Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife
Lessons from Iraq for Afghanistan
---and Beyond

John Nagl
December 9, 2011
“To make war upon insurgents is messy and slow, like eating soup with a knife.”
Key Points

• The US (esp. US Army) neglected COIN in the wake of Vietnam
• The United States learned effective counterinsurgency principles in Iraq and is employing them now in Afghanistan
• Iraq and Afghanistan are harbingers of an era of persistent irregular conflict
• The United States must develop the capability to wage irregular warfare smarter and more efficiently
After Vietnam

“We put an army on the battlefield that I had been a part of for 37 years. The truth of the matter is: It doesn’t have any doctrine, nor was it educated and trained, to deal with an insurgency. ... After the Vietnam War, we purged ourselves of everything that dealt with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war. In hindsight, that was a bad decision... We have responsibility.”

• GEN Jack Keane, 18 April 2006
“In the years following the Vietnam War, the Army relegated unconventional war to the margins of training, doctrine, and budget priorities. [This] left the service unprepared to deal with the operations that followed: Somalia, Haiti, the Balkans, and more recently Afghanistan and Iraq – the consequences and costs of which we are still struggling with today.”

- Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, 10 October 2007
Organizational Learning

“A process by which an organization uses new knowledge or understanding gained from experience or study to adjust institutional norms, doctrine and procedures in ways designed to minimize previous gaps in performance and maximize future successes.”

- Richard Downie,
The U.S. Army as Learning Institution
The Organizational Learning Cycle

Richard Downie, *Learning from Conflict*

- **Individual Action/Attention to Events**
- **Change in Situation or Organizational Behavior**
- **Transmit Interpretation: Publish Doctrine**
- **Organizational Performance Gap Identified**
- **Search for Alternative Organizational Actions**
- **Sustained Consensus: Alternative Solution Accepted**
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Successful</th>
<th>Unsuccessful</th>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasis on intelligence.</td>
<td>Primacy of military direction of counterinsurgency.</td>
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<td>Focus on population, their needs, and security.</td>
<td>Priority to “kill-capture” enemy, not on engaging population.</td>
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<td>Secure areas established, expanded.</td>
<td>Battalion-size operations as the norm.</td>
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<td>Insurgents isolated from population (population control).</td>
<td>Military units concentrated on large bases for protection.</td>
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<td>Single authority (charismatic/dynamic leader).</td>
<td>Special Forces focused on raiding.</td>
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<td>Effective, pervasive psychological operations (PSYOP) campaigns.</td>
<td>Adviser effort a low priority in personnel assignment.</td>
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<td>Amnesty and rehabilitation for insurgents.</td>
<td>Building, training indigenous army in image of U.S. Army.</td>
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<td>Police in lead; military supporting.</td>
<td>Peacetime government processes.</td>
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<td>Police force expanded, diversified.</td>
<td>Open borders, airspace, coastlines</td>
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<td>Conventional military forces reoriented for counterinsurgency.</td>
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<td>Special Forces, advisers embedded with indigenous forces.</td>
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<td>Insurgent sanctuaries denied.</td>
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Chapter 5: Counterinsurgency Operations

Starting Conditions

- Terrorist/Insurgent
- Neutral or Passive

Support the Gov’t/Coalition

Information Operations

- Combat Operations
- Train & Employ HN Security Forces
- Essential Services (Life Support)
- Governance
- Economic Development

Terrorist/Insurgent

Neutral or Passive

Support the Gov’t/Coalition

~1%

.5%
• Fundamental dynamics of conflict have changed: Cycle of retaliation broken, commitment to working through politics
• Drawdown is on track, necessary
• Eventual Iraqi government is likely to request long term security relationship with US: M1A1 tanks, F16 fighters
• Long term implications of a real democracy in the heart of the Arab world not yet clear
• Eyes on Iran
Afghanistan: A Work in Progress

- Counterinsurgency campaign really began in 2009—in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. Latter is decisive.
- Good illustration of future of conflict: Not being outfought, being outgoverned
- Kandahar offensive
- Effort to raise, train, and equip Afghan Security Forces finally beginning to be resourced
- Long term commitment
Future of Conflict

SPECTRUM OF CONFLICT

Increasing Violence

Stable Peace

Unstable Peace

Insurgency

General War

Globalization

Urbanization

Climate Change

Population Growth

Resource depletion

Nuclear Weapons

US Conventional Superiority
“It is hard to conceive of any country challenging the United States directly on the ground – at least for some years to come. Indeed, history shows us that smaller, irregular forces – insurgents, guerrillas, terrorists – have for centuries found ways to harass and frustrate larger, regular armies and sow chaos. We can expect that asymmetric warfare will remain the mainstay of the contemporary battlefield for some time.”

- Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, 10 October 2007
Conclusions

• Counterinsurgency and the Military

• Armies as Learning Institutions

• Transformation for the Long War