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<td><a href="mailto:gglass@apus.edu">gglass@apus.edu</a></td>
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LETTING BYGONES BE BYGONES: THE UNITED STATES MILITARY’S TURN FROM IRREGULAR WARFARE IN THE WAKE OF THE VIETNAM WAR

A Master Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty
of
American Military University
by
McLean Gaddy Bethea
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
In
Military History
January 2017
American Public University
Charles Town, WV
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my children, Bobby and Mimi. I hope you always love dinosaurs.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. John Chappo for his patience and guidance throughout the thesis process. I also want to thank Dr. Mikolashek whose expertise was invaluable. Finally, I also want thank my wife, Lindsay, for watching the kids while I worked on this thesis.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

LETTING BYGONES BE BYGONES: THE UNITED STATES MILITARY’S TURN FROM IRREGULAR WARFARE IN THE WAKE OF THE VIETNAM WAR

by

McLean Gaddy Bethea

American Public University System, January 2017

Charles Town, West Virginia

Professor John Chappo, Thesis Professor

The following is a study of the United States military’s discarding of irregular warfare capabilities following the Vietnam War. At the expense of losing its hard-won counterinsurgency skills, the military rebuilt itself as a force only to be utilized in conventional conflicts. This paper will first examine how the American military struggled to implement counterinsurgency in Vietnam. Second, it will explore the military’s encounters with irregular warfare from 1975 to 2001. During this period, the military endeavored to avoid protracted irregular conflicts rather than maintain the skills to actually win them. Finally, this work will explore how the military’s neglect of irregular warfare competencies produced needless casualties and squandered precious time in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

This study concludes that the American military consciously turned away from irregular warfare in an attempt to remake itself after the Vietnam War. Research has revealed that the military considered counterinsurgency outside of its “proper” missions. This work explores why the military chose this path and its adverse ramifications on
irregular warfare capabilities. Furthermore, the military continued to neglect counterinsurgency despite shortcomings evident in irregular conflicts leading up to the Iraq War. The analysis of the post-Vietnam military’s dogged determination to avoid rather than prepare for protracted irregular warfare makes this a unique work that fills a historical gap.
Literature Review

America’s post 1960’s experience in small wars has been both unfortunate and well documented. During Vietnam, the US military became proficient in irregular warfare only after having unsuccessfully tried a more conventional approach. After the US has gained the relevant capabilities, it has quickly discarded them in favor of a return to a conventional warfare focus.

Academic works on American counterinsurgency either focus on specific conflicts, relate Vietnam to other contemporary wars (such as Malaya), or relate Vietnam to Iraq/Afghanistan without much mention of what happened in-between. However, what happened in the intervening twenty-five years is of crucial importance.

Unfortunately, the US military quickly distanced itself from fighting unconventional wars after Vietnam ended. At the same time, the US failed to take note of other contemporary unconventional conflicts fought by both its allies and foes. This inability to retain adequate irregular warfare capabilities has driven the US military into a pattern of forgetting and relearning, creating needless casualties and unfulfilled political goals.

To fully understand America’s irregular warfare regression, one must examine its development in view of the larger Cold War. Several books provide an outstanding overview of the superpower conflict. Norman Friedman’s *The Fifty Year War* comprehensively analyses how challenging circumstances forced the US to prioritize its limited resources.1 In addition, *Strategies of Containment* by preeminent Cold War

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1 Norman Friedman, *The Fifty Year War: Conflict and Strategy in the Cold War.* (Naval Institute Press: Annapolis, 2000)
historian John Gaddis provides a concise synopsis of the interaction between personalities, ideology, technology, and cultural shifts shaped the conflict.²

For background on American unconventional warfare, *US Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1942-1976* is an exhaustive work that details the development of strategy and tactics. It examines the state of the US irregular warfare capabilities upon entry into the Vietnam War. Furthermore, it analyzes their development until the end of the conflict.³

American failure in Vietnam had many fathers. Andrew Krepinevich’s classic *The Army and Vietnam* attributes US failure primarily to organizational culture. Krepinevich argues that the US Army attempted to transfer its World War II firepower-centric doctrine into counterinsurgency. He places heavy blame on the army’s institutional inertia and unwillingness to adapt.

Max Boot’s related *Invisible Armies* and *The Savage Wars of Peace* draw several conclusions by examining a broad span of history. Notably, Boot states that unconventional warfare is the dominant form of military conflict. He describes guerrilla warfare as not limited to certain ideologies but instead as the “universal war of the weak.” Historically, the US has fought many of these “small wars,” often successfully before

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World War II. Boot also states that counterinsurgencies are best won by long-term commitments of comprehensive and dedicated forces.

In a recent development, works such as Gregory Daddis’s *Westmoreland’s War* reexamine the reasons for American failure in Vietnam. It asserts that Westmoreland became a scapegoat in spite of consistently making informed and logical decisions. Upending previous revisionist works, *Westmoreland’s War* asserts that the conflict was unwinnable and, while Westmoreland made mistakes, he was not the reason for failure.

*A Question of Command*, written by Mark Moyar, examines the role of leadership in counterinsurgency. He states that leadership is the most important variable in fighting an insurgency. In regards to Vietnam, Moyar credits the passage of command from Westmoreland to Abrams as dramatically improving American efforts in the war. Through numerous case studies, Moyar makes the case that counterinsurgency places creativity and innovation at a higher priority than conventional warfare.

To avoid a completely US-centric view of the Vietnam War, James Warren’s *Giap* provides insight into the North’s military chief. He examines how Giap used regular and irregular forces in concert to defeat a more technologically advanced foe.

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characterizes Giap as pragmatic and willing to use his country’s high tolerance for casualties to bring victory.

David Fitzgerald’s *Learning to Forget* provides a survey of US counterinsurgency from Vietnam to Iraq. However, it glosses over much of the intervening period and focuses more on how the Iraq War leadership neglected lessons learned thirty years before in Vietnam. His work will be useful to connecting how the military neglected proven counterinsurgency doctrine created in Vietnam in the wake of its aftermath.⁸

To only observe the military aftermath of Vietnam would provide an incomplete analysis. *American Reckoning* by Christian Appy describes the effects the war had on the national psyche. He asserts that the “ghost” of Vietnam so haunted the US public that policymakers decided to completely avoid irregular warfare rather than prepare for an inevitable reencounter.⁹

Edited by Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian, *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare* is a series of essays written by various experts on recent unconventional conflicts. Through examination of these wars, Marston and Malkasian propose that a counterinsurgency force must be prepared to adapt quickly to suit local conditions. Its chapter on Vietnam, “American Organizational Culture and Learning,” describes the US Army as lacking any substantially counterinsurgency doctrine upon entry into Vietnam. In agreement with previous works, it portrays the Americans as slow to adapt to a more

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suitable strategy. In addition, *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare* states that after its withdrawal, the US military did not incorporate lessons learned into its official doctrine.  

Contemporary conflicts waged by America’s friends and foes also presented an opportunity for America to grasp the importance of irregular warfare. Ahron Bregman’s *Israel’s Wars* details the subsequent strategic failure of the Israeli military in Lebanon in the face of repeated tactical successes. The US would find itself in similar circumstances in Iraq where it made impressive territorial gains but was then unable to pacify those areas.

Perhaps no other conflict so mirrored the US experience in Vietnam than the Soviet-Afghan War. Written by many of the men who fought it, *The Soviet-Afghan War* provides a blow-by-blow retelling of the conflict. It reveals a Soviet Army hobbled by poor morale, an inability to adapt, and lackluster support back at home. In spite of Soviet’s brutality, they were unable to conquer the Afghan guerrillas.

The US fought several conflicts between Vietnam and Afghanistan but often drew the wrong conclusions from them, especially the Persian Gulf War. Rick Atkinson’s *Crusade* provides a comprehensive study into the circumstances that made Operation DESERT STORM an aberration in recent US military history. Atkinson makes the case that the Persian Gulf War was not flawless as commonly perceived nor was American


victory ever really in doubt. He casts the Iraqis as massively outmatched and who found themselves in a war against Western powers that they did not foresee.\textsuperscript{13}

Perhaps the conflict of the 1990s that most foreshadowed the US military’s conflicts was the intervention in Somalia. Ambiguous strategic aims, muddled command structures, and ill-prepared troops culminated in an American withdrawal from the war-torn country. William Durch’s \textit{UN Peacekeeping, American Policy, and the Uncivil Wars of the 1990’s} delivers a complete assessment of Somalia and the struggle of the US military to define its mission in the post-Cold War era.\textsuperscript{14}

Once overshadowed by the conventional military success of DESERT STORM, the recent American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have added new relevance to counterinsurgency. \textit{Fiasco} by Thomas Ricks provides an excellent analysis of why the Iraq War went so wrong. It reveals a culmination of US military missteps and willful neglect of irregular warfare.\textsuperscript{15}

Scholarship on American irregular warfare has grown in recent years. Once regarded as a chapter in American history perhaps best forgotten, Vietnam has remerged in importance. As authors have examined the Vietnam War in concert with other unconventional conflicts, much of the confusion that existed in its aftermath has cleared. The literature on Vietnam is now mature and future works will likely focus on its applicability to modern conflicts. However, as the Afghan War continues and the Iraq


conflict enters another stage, historians will carry on with the duty of examining America’s most common and arguably most important type of warfare.
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Introduction

In the early spring of 2003, the United States launched the invasion of Iraq. American armor quickly defeated the Iraqi military in less than two months. After overrunning the country, US troops and their tanks, most still outfitted in the verdant green camouflage of European forests, posed for triumphant photographs in front of Iraqi landmarks. Yet their inappropriate camouflage patterns hinted at a deeper unpreparedness for the forthcoming fight. Over the next six-and-a-half years, the US military became ensnared in a bloody occupation as it fought an insurgency fueled by sectarianism. Even when the majority of US troops withdrew in late 2011, the Iraqi government was still fragile and beset by sectarian rivalries. The concurrent Afghan War also saw American forces unable to quickly and effectively adapt to counterinsurgency. Despite its technical supremacy and conventional dominance, the American military was unprepared to fight an irregular war at the start of the twenty-first century.

Tragically, the Iraq War was not the first conflict where America had struggled to adapt to irregular warfare in recent memory. Less than thirty years before, South Vietnam fell in the final act of a war that cost the lives of more than 58,000 US soldiers and three million Vietnamese. Though the Vietnam War featured a considerable amount of conventional fighting, Viet Cong guerrillas eroded away American resolve by inflicting casualties and scoring propaganda victories. The resultant shift in US political will led to a military withdrawal. Without the Americans, the South Vietnamese government was unable to resist the Communist onslaught.

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In retrospect, the American military was slow to shift its mentality from blunting a massive Soviet attack to fighting guerrillas in Indochina. Instead of concentrating on securing the South Vietnamese populace, US forces sought to hunt down insurgents in the jungle. In response to his pre-war education on counterinsurgency, American General Creighton Abrams declared, “They didn’t have any lectures on that—anything! And they don’t have F.M.’s [field manuals] about that.”

In its aftermath, the US military did not pledge to win its next unconventional conflict – it instead vowed to avoid them altogether. However, irregular war is an advantageous strategy for a weaker combatant. After the Soviet Union collapsed, the US was unmatched in its dominance of conventional warfare. As such, few adversaries were foolish enough to battle the US military in a head-on fight. Therefore, US military leadership should have accepted the inevitability of irregular conflicts and been prepared to win them.

The time between the Vietnam and Iraq War was spent concentrating overwhelmingly on conventional conflict. Indeed, America rebuilt its conventional forces to heights unprecedented since World War II. These forces played a critical role deterring a Soviet invasion of Western Europe and ably removed Iraqi forces from Kuwait during the Persian Gulf War. However, from 1975 to 2003, numerous failures demonstrated that unconventional warfare was the American military’s Achilles’ heel.

For the rest of the century, America endured losses to irregular forces yet failed to sufficiently adapt to counter them. The 1983 Beirut barracks bombing killed 241 US soldiers and led to the withdrawal of American forces from Lebanon. Still, the response
to this attack was not a resolve to adjust to unconventional warfare. Instead, it resulted in the Weinberger doctrine which reaffirmed the US’s determination to avoid unconventional conflicts rather than accept their inevitability.  

Some of the most poignant examples of the need to master unconventional warfare came from America’s friends and foes. In an echo of Vietnam, the Soviet-Afghan War demonstrated once again that determined and supported guerrillas could defeat massive conventional strength. In Afghanistan, fearsome Soviet gunships prowled the skies overhead but were unable flush Afghan guerrillas out of their hideouts. Instead, the guerrillas hit vulnerable supply lines and undermined Soviet morale. Even without the considerable organizational support North Vietnam provided to the Viet Cong, the Afghans exacted enough pain on the Soviets to force a withdrawal.

Much like the Vietnam War, the Israeli conflict in Lebanon verified that a highly competent Western-style military could win tactical battles against irregulars but lose the war. In 1982, the Israelis plunged headlong into Lebanon whose fragile religious balance had been upset by a flood of Palestinian refugees. Despite stunning victories against Syrian aircraft in the skies above, the Israelis’ plan to stabilize Lebanon soon fell apart. After Israeli-allied Christian militias massacred Muslim civilians, the country collapsed into sectarian chaos. Israel struggled to maintain peace but Hezbollah’s incessant attacks

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18 Fitzgerald, 88-89.

19 Russian General Staff, 304.

20 Bregman, 146.
eventually forced it into a “security zone” in the south. In 2000, Israel finally retreated from Lebanon after suffering 700 killed and its goals unachieved. 21

During the 1980s, America scored victories in Grenada and Panama, but these wins reflected the weakness of its adversaries rather than military prowess. 22 During these small Central American operations, US forces suffered from inadequate intelligence and poor cooperation. Still, the overwhelming American superiority in numbers and technology was able to make short work of paltry opposing forces.

While the military failed to study contemporary irregular conflicts, it gleaned the wrong lessons from its first war with Iraq. The 1991 Persian Gulf War was an aberration in recent US military history. The telegenic conflict featured virtually no irregular action and took place in a barren landscape largely devoid of cover. As a result, the success of Operation DESERT STORM created misleading confidence in US military competence. The US was able to defeat Iraq’s demoralized military due to overwhelming forces, technological advantages, and a well-practiced conventional warfare playbook. 23 To the American public and military, the war banished “the specter of Vietnam” and prevented introspection into unconventional military competencies not needed in DESERT STORM. 24

Perhaps the loudest wake-up call was the American-led intervention into Somalia in the early 1990s. There, US forces pursued a military-centric plan with murky strategic

21 Bregman, 176.


23 Black, 146.

24 Fitzgerald, 87.
goals under a dysfunctional United Nations command. Foreshadowing Iraq, US forces were ill trained and ill equipped for low-intensity warfare. During the United Nations sponsored intervention, American troops drove unarmored Humvee jeeps through Mogadishu’s urban jungle in a botched attempt to capture local warlords. Due to overambitious aims and sagging political will, the US forces suffered untenable casualties and beat a hasty retreat from Somalia. In fact, the trauma resulting from Somalia prevented the US from dispatching peacekeepers to Africa for the rest of the decade.\textsuperscript{25} Despite the losses suffered, irregular warfare still failed to make lasting change on the American military.\textsuperscript{26}

In the lead up to the American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, US military interventions largely devolved into the dropping of precision bombs. Despite dubious results, aerial bombing presented few risks while offering an image of action. Throughout the 1990s, US aircraft and warships carried out various punitive strikes. Whether against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein or shadowy al Qaeda, American retaliation was usually a televised but largely ineffective airstrike. When Iraq attacked its Kurdish minority, the US bombed radar sites for a day. Likewise, the US responded to the bombings of the USS \textit{Cole} and its African embassies by launching cruise missiles that killed a mere handful of al Qaeda fighters. Ever cautious, US participation in Bosnia was limited to an initial bombing campaign followed by traditional peacekeeping. Reinforcing its resolve to not use ground troops, the US fought the Kosovo War without setting a foot in Serbia (downed pilots and their rescuers notwithstanding). By not adapting itself to fight

\textsuperscript{25} Black, 151.

\textsuperscript{26} Fitzgerald, 5.
irregular conflicts, the military effectively limited political leadership to ineffective actions.\textsuperscript{27}

In the aftermath, the US military suffered from an identity crisis along with budget cuts and a loss of prestige. During the 1970s, the military chose to turn away from irregular warfare, which it grouped together with its other ills. Military leadership threw away much of its hard-worn counterinsurgency skills in an attempt to remake itself. By turning away from irregular warfare, the military attempted to limit its mission to conventional warfare. By confining itself to its vision of a conventional-only force, the military ignored the inevitability of fighting an irregular conflict and failed to prepare to fight one.

Despite much evidence to the importance of irregular warfare, the US military relearned effective small wars skills only after enduring considerable failure in Afghanistan and Iraq. The military’s failure to remain proficient at irregular warfare dated back to the withdrawal from Vietnam. Blame for this failure rests on US military leadership and institutional inertia. As America extricates itself from Afghanistan and reinforces its presence in Iraq, its military must resolve not to again forget its hard-learned lessons. By illuminating the missteps taken by the US military between the Vietnam and Iraq War, historians will gain a more nuanced understanding of why American irregular warfare skills withered away.

The following chapters will provide evidence for this assertion by first detailing the missteps of the Vietnam War. The second chapter will demonstrate how the military later discarded irregular warfare skills as unwanted baggage from an “unwinnable” war.

\textsuperscript{27} Black, 183.
In addition, the military failed to recognize the persistent importance of
counterinsurgency from small wars of the period. The third chapter will illuminate how
the misplaced confidence resulting from the Persian Gulf War victory shaped American
military thinking more than the disastrous humanitarian intervention in Somalia.
Furthermore, the aftermath of the Somalia mission led to sheepish military interventions
for the rest of the 1990s that did little to force the military to change. Finally, the Iraq
and Afghan wars forced the US military to reacquaint itself with unconventional warfare.
Chapter One: Firepower! and It’s After Effects

The Vietnam War epitomized the struggle of the US military to conduct counterinsurgency. The American mission began as an operation to “hold the line” in order to contain the worldwide spread of communism. However, the conflict was less about communist ideology than a decades-old nationalist struggle for an independent Vietnam.

Failure of US leadership to prioritize counterinsurgency led to the continued degradation of the American position in Vietnam. US forces spent the majority of their efforts attempting to destroy North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units and hunting down Communist guerrillas in the highlands. Instead, the Americans should have focused more on pacification while using their superior firepower to hold Communist conventional forces at bay.

There were several reasons for the poor performance of American forces. The US Army was well prepared for a conventional war, but not a counterinsurgency campaign in Southeast Asia. In addition, the South Vietnamese government lacked popular support and suffered from rampant corruption and political instability. Finally, US leadership failed to adopt successful strategies following the initial military failures.

In the lead up to the Vietnam War, the American military focused on a total war with the Soviets. To this end, the US military prioritized mobility and firepower. Army doctrine and training reinforced this mindset at all levels. In fact, when reporters


29 Fitzgerald, 20.
asked General William Westmoreland in a 1965 how he planned to combat Communist guerrillas, he confidently replied, “Firepower.” Unsurprisingly, Westmoreland and his successor General Creighton Abrams primarily fought the war using the methods the Army had taught them.

Ironically, irregular warfare garnered some high level attention in the run-up to Vietnam. President John F. Kennedy elevated the Army Special Forces, experts in unconventional tactics, and even insisted they be allowed to wear their famous green beret. Notably, the Special Forces were tough, but also placed emphasis on foreign language training and local customs. In 1966, they even achieved nationwide recognition through the number one single “The Ballad of the Green Berets.” Despite Kennedy’s interest in unconventional warfare, mainstream military forces remained unconvinced the merits of preparing for it.

Counterinsurgency did gain traction among some officers as they were exposed to it through both experience and formal training. Many officers served as advisors in friendly nations battling insurgency. In the aftermath of the Chinese Civil War, several officers wrote prescient articles in Army journals with titles such as “Some Reflections on Counterinsurgency” and “Objectives and Methods of Communist Guerrilla

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31 Arnold, 231.

32 Appy, 120-121.

33 Ibid, 124.

34 Arnold, 231.

Warfare.”\textsuperscript{36} The Army War College routinely featured discussions of Mao Tse-tung’s writings on insurgency and holistic warfare.\textsuperscript{37} Westmoreland appeared to grasp its rising importance even if he would later choose a primarily conventional strategy in Vietnam. In 1962 while Superintendent of West Point, Westmoreland incorporated irregular warfare into the syllabus for cadets.\textsuperscript{38}

However, while the military espoused irregular warfare at times, its ambiguous doctrine lacked coherence and comprehensiveness. For example, the Army’s premier irregular warfare manual, titled \textit{Counterguerrilla Operations}, prioritized offensive sweeps to root out fighters. It relegated strengthening host country forces to a secondary goal. While official doctrine recognized the political complexity of insurgencies, it chiefly advised military solutions to address them.\textsuperscript{39}

In Vietnam, the Americans enjoyed nearly limitless firepower but spent it unwisely. The overuse of firepower destabilized Vietnamese society but was largely ineffective against the guerrillas. Formations of B-52s, giant retrofitted nuclear bombers, rained down more than one hundred bombs apiece on the green carpet of Vietnamese jungle. The Communists learned how to cope with these bombardments by scurrying down to the safety of tunnel networks.\textsuperscript{40} However, the bombings frightened Vietnamese

\textsuperscript{36} Daddis, “Eating Soup with a Spoon,” 236.

\textsuperscript{37} Daddis, \textit{Westmoreland’s War}, 18.

\textsuperscript{38} Daddis, “Eating Soup with a Spoon,” 238.

\textsuperscript{39} Daddis, \textit{Westmoreland’s War}, 24.

\textsuperscript{40} Appy, 152-154.
civilians so badly that many would only farm at night.\textsuperscript{41} Despite insider criticism that argued the bombing killed predominantly civilians and enraged the population, military leaders remained convinced that the carpet-bombing would at least keep the enemy “on the run.”\textsuperscript{42}

Foreshadowing future conflicts, Vietnam proved that airpower was of limited utility in unconventional wars. Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtiss Lemay bragged that his airplanes could bomb the Communists “back into the Stone Age.” To this end, the Air Force dropped twice as many bombs in South Vietnam than in all of World War II. Loose American rules of engagement allowed bombing runs on entire villages if a single round was fired from a house. In 1965, journalist and Vietnam expert Bernard Fall remarked, “What changed the character of the Vietnam War was…the decision to wage unlimited aerial warfare inside the country at the price of literally pounding the place to bits.” Fall noted that South Vietnam’s primary problem was its governing regime, largely viewed by its citizens as illegitimate. It was an obstacle, he said, “no aircraft carrier or eight-jet bomber can provide a ready answer in the long run.”\textsuperscript{43}

Early American actions in Vietnam seemed to support a conventional approach. The 1965 Battle of the Ia Drang Valley resulted in US troops inflicting large casualties on North Vietnamese regulars.\textsuperscript{44} However, the Communists could withdraw at will and rebuild their forces, while popular support for the South Vietnamese government

\textsuperscript{41} Daddis, \textit{Westmoreland's War}, 96.

\textsuperscript{42} Appy, 156.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 163-167.

\textsuperscript{44} Daddis, “Eating Soup with a Spoon,” 245.
remained low regardless of American victories. Behind the scenes, the US government failed to force various military and civilian agencies to cooperate for a common strategic goal.45

Through 1968, American forces in South Vietnam attempted to utilize their firepower advantage to defeat their Communist enemies. Faced with an enemy that blended into the populace and needed little logistical support, the United States pursued a strategy more appropriate to conventional warfare than counterinsurgency.46 Units often followed the Army mantra of “Find ‘Em, Fix ‘Em, Fight ‘Em and Finish ‘Em!”47 These operations, namely search-and-destroy missions and their accompanying heavy aerial bombardment, produced high body counts but were ineffective in defeating the Viet Cong (VC). In the end, these firepower-based operations squandered time and forces that could have been put to better use defeating the Communists through pacification operations.

Search-and-destroy missions were the result of political pressure and predilection for offensive action in Army doctrine. Secretary McNamara directed Westmoreland to seek out and kill Communists faster than they could be replaced, despite Westmoreland’s reservations about the viability of an attrition strategy.48 After being frustrated by the hit-and-run tactics of the National Liberation Front (NLF) guerrillas and North Vietnamese


47 Daddis, “Eating Soup with a Spoon,” 239.

regulars, he attempted to use overwhelming force to coerce the NLF into fighting a pitched battle that US forces would surely win.

Westmoreland assumed command of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) in 1964. An adept artillery officer in World War II, he was a newcomer to irregular warfare. Like many senior American commanders, Westmoreland had little practical experience of counterinsurgency. Furthermore, he believed that the introduction of North Vietnamese Army units had “moved [the war] out of the purely guerilla phase and into a more formalized military conflict.” Therefore, American commanders built operations around large units taking and holding ground instead of smaller ones more suited to counterinsurgency.

Realizing that they could not defeat the Americans in force-on-force combat, the Communists developed *dau tranh* as a counterstrategy. Compensating for inferior technology with a superior strategy, *dau tranh* dictated accepting tactical defeats in return for ultimate victory. The Communists were able to operate effectively and simultaneously across the spectrum of warfare. American forces, on the other hand, surrendered the initiative to their opponents and were primarily reactionary.  

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49 Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War*, 57.

50 Ibid, 60.


52 Herring, 183.

targeted the American political will to continue the war and relied on North Vietnam’s capability to absorb casualties at a far higher level than their opponents.

On a tactical level, the Communists fought the American with a variety of asymmetric tactics. When the NLF chose to fight, they used hit-and-run attacks that left little time for the Americans to respond effectively with airstrikes or artillery. They planted mines that were unaffected by aerial bombardment. Even more low-tech, they set “tiger traps,” hidden pits filled with sharpened bamboo poles, to inflict casualties on US forces. Furthermore, when faced with unfavorable conditions, the NLF guerrillas could flee to sanctuaries in Cambodia. In these sanctuaries, mauled NLF units could reconstitute to full strength without meaningful interference.

Unlike their American opponents, the Viet Cong quickly adapted to new threats. North Vietnamese army commander General Nguyen Giap stated “your shelling and your mobility were our biggest concerns…so how could we preserve our forces, but still engage you?” In response to superior American firepower, Giap directed his troops to fight US units at very close range. Because of the Communists’ “hugging” of US forces, the Americans were unable to effectively use heavy firepower without risk of fratricide.

Faced with American superiority in firepower, the VC heavily utilized tunnels and bunker complexes. These underground facilities not only offered protection, but also

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54 Herring, 184.

55 Hackworth, 497-498.

56 Ibid, 545.


58 Daddis, Westmoreland’s War, 155.
permitted entire units to move undetected by the Americans.\textsuperscript{59} The Communists even turned American firepower against them by routinely making bombs out of unexploded ordnance.\textsuperscript{60} Outside observers noted that, despite the massive American firepower, the Communists generally held the initiative.\textsuperscript{61}

However, Westmoreland’s strategy was not merely the product of conventional military doctrine. Westmoreland reasoned that he commanded too few troops to successfully police the countryside. Besides, simply allowing the Communists to remain in place amounted to a de facto loss. Furthermore, he wanted US forces to do the majority of the actual fighting. Faced with these circumstances, he opted for an aggressive strategy to force the Communists to fight.\textsuperscript{62}

Westmoreland’s goal for his campaign was no less than to roundly defeat the Communists. Once the Hanoi’s fighting forces and logistical backbone had been broken, less capable but numerous Army of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers could occupy the sanitized countryside and “pacify” the populace.\textsuperscript{63} His strategy promised to both eject the Communists and allow the South Vietnamese government to reach out to rural areas and solidify the progress.

Launched in 1967, Operation CEDAR FALLS epitomized both the techniques and failings of the search-and-destroy campaign. CEDAR FALLS targeted the infamous


\textsuperscript{61} Hackworth, 551.

\textsuperscript{62} Herring, 179.

\textsuperscript{63} Murphy, 97.
“Iron Triangle,” a strategic stronghold from where the Viet Cong organized attacks on Saigon. Bringing the full brunt of American firepower to bear, tactical aircraft carpet-bombed the jungle with napalm and cluster bombs before the airborne assault.

US forces expended enormous quantities of ammunition and uprooted thousands of residents in an effort to rid the area of VC guerrillas. Indiscriminate firing was commonplace in an effort to “discourage” infiltration. However, the massive American lead in technology and weaponry was unable to distinguish Communist fighters from ordinary Vietnamese. Despite high reported numbers of killed enemy fighters, the US struggled to maintain security in population centers.

The astronomical body count led Washington to falsely conclude the war was being won through attrition. Westmoreland assured President Johnson that the war would soon reach a “crossover point,” where the Communists would be unable to replace their losses. In 1967, he told Johnson that, if he approved his request for 200,000 additional troops, the war would be over in two years.

Over the course of the battle, American troops killed 700 enemy fighters, but the majority of the NLF forces escaped to fight another day. While Westmoreland’s troops

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64 Herring, 186.
65 Hackworth, 496.
66 Franks, 68.
67 Herring, 187-188.
68 Krepinevich, 255.
69 Zaffiri, 191.
70 Herring, 191.
successfully cleared the “Iron Triangle,” they were unable to trap the Communists and prevent them from reaching sanctuary across Cambodian border. Irreversible, however, was the damage to the American cause incurred by moving out thousands of civilians out of the Iron Triangle and then destroying their villages in the search for Communists. In the end, CEDAR FALLS proved to be an indecisive campaign supporting an ineffective strategy.

Unfortunately for the Americans, the North Vietnamese leadership had hoped for the very conditions that resulted from search-and-destroy operations. Because the Americans shifted the majority of their forces out into the jungle, the Communists enjoyed more freedom in population centers. ARVN troops left in the villages proved less capable at pacification programs than the Americans, so those efforts also suffered. Furthermore, should the Americans corner NLF forces in the mountainous jungle and force them to fight, their superior firepower would be less of an advantage.

Undoubtedly, the presence of North Vietnamese regulars had to be negated in order to affect a successful counterinsurgency. By 1966, a fresh North Vietnamese Army regiment entered the South every month through the Ho Chi Minh Trail. However, Westmoreland devoted too many resources to hunt down and destroy them,

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71 Zaffiri, 187.
72 Herring, 187.
73 Ibid, 194.
74 Murphy, 98.
75 Dale, 145-181.
76 Zaffiri, 158.
instead of simply using his firepower advantage to block them from massing on the battlefield. The battle of the Ia Drang Valley demonstrated the folly of Communist regulars confronting American troops on the battlefield, even when they enjoyed numerical superiority. However, instead of keeping these regular units away from the populated coast, Westmoreland chose to hunt them down in the jungle. VC and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units typically evaded these sweeps or quickly escaped when forced to fight.\textsuperscript{77} Once the Americans left, the Communists quickly reclaimed their former territory.\textsuperscript{78}

Marine General Victor Krulak championed the notion that American firepower could overwhelm any massed NVA attack. He espoused battling North Vietnamese regulars should “they sortie out of the mountains and come down to the plains.” However, he saw little use in “battalions thrashing about the green hills against vanishing targets” and declared “every man we put into hunting for the NVA was wasted.”\textsuperscript{79} Krulak’s ideas were rooted in recent experience. For example, in 1966 the North Vietnamese 324B division moved into the demilitarized zone and threatened US Marines conducting pacification operations. The Marines temporarily put aside their counterinsurgency work and attacked the twelve thousand strong NVA formation. Over two-weeks, eight thousand Marines and three thousand ARVN troops decimated the Communist regulars and forced them to retreat back into North Vietnam.\textsuperscript{80} Later, the

\textsuperscript{77} Boot, \textit{Invisible Armies}, 418.

\textsuperscript{78} Currey, 263.

\textsuperscript{79} Zaffiri, 169.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid, 173-174.
The siege of Khe Sanh proved that even outnumbered and encircled American troops could survive given the massive advantage of US air power.\textsuperscript{81}

American efforts would have been more successful had Westmoreland attempted to rethink the US approach to the war. Most notably, the Army ignored its own Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam (PROVN) study. Chaired by future MACV commander Abrams, PROVN declared that MACV’s strategy was counterproductive and unlikely to produce success. Furthermore, PROVN rightly concluded that time was running out to build up the South Vietnamese security forces needed to root out the Communists. However, Westmoreland ordered PROVN downgraded to a “conceptual document” and did not incorporate its findings into his command of MACV.\textsuperscript{82}

In addition, Westmoreland dismissed General James Gavin’s concept of an “enclave” strategy. Gavin advocated securing population centers first and then methodically expanding control to the countryside. He argued that US actions should be intentionally slow-paced, so as to avoid fighting over the same village “five or six times.” However, Westmoreland viewed his ideas as ceding initiative to the enemy and an “inglorious, static use of US forces in overpopulated areas with little chance of direct or immediate impact on the outcome of events.”\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{81} Zaffiri, 274.

\textsuperscript{82} Marston, 128-129.

\textsuperscript{83} Daddis, \textit{Westmoreland's War}, 79.
The American’s firepower-based strategy failed for several reasons. Foremost, the Americans were not able to pin down and destroy the Communists as they had hoped. The NLF proved slippery and chose to disengage when fighting on unfavorable terms. First Infantry Division commander General William DePuy epitomized the military’s inability to adapt with his declaration “The solution in Vietnam is more bombs, more shells, more napalm…till the other side cracks and gives up.” However, “free-fire” zones and indiscriminate bombardment proved ineffective against the guerrillas. Furthermore, the Communists could simply retreat outside of South Vietnam when cornered.

Secondly, US forces were not able to inflict casualties at a high enough rate to sufficiently attrite Communist forces. North Vietnam could add 200,000 fighters every year, a number higher than even the most optimistic US body count. Furthermore, military leadership rewarded commanders who reported high body counts, leading to widespread statistical inflation. By focusing on body counts, not on the growing strength of the Communists, the US military could not sense the shifting tide of the war.

Search-and-destroy missions, along with the bombing they entailed, added to the antiwar movement in the US, weakening support for continued intervention. Protesters condemned the indiscriminate tactics utilized by American commanders as immoral. In

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84 Appy, 169.
85 Herring, 188.
86 Appy, 170.
particular, the destruction of the hamlet of Ben Suc became a rallying cry for the antiwar movement. Destroyed during CEDAR FALLS, American troops razed the tiny village in an effort to prevent its reoccupation by the VC. 88 As a direct result, increasing pressure from the antiwar movement resulted in the denial of Westmoreland’s final request for additional troops. 89

US Marine operations during the same period offered an alternative approach. “County Fair” and “Golden Fleece” operations successfully removed VC presence from villages without alienating the inhabitants. “County Fair” missions featured ARVN-led quarantines of villages, where South Vietnamese soldiers searched for VC and also provided governmental services to the residents. American troops remained out of view while providing overwatch and logistical support. Additionally, South Vietnamese farmers benefited from “Golden Fleece,” where Marines provided security during the harvest season. These operations both protected farmers and denied the VC opportunities to commandeer their own supplies. 90 Also, the Marines experimented with “Combined Action Platoons” that integrated a US rifle squad into a Vietnamese Regional Force Platoon. 91 In addition to the efforts of the Marines, Special Forces pioneered their own tactical intelligence networks, which enabled them to quickly act on relevant information with measured force. 92


89 Small, 66.

90 Murphy, 59.

91 Moyar, 127.
The 1968 Tet Offensive epitomized *dau tranh*. Although Tet failed at its primary goal of creating a general uprising, it did achieve impressive impacts on the American psyche. At the start of the offensive, Giap launched a simultaneous surprise attack on virtually every major South Vietnamese city with 100,000 VC guerrillas. While American forces were distracted by the siege of their remote Khe Sanh outpost, Giap aimed for southern population centers. In an interview after the war, Giap remarked:

> We dramatized [during Tet] that we were neither exhausted nor on the edge of defeat, as Westmoreland claimed. And though we knew most Americans had nothing against us, we wanted to carry the war into the families of America, to demonstrate, *n’est pas*, that if Vietnamese blood was being spilled, so was American blood. We did all this and more, and more Americans denounced the war.

While Tet did finish the Viet Cong as a fighting force, the Communists traded a tactical battlefield loss for a strategic strike on American political will to continue the war.

Westmoreland struggled to grasp the strategic impact of Tet and viewed the attack through an operational lens. During the offensive, VC sappers occupied the grounds of the US embassy in Saigon, striking a symbolic blow against American control of the country. After the battle, Westmoreland drove to the embassy and gave an informal press conference. There, reporters questioned his previous statements asserting American progress in view of the recent attack. Westmoreland appeared to dither on whether VC

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92 Brinkley, 274.

93 Zaffiri, 234.

94 Currey, 266-267.


96 Currey, 269.
troops had entered the chancery of the embassy or not, instead of addressing the more important symbolic effects of the assault. To Westmoreland, the enemy’s objective was the physical embassy.97 However, dau tranh dictated that the real target was American popular support.

Westmoreland largely failed in his handling of the media. Unlike previous conflicts, reporters broadcasted raw images from Vietnam into American homes within hours. Westmoreland viewed the media presence as a distraction from the war, while, in truth, it was a central piece of the conflict.98 In his memoirs, he showed his disdain by alleging that reporters “sped unedited television film by air to Tokyo for transmission by satellite to the United States before facts were ascertained.”99 Furthermore, he was overly optimistic on the progress of the war when he dealt with the press, despite his private reservations. For example, during a 1967 trip to Washington, he told reporters, “I have never been more encouraged in the four years I’ve been in Vietnam. We are making real progress. Everyone is encouraged.”100

Indeed, just months before Tet, Westmoreland stated, “We have reached an important point where the end begins to come into view.”101 This assertion now seemed groundless. Widely respected anchorman Walter Cronkite remarked, “What the hell is

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98 Zaffiri, 242.
99 Westmoreland, 325.
100 Zaffiri, 245.
going on? I thought we were winning the war!”102 The massive attack caused
disapproval of President Lyndon Johnson’s handling of the war to rocket from 47 to 63
percent. The grim realization that America lacked a winning strategy in Vietnam struck
fatally at political resolve to continue the war.103

Ironically, the Tet Offensive was just the battle Westmoreland had been searching
for out in the jungle. Thousands of Viet Cong fighters died in street battles with
American and ARVN troops.104 By choosing to meet the Americans force-on-force, the
Communists exposed themselves to withering US firepower.105 Although the Viet Cong
was devastated as a fighting force, their large surprise attack ran counter to American
portrayals of a beaten enemy.

In Tet, American commanders finally battled VC forces out in the open and
slayed countless fighters. Yet Westmoreland’s assertions did not match the shock of the
VC surprise attack, amplified by nightly television broadcasts. Dismayed Americans
watched on television as Communist fighters triumphantly raised their flag over the Hue
Citadel.106 While Westmoreland possessed a nuanced view of the complexities of the
war, he often failed to communicate these ideas to the American public.107 To them,
Westmoreland appeared either ignorant at best or deceptive at worst.108

102 Lawrence, 125.
103 Zaffiri, 296.
104 Boot, Invisible Armies, 423.
105 Krepinevich, 239.
106 Appy, 175.
With the realization that they were not winning the war, American goals shifted after Tet. Instead of long-term stabilization of South Vietnam, US leadership looked for a credible “out” that would not lead to an immediate Communist takeover. Indeed, the failure of the attrition strategy to secure the South Vietnam led Johnson successor President Richard Nixon to change American goals in the conflict. After Tet, the objective of US intervention was no longer winning the war but instead the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam “with honor.”

This change forced US leadership to look at alternative solutions, namely increasing focus on counterinsurgency. Fading popular support for the war forced Nixon to shift to “Vietnamization.” The political effect of Tet meant that America was no longer willing to pour troops into Vietnam. Instead, US leadership chose to shift the burden of fighting to the South Vietnamese. To achieve this outcome, Vietnamization called for a phased upgrading of the ARVN to fight both conventional and unconventional battles.

However, Westmoreland would not have the chance to tackle these new goals. In the closing days of his administration, Johnson selected Abrams to replace Westmoreland


108 Zaffiri, 247.


110 Fitzgerald, 36.

111 Krepinevich, 243.

112 Marston, 132.

113 Krepinevich, 251.
as commander of MACV. In a move debated as either a genuine promotion or merely being “kicked upstairs,” Johnson tapped Westmoreland to become the Army Chief of Staff.114

Abrams was an armor officer by trade, an expertise that seemed out of place in Vietnam. However, Abrams was intellectual and willing to adapt, despite his outward appearance as cigar-chomping, aggressive, and often unkempt. As a commander in World War II, he developed tactics to defeat German tanks equipped with superior guns and armor.115 Furthermore, he promoted subordinates based on performance, not on school pedigrees or unit affiliations.116

Despite his promise, the promotion of General Abrams to head MACV represented an evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, shift in US focus in the Vietnam War. Looking back, it is debatable whether Abrams emphasized pacification due to a larger change in strategy or whether he was simply adapting to the aftermath of Tet.117 Indeed, Westmoreland strongly recommended Abrams to Johnson as his replacement.118 However, Abrams did benefit from several positive press reports, in contrast to the recent negative news pieces on Westmoreland.119

114 Daddis, Westmoreland’s War, 170.
115 Moyar, 158.
116 Ibid, 159.
117 Daddis, Westmoreland’s War, 171.
118 Westmoreland, 362.
119 Zaffiri, 327.
Undeniably, differences did exist between how the two balanced conventional fighting and counterinsurgency. Westmoreland later recounted he only had two disagreements with how Abrams fought the war. He asserted that Abrams placed too much emphasis on the safety of Saigon and ignored the NVA units in the north of the country.\textsuperscript{120} In other words, Abrams focused more on population security at the expense of tackling regular Communist forces.

Abrams emphasized the importance of small-unit operations versus the large search-and-destroy missions under Westmoreland. However, Westmoreland did not enjoy the same freedom of action as Abrams. Abrams had the opportunity to disperse his forces due to the large losses the Communists suffered during the Tet Offensive and their need to regroup.\textsuperscript{121} Still, many units still concentrated fruitless offensive operations, such as during the 1969 battle of Hamburger Hill.\textsuperscript{122} Additionally, units continued to focus on body counts as their measure of effectiveness, something Abrams could have stopped.\textsuperscript{123}

Abrams also allowed the continued use of indiscriminate airstrikes and artillery bombardments. Reinforcing the counterproductive use of firepower, 1969’s Operation SPEEDY EXPRESS killed an estimated 7,000 civilians for roughly 5,000 dead Communist fighters.\textsuperscript{124} Furthermore, organizations dedicated to counterinsurgency remained on the fringes of the military.

\textsuperscript{120} Westmoreland, 381.

\textsuperscript{121} Zaffiri, 326.

\textsuperscript{122} Marston, 132.

\textsuperscript{123} Appy, 178.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid, 180-181.
Westmoreland had positioned the ARVN as a support force to US troops, whom he appointed to do the brunt of the fighting. With Vietnamization in full swing, Abrams had to steel the ARVN to stand on its own. While he was privately critical of Vietnamization, calling it “slow surrender,” he realized the urgency of his task. To this end, Abrams insisted his commanders to push the ARVN to fight whenever possible. In addition, Abrams improved ARVN logistical capability and leadership competence. In a nod to the importance of a loyal (and hopefully coup-adverse) military, he insisted that ARVN troops receive their paychecks on time.

Prior to assuming MACV command, Abrams led the PROVN study group suggesting that pacification, not attrition, was the correct course in the conflict. Furthermore, he advocated that the correct course was a “hearts and minds” campaign to win the population over to the government’s side. To achieve this effect, PROVN declared that military operations should be decentralized and focused on the provincial level. PROVN also called for the unification of South Vietnamese security forces in order to “saturate” population centers. Finally, Abrams’ group stated that the US ambassador to South Vietnam, not the MACV commander, should be in charge of all American efforts in the country. However, the Army brass did not wholeheartedly

125 Herring, 190.
126 Ibid, 283.
127 Zaffiri, 211.
128 Krepinevich, 252.
accept Abrams’ report. In fact, the Army Chief of Staff General Harold Johnson forbid discussion of Abrams’ PROVN study outside of his inner circle.\textsuperscript{130}

The real shift to counterinsurgency began when the Americans started to withdraw from Vietnam. To this end, Abrams focused on improving South Vietnamese leadership. As coups were an ever-present threat, Saigon chose military commanders for loyalty rather than competence. Indeed, when ARVN leadership improved, their effectiveness grew exponentially. As proof of Abrams’s success in revamping the ARVN, the insurgency essentially ended in 1971 as the Communists shifted to primarily conventional tactics.

In a visible shift from Westmoreland’s conventional sweeps of the mountains, Abrams camped troops in South Vietnamese villages. Symbolically, one of his first actions as MACV commander was initiating the closure of the remote Khe Sanh base, which Westmoreland insisted be kept open. In general, he decentralized command and permitted local commanders to use forces as they saw best. Abrams also used American troops in widespread partnership with those of the ARVN, unlike his predecessor.\textsuperscript{131}

Abrams also worked with the South Vietnamese government to implement programs that assuaged the population’s political grievances. The Thieu regime allowed villages to hold local elections and manage their own militias. In addition, government-administered land reform provided economic incentives while other programs built roads, hospitals, and schools. As the Americans began their final withdrawal, the South

\textsuperscript{130} Nagl, 159-160.

\textsuperscript{131} Moyar, 159-162.
Vietnamese countryside appeared more secure than at any time since the introduction of American combat forces.\textsuperscript{132}

A hallmark of US-South Vietnamese cooperation, the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) integrated both civil and military agencies in a concerted effort to provide both governance and security. These civil-military teams performed admirably at winning “hearts and minds.”\textsuperscript{133} They coordinated economic development and security missions under one chain of command.\textsuperscript{134} CORDS teams spread out into the countryside to deliver agricultural training and oversee public works projects.\textsuperscript{135} During his reign, Westmoreland failed to expand these types of programs despite his praise for their innovative approach.\textsuperscript{136} Personnel assigned to CORDS programs never numbered more than 5,500.\textsuperscript{137} In general, he viewed them as distractions from his attrition campaign.\textsuperscript{138} However, Abrams reviewed these programs favorably in his PROVN study and modeled future American involvement on them.\textsuperscript{139}

However, not every part of CORDS was so undeniably successful. One of CORDS’ component programs had a more sinister aspect. In an attempt to cripple the

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{132} Herring, 285-286.
\item\textsuperscript{133} Marston, 129.
\item\textsuperscript{134} Daddis, “Eating Soup with a Spoon,” 252.
\item\textsuperscript{135} Daddis, \textit{Westmoreland’s War}, 129.
\item\textsuperscript{136} Daddis, “Eating Soup with a Spoon,” 253.
\item\textsuperscript{137} Daddis, \textit{Westmoreland’s War}, 130.
\item\textsuperscript{138} Nagl, 157.
\item\textsuperscript{139} Marston, 128.
\end{itemize}
Viet Cong, the PHOENIX program aimed to target insurgent leaders. Started in 1965, the program grew in importance after the Tet Offensive. PHOENIX dismantled Viet Cong shadow governments by “neutralizing” their leaders, a euphemism for either killing them or convincing them to defect. By 1971, PHOENIX had neutralized more the 48,000 Viet Cong.\textsuperscript{140} Although successful in eliminating leaders, interagency reluctance to share intelligence hampered PHOENIX’s effectiveness.\textsuperscript{141} In addition, human rights violations committed under PHOENIX created political backlash that diminished its tactical gains.\textsuperscript{142}

In spite of making progress, Abrams was unable to fully correct South Vietnamese leadership problems. In hindsight, inept ARVN commanders threatened South Vietnam as effectively as Viet Cong guns. The ARVN suffered from the same corruption and poor leadership that affected the rest of the South Vietnamese government.\textsuperscript{143} To his credit, Abrams built strong personal relationships with South Vietnamese leaders. Although ARVN leadership problems persisted throughout the war, Abrams managed convince the South Vietnamese government to replace the worst commanders. Additionally, the looming American withdrawal forced President Nguyen Thieu that he needed not only loyal, but also competent commanders. Indeed, most of the ARVN’s post-1970 success in counterinsurgency was due to improved leadership. In testament to the ARVN’s new effectiveness, the Communist insurgency was no longer a

\textsuperscript{140} Marston, 133.

\textsuperscript{141} Moyar, 156-157.

\textsuperscript{142} Marston, 130.

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid, 133.
factor in the conflict by the time American combat forces left Vietnam.\textsuperscript{144} However, the South Vietnamese population still offered only lackluster support for their troubled government. In the words of I Field Force commander General Arthur Collins, the government had not yet “succeeded in mobilizing the will and energies of the people against the enemy and in support of national programs.”\textsuperscript{145}

In one of the more controversial chapters of the war, the invasions of Cambodia and Laos produced unsatisfactory results. In an attempt to preemptively strike Communist bases before they launched an attack, a joint US/ARVN raid into Cambodia failed to achieve many of its objectives. A later ARVN venture into Laos left it badly bloodied by the Communists. In either case, Communist supply lines stretched as far back as China, which was off limits from military action.\textsuperscript{146} Instead of securing South Vietnam, these invasions further hurt US public support for the war, which in turn helped speed up the withdrawal.\textsuperscript{147}

The North Vietnamese 1972 Easter offensive appeared to be the finishing test for the improved ARVN. Fourteen North Vietnamese divisions attacked headlong across the Demilitarized Zone. After Thieu’s replacement of a few underperforming commanders, the ARVN held firm against Communist tanks and artillery. In a sharp change from the pre-Tet Offensive years, the ARVN could rely on local support from villagers.\textsuperscript{148}

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{144}] Moyar, 161-166.
\item[\textsuperscript{145}] Herring, 285.
\item[\textsuperscript{146}] Boot, \textit{Invisible Armies}, 425.
\item[\textsuperscript{147}] Marston, 134.
\end{itemize}
While the ARVN had improved remarkably, American support was crucial in blunting the Communist assault. US bombers relentlessly pounded conventional NVA forces streaming into South Vietnam. American cargo planes flew in replacement tanks from Japan to replenish ARVN stocks.\textsuperscript{149} In addition, the January 1973 bombing of Hanoi and corresponding mining of Haiphong harbor helped bring a temporary ceasefire to the fighting.

The withdrawal of US combat troops was not supposed to be the end of American support for South Vietnam. More than 150,000 NVA troops remained in occupied South Vietnam. To stave off another Communist invasion, Nixon had promised continued American financial and logistical support. However, Nixon resigned in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal. Mounting political pressure cut off aid entirely to South Vietnam by 1974. However, China and the Soviet Union continued their support of North Vietnam unabated.\textsuperscript{150}

Starved of American military assistance, the ARVN began to show its weaknesses. Dooming South Vietnam, Nixon’s “peace with honor” was a convenient farce. Shortly after Communist and American delegations signed the Paris Peace Accord, its promised ceasefire unraveled and fighting resumed. The Accord allowed the US a sufficient interlude to complete its withdrawal unmolested, but the Communists’ intent to resume their conquest of the South was no secret. Further underscoring the inevitability of South Vietnam’s defeat, its government still lacked popular support. The

\textsuperscript{148} Moyar, 163.

\textsuperscript{149} Westmoreland, 392.

\textsuperscript{150} Boot, \textit{Invisible Armies}, 424.
government’s lack of authority and legitimacy meant South Vietnam was unable to stand on its own.\textsuperscript{151} South Vietnam could not afford the massive war machine once funded and equipped by the Americans. Additionally, the Nixon’s threat to resume bombing of North Vietnam evaporated with his resignation.\textsuperscript{152} Finally, the Khmer Rouge’s takeover of Cambodia suddenly left South Vietnam with few friendly neighbors.\textsuperscript{153}

In 1975, the final Communist invasion highlighted the ARVN’s fatal flaws. An onslaught of North Vietnamese soldiers poured into South Vietnam. The leadership inadequacies so prevalent during the early years of the war reemerged under the assault. While some units put up stout resistance, the majority of the ARVN melted away under attack. Unlike the 1972 Easter offensive, no American airpower arrived to devastate conventional forces out in the open.\textsuperscript{154} Within weeks, the Communists conquered the whole of the country. Tragically, South Vietnamese leadership who did not flee the country were killed or forcibly “reeducated” by their Communist conquerors.

Despite the fall of South Vietnam, Abrams had largely achieved his goals while commander of MACV. He had overseen the virtual eradication of insurgents in South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{155} Abrams had shaped the ARVN into a force that, while it possessed

\textsuperscript{151} Appy, 222.

\textsuperscript{152} Gaddis, 176.


\textsuperscript{154} Marston, 133-135.

\textsuperscript{155} Moyar, 163-164.
considerable flaws, could defend South Vietnam given American airpower and logistical support.

The Vietnam War ended with Communist tanks crashing through the streets of Saigon. However, the guerrillas of the Viet Cong paved the road to victory by exacting casualties on US servicemen and sapping American political will. Their perseverance and resiliency ultimately led Johnson to refuse Westmoreland’s request for additional troops expand the war. Johnson’s decision effectively ended American resolve to eject Communist forces from South Vietnam. The US military did eventually learn effective counterinsurgency, but it was too late and unable to fix the fundamental weaknesses of the South Vietnamese government.

In 1975, an internal “lessons-learned” paper commissioned by National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger promptly summed up American failure in Vietnam. It stated, “When we thought it was “our war,” we would not let the South Vietnamese fight it; when we no longer thought it was “our war,” we would not support them in fighting.” In other words, the Americans initially failed push the ARVN to stand on their own. Once the Americans withdrew, they failed to provide the air support and economic aid necessary to prevent their collapse.

Historians continue to debate whether it was possible for the US to “win” the Vietnam War. The Communists were undoubtedly strong and well supported, while the


157 Herring, 242.


159 Fitzgerald, 50.
South Vietnamese government remained weak and corrupt. After the war, Secretary McNamara recounted, “We failed then - as we have since - to recognize the limitations of modern, high technology military forces, equipment, and doctrine in confronting unconventional, highly motivated people’s movements.”\footnote{Daddis, \textit{Westmoreland’s War}, 181.} However, Westmoreland and Abrams could have done a better job implementing counterinsurgency techniques while also more appropriately balancing the need to fight regular NVA forces. Westmoreland admits this much in his memoir, stating “the Army failed to pay attention to the combination of guerrillas, local forces, and invading regular troops.”\footnote{Westmoreland, 414.} Unfortunately, the humiliation of the Vietnam War caused the American military to turn away from its hard-won counterinsurgency methods and instead concentrate solely on the Soviet threat in Europe.\footnote{Fitzgerald, 37-39.}
Chapter Two: Time Ill-Spent

The US military remade itself in the wake of the Vietnam War. Despite entering Vietnam with motivated and capable soldiers, US forces left years later with morale and discipline into steep decline. The shift to an all-volunteer force combined with the Reagan build-up of the 1980s gave a needed facelift to the war-weary armed services. Despite enduring losses to irregular opponents throughout the next two decades, the military still neglected to build and maintain the skills needed to defeat them. In its effort to cleanse itself of the embarrassment and pain of the Vietnam era, the US military consciously abandoned counterinsurgency in its aftermath.

Even before the Vietnam War’s end, US political leadership yearned to avoid future counterinsurgencies. No lower figure than President Nixon championed this change. In 1969, he stated that the US “has a right to expect that this problem will be increasingly handled by, and the responsibility for it taken by, the Asian nations themselves.”\(^{163}\) Upon learning of South Vietnam’s collapse in 1975, his successor President Gerald Ford remarked, “America can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned.”

The public laid most blame on political rather than military leaders, which allowed many inadequacies to remain unaddressed. This sentiment conveniently dovetailed with the presidential corruption uncovered by the Watergate scandal.\(^{164}\) The American public increasingly saw Vietnam as an unwinnable war instead of a military

\(^{163}\) Fitzgerald, 37.

\(^{164}\) Appy, 222-224.
failure. In 1975, Time magazine reported that South Vietnam was “a country seemingly fated for tragedy.” Absolved of losing the war, the military could remake itself as its leadership saw fit.

After the Vietnam War, the US military abandoned most of its irregular warfare programs to refocus on conventional warfare. The military quickly shifted to countering Soviet military build-ups while transitioning to an all-volunteer force. As the Army shifted its thinking to more straightforward conventional warfare, it placed counterinsurgency outside its self-selected missions. By 1972, the policy of “Europe first” eclipsed the pressing need to formally ingrain counterinsurgency into the Army. Furthermore, military leadership used the Israeli success in the conventional 1973 Yom Kippur War as an example why the US should abandon attempting counterinsurgency. Despite the still-ongoing Vietnam War, “Europe first” dictated that the military’s top priority was shoring up its NATO-assigned forces opposing the Soviets.

In 1975, the Army War College presented the only official military review of the Vietnam War. The “Vietnam Lessons Learned Study” argued that American reliance on firepower and technological superiority was the foremost cause of defeat. The study realized that while indiscriminate massive firepower often produced tactical victories. Misuse of firepower produced immense collateral damage that ran counter to American strategic goals. Furthermore, it found that the emphasis on firepower distracted from the

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165 Appy, 225.
166 Fitzgerald, 39.
167 Krepinevich, 272.
168 Fitzgerald, 42.
crucial task of stabilizing the South Vietnamese government. However, its most
prescient conclusion was that while the military had trouble tackling counterinsurgency,
the only path forward was to prepare for their inevitability.¹⁶⁹

Despite evidence to the contrary, the idea that Vietnam would have been won if
only politicians would have unleashed the full power of the military became popular in
professional circles. Many officers espoused the idea that “mission creep” left them stuck
with ever-evolving and unachievable goals.¹⁷⁰ In line with this thinking, the Army’s
service schools removed formal lessons on counterinsurgency.¹⁷¹

Emblematic of this mode of thinking was Harry Summers’ *On Strategy: The
Vietnam War in Context*. Summers’ work convinced much of the military that Vietnam-
esque wars were a dangerous distraction from their proper conventional mission. His
prescription to win the war centered on a full-scale conventional invasion of North
Vietnam. He wholly ignored the likelihood that China would have militarily intervened
if US troops crossed into North Vietnam.¹⁷² Counter to his narrative that politicians
heavily restrained US forces, American planes dropped more bombs on Vietnam than in
all of World War II. Furthermore, Washington approved the majority of requested troop

¹⁶⁹ Fitzgerald, 51-53.

¹⁷⁰ Dale Herspring, *The Pentagon and the Presidency: Civil-Military Relations
from FDR to George W. Bush.* (University of Kansas Press: Lawrence, 2005), 215-216.

¹⁷¹ Krepinevich, 272.

increases. Yet, his ideas that US forces fought with “one hand tied behind their back” eventually spread outside the military and into the general populace. 

To this end, military leaders saw protracted irregular war as something to be avoided at all costs, rather than realizing a need to improve their counterinsurgency skills. In its 1976 revision of its chief manual *Operations*, the Army largely deleted references to counterinsurgency. *Operations* cast the Army as in dire need of skills to fight a theoretical war with the Soviets. While the Soviets did present an existential threat to the United States, the Army would have done well to correct deficiencies that had recently lost a war costing nearly 60,000 American lives. Instead, military officers viewed specialization in irregular warfare as career ending.

The Vietnam War left the American military in shambles. At its core, the officer corps fought a battle between professional competence and careerism. According to a 1970 study, junior officers believed their superiors forced them to violate their integrity in order to remain competitive for promotion. The study reported that officers saw a system that “rewarded selfishness, incompetence and dishonesty.” Company and field grade officers who had served in Vietnam left in unprecedented numbers. The professional conformity and “box-checking” required for career advancement was

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174 Appy, 242.

175 Fitzgerald, 45.

176 Appy, 325.

177 Zaffiri, 345.
incompatible with many officers’ ethos of self-sacrifice and duty to country. Upon returning without homecoming fanfare, they rejoined their countrymen who were seemingly unappreciative of their sacrifice.\(^{178}\)

Upon American entry into Vietnam, the average soldier was better educated, trained, and motivated than his counterparts in the recent past.\(^{179}\) By the time of the US withdrawal, unit morale and readiness had sunk to record lows. Only four of thirteen Army divisions were combat ready. Distressingly, the military reported more than three hundred incidents of enlisted troops attempting to kill their commanding officers in 1971 alone. Additionally, drug and race problems infected many military bases, further undercutting discipline. Alarmingly, approximately ten percent of the troops deployed to Vietnam had been regular heroin users.\(^{180}\) A Senate investigation into “military disintegration” in Vietnam was damning. It found that, between 1968 and 1972, a steadily increasing number of American soldiers simply refused to fight.\(^{181}\) In short, the American military needed a top-to-bottom makeover, one that would unfortunately categorize irregular warfare as one of its ills.\(^{182}\)

The US military fought relatively straightforward and strategically insignificant conflicts in the 1980’s that did little to bolster unconventional capabilities. However, there were certainly shortcomings to improve upon. Reagan infused the military with

\(^{178}\) Appy, 238.

\(^{179}\) Zaffiri, 346.

\(^{180}\) Appy, 214.

\(^{181}\) Ibid, 212.

\(^{182}\) Fitzgerald, 40.
expanded budgets, allowing the possible expansion of unconventional capabilities. Additionally, his admiration for the military rejuvenated its public image.\(^{183}\)

The military’s makeover bore fruit by the 1980s. The quality of troops and their equipment improved dramatically. Pay raises and increased liberties for enlisted men steadily improved the quality of recruits.\(^{184}\) For example, in the early 1980s Army recruits overwhelmingly possessed high school degrees, up to 90 percent from 50 percent in the mid 1970s.\(^{185}\) The induction of modern marvels such as the F-15 fighter and M-1 tank was the cover page of a remade and rejuvenated military.

However, these multi-million dollar war machines had little use in counterinsurgencies and revealed the military’s turn away from its Vietnam experience. Incredibly, even the Army Special Forces, whom Kennedy created to specialize in irregular warfare, eliminated most of their counterinsurgency syllabus in order to remain useful to the “Big Army.”\(^{186}\) In fact, the Army’s penultimate Operations stated that the primary goal was to “win the first battle of the next war.” Unfortunately, it failed to sufficiently address necessary actions after winning this “first battle.”\(^{187}\)

Furthermore, the Army set the ability to win in mock tactical battles as the hallmark of a future general. Unfortunately, this mindset led Army generals to focus on

\(^{183}\) Herspring, 265.

\(^{184}\) Zaffiri, 352.


\(^{186}\) Fitzgerald, 47.

winning battles instead of winning wars. The resultant emphasis on defeating a battlefield opponent resulted in a lack of understanding how to turn military advantage into political victory. As Army War College professor Antulio Echevarria II warned, “The characteristics of the US style of warfare…are better suited for strike operations than for translating such operations into strategic success.”

Reagan’s primary national security goal was establishing military superiority over the Soviets. During the Vietnam War, the Soviets had built up their numerical superiority in conventional equipment and nuclear forces. He also believed that America should be able to counter Soviet moves around the globe. Yet, Reagan was also steering the military away from having to consider conducting another large-scale counterinsurgency. In his 1980 “noble cause” speech he declared, “let us tell those who fought in that war that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win.”

The post-Vietnam US military looked to Israel’s phenomenal victory in the 1973 Yom Kippur War as the way wars “should” be fought. However, the following Israeli conflict in Lebanon verified that a highly competent Western-style military could win tactical battles but lose strategically to irregular opponents. Much in the way the Persian

188 Ricks, 132-133.

189 Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 265.

190 Herspring, 272-273.

191 Appy, 286.

192 Fitzgerald, 46.
Gulf War would produce overconfidence in the US prior to the Iraq War, earlier Israeli conventional victories prevented them from adapting quickly to new ways of war.

Throughout the 1970’s, waves of Palestinian refugees, mostly from Jordan, upset Lebanon’s delicate balance of a dozen ethnic groups. After sectarian attacks by Christians and Muslims ignited a civil war, Syria sent troops to stabilize Lebanon. Syria allied with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), while Israel allied with Maronite Christians.  

After a series of Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israelis, in 1978 Israel launched a limited invasion into Lebanon. However, the Israeli force of 7,000 stopped short of the Litani River in order to avoid engagement with Syrian force. After seven days, the Israelis withdrew after inflicting significant damage on PLO infrastructure.

Unfortunately, the Israeli raid failed to prevent a renewal of Palestinian attacks on Israel. Additionally, Syrian troops bought anti-aircraft missiles into Lebanon to protect the PLO from future Israeli airstrikes. In order to destroy the PLO and force Syrian forces to evacuate from Lebanon, Israel mounted another invasion originally intended to last no more than 48 hours.

The 1982 Israeli invasion, codenamed “Peace for Galilee,” sent armored forces into Lebanon supported by artillery and airstrikes. As the Israelis had hoped, the Syrians fired back at Israeli troops and warplanes. In a stunning victory, the Israeli Air Force made short work of Syrian missile batteries and aircraft, shooting down 96 planes for no

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193 Bregman, 145-149.
194 Ibid, 150-151.
losses of their own. By the fifth day of the conflict, Israel and Syria agreed to a ceasefire. With the Syrians sidelined, the Israelis laid siege to Beirut, where PLO leadership had taken shelter. Within two months, the PLO abandoned Beirut to the Israelis, effectively handing the country over to Israeli forces.\(^{196}\) However, Israel’s bloody siege of Beirut sapped away most of its international support.\(^{197}\)

In Lebanon, Israel handily defeated the conventional forces of Syria and was able to dislodge the PLO. After the PLO’s defeat, a new terrorist group named Hezbollah (“Party of God”) rose to recommence attacks on Israelis.\(^{198}\) However, Hezbollah would prove to be a much tougher enemy than its PLO forerunner.

Much like the US in Vietnam, the IDF saw the conflict in mostly military terms. However, Hezbollah utilized a more sophisticated strategy. Hezbollah possessed a military arm, but it also performed social services, giving itself legitimacy among its Shia supporters. It also had a media arm that could amplify its military gains.\(^{199}\)

The Israeli military was unprepared for the unconventional tactics of Hezbollah. Trained with help from revolutionary Iran, Hezbollah possessed cunning tacticians and a penchant for spectacular attacks. Unlike other Islamic groups, Hezbollah had no qualms

\(^{196}\) Ibid, 165-175.

\(^{197}\) Boot, *Invisible Armies*, 467.

\(^{198}\) Bregman, 253.

against using suicide bombers.\textsuperscript{200} The IDF attempted to use its firepower advantage in punitive strikes, but these attacks only gained the insurgents more recruits.\textsuperscript{201}

Instead of rapidly invading and withdrawing, Israel became trapped in Lebanon and suffered relentless “pin-prick” attacks from Hezbollah.\textsuperscript{202} The Israeli tanks, champions of the Yom Kippur War, proved vulnerable to rocket attacks in urban areas, leading Israel to depend on exposed infantry.\textsuperscript{203} Hezbollah could switch between suicide bombers, kidnapping, and rocket attacks effortlessly.\textsuperscript{204} They used human shields to mitigate the IDF’s firepower advantage.\textsuperscript{205} To combat Israel’s technological edge, Hezbollah sponsor Iran supplied jam-resistant roadside bombs.\textsuperscript{206}

Not only was Israel unprepared militarily, it also lacked the political and economic power to affect the insurgency.\textsuperscript{207} To ensure continued support from its Shia base, Hezbollah performed the social services more commonly associated with a formal government. It also had a strong media arm that allowed it to “out-message” the

\textsuperscript{200} Boot, \textit{Invisible Armies}, 504-505.

\textsuperscript{201} Ibid, 513.

\textsuperscript{202} Ibid, 467.


\textsuperscript{204} Boot, \textit{Invisible Armies}, 507.

\textsuperscript{205} Marston, 236.

\textsuperscript{206} Boot, \textit{Invisible Armies}, 507.

\textsuperscript{207} Black, 132.
Israelis.\textsuperscript{208} In contrast to Hezbollah’s social outreach, the Israelis alienated the Lebanese with ever-present security checkpoints and brutal roundups of suspected Hezbollah members.\textsuperscript{209} Despite its tactical successes, the Israelis failed to achieve their political goal of stabilizing Lebanon.\textsuperscript{210}

By 1985, Hezbollah had inflicted enough pain to coerce Israeli forces to withdraw to a “security zone” in southern Lebanon.\textsuperscript{211} Two years later, the riots of the Palestinian \textit{intifada} showcased the popular resistance to the occupation and the vulnerability of Israeli soldiers.\textsuperscript{212} Over the next decade, Hezbollah killed roughly a dozen Israeli troops every year. Eventually, the Israelis vacated their “security zone” entirely as they withdrew in 2000.\textsuperscript{213}

Surprisingly, American forces also suffered losses in Lebanon during the 1980s but failed to learn from them. Following the Israeli invasion, American peacekeepers entered the country in September 1982. Once in Lebanon, they attempted to serve as a buffer between Israeli and PLO forces. Despite reservations from the Joint Chiefs, Reagan believed that the troops would be in Lebanon less than a month.\textsuperscript{214}

\textsuperscript{208} Boot, \textit{Invisible Armies}, 508.

\textsuperscript{209} Ibid, 506.

\textsuperscript{210} Smith, 260.

\textsuperscript{211} Boot, \textit{Invisible Armies}, 507.

\textsuperscript{212} Black, 132.

\textsuperscript{213} Boot, \textit{Invisible Armies}, 509-510.

\textsuperscript{214} Herspring, 278-279.
Due to its emphasis on conventional doctrine, US forces proved a poor fit for Lebanon. The Marines selected for the job were unsuitable for peacekeeping. Trained to maintain an offensive mindset, the Marines found themselves sitting on a vulnerable airfield that served as a buffer between warring factions. They were also frustrated by the rules of engagement, which only allowed returning fire when there was no risk of collateral damage.215

To compound the situation, Reagan directed the Marines to assist the Lebanese government in “providing for internal security.” Therefore, the US military helped supply and train the Christian-dominated Lebanese army. After initially viewing the Americans as a neutral party, Lebanese Muslims now saw the Marines as siding with the Israeli-allied Christians. Almost immediately, the Marines suffered an uptick in incoming sniper fire and shelling. In order to safeguard themselves from these long-range attacks, the Marines centralized all of their billeting to a single concrete building.216

In response to several casualties, American battleships bombarded Muslim settlements around Beirut with one-ton shells, further erasing the notion of American neutrality.217 By mid-October 1983, the threat to the Marines had grown so grim Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger recommended they be withdrawn to Navy ships offshore.


216 Herspring, 280-282.

217 Appy, 288.
However, Reagan declined to move them off the airfield to avoid the perception of retreating from the country.218

Tragically, on October 23 a Muslim suicide bomber plowed his explosive laden truck through the Marines’ meager security and detonated it next to their centralized barracks. Little known at the time, the bomber belonged to Islamic Jihad, a shadowy organization whose tactics would later influence Hezbollah. Nearly two-and-a-half tons of high explosive killed 241 Marines. A simultaneous bombing hit the French army barracks only two miles away. Never expecting such horrific casualties, the Marines ran out of body bags.219 The political aftermath forced the Americans to withdraw from the country, followed quickly by Italian and French peacekeepers.

An investigative commission into the bombing released a damning analysis. The Marines lacked sufficient military intelligence, their commanders failed to take adequate protective measures, and restrictive rules of engagement compromised their security. Most tellingly, however, was that the Marines were not equipped, trained, or organized for peacekeeping. The commission called for disciplining the officers responsible for security. However, Reagan stated that the officers “had already suffered quite enough” and took personal blame for the fiasco.220 Yet, the inability of the military to provide sufficient options to combat Lebanese guerrillas would prove humiliating in three years

218 Herspring, 283.
219 Boot, Invisible Armies, 503.
220 Herspring, 284.
later. Unable to free several Hezbollah-held American hostages by other means, in 1986 Reagan authorized the sale of weapons to Iran in exchange for their release.\textsuperscript{221}

Only a year after the Beirut bombings, the Weinberger doctrine reaffirmed the US’s determination to avoid unconventional conflicts rather than adapt to their inevitability. Dictated by its namesake, the doctrine called for several preconditions before the commitment of American combat troops. First, a conflict should be vital to the national interest. Next, his doctrine called for clear goals, the use of overwhelming combat power, and the support of the American people. Finally, he considered the entry into combat as a last resort.\textsuperscript{222}

While straightforward and seemingly reasonable, the Weinberger doctrine possessed considerable flaws. Namely, it seemed to put military intervention in untidy internal conflicts off the table. In addition, its resolve to use overwhelming forces harkens back to the counterproductive firepower employed in Vietnam. Finally, relegating military intervention to a last resort limited options for countering Soviet aggression or stabilizing allies. By placing the safety of military forces over political goals, the Weinberger doctrine warped the rational purpose of having a military.\textsuperscript{223}

The US military could have learned from the woes of the Soviet army in Afghanistan. The Soviet-Afghan War confirmed once again that determined and supported guerrillas could defeat massive conventional strength. Dispelling myths of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{221} Appy, 292.  \\
\textsuperscript{222} Fitzgerald, 88-89.  \\
\textsuperscript{223} Black, 150.  
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being able to bomb guerrillas “back into the Stone Age,” the conflict demonstrated that overwhelming firepower and brutality were no panacea for defeating irregulars.

After having taken over the Afghan government in 1978, the Communist regime instituted a number of changes that were anathema to Afghanistan’s traditional tribal society. When the government brutally cracked down on the tribes, it ignited a civil war. Within a year most of the Afghan army had deserted and the government was on the verge of toppling over.²²⁴

In late 1979, the Soviets launched a countrywide invasion in an attempt to prop up the faltering Communist regime. Their attack was impressive in scale, speed, and complexity. KGB agents swiftly executed Communist President Hafizullah Amin, whom the Soviets regarded as a liability. Simultaneously, 80,000 Russian troops secured strategic points throughout the country. Within a few weeks, the Russians controlled the country and had installed Babrak Karmal as the new president.²²⁵

However, like the Americans would later discover in Iraq and Afghanistan, the invasion was the easy part. The Soviet occupation stretched out nearly a decade as Afghans rallied to fight the foreign invaders. Despite their technological advantages and ruthlessness, the Soviets and their government allies struggled to engage the Afghan fighters on their own terms. The Soviet launched large offensives, but they failed to impart lasting damage on their opponents. Under the command of such resourceful

²²⁴ Boot, Invisible Armies, 485.

²²⁵ Ibid., 486.
leaders as Ahmed Shah Massoud, the insurgents could retreat into cave networks when attacked, only to reappear when the communists were vulnerable.\textsuperscript{226}

In retrospect, the Afghan guerrillas, or \textit{mujahedeen} as the Afghans popularly called them, made the most of their advantages in the face of the intimidating Soviet forces. The mujahedeen were able to unite their disparate countrymen to fight through religion and a shared revulsion to foreign influence. Mountainous Afghanistan was ideal for ambushes and hit-and-run attacks on Soviet supply lines.\textsuperscript{227} Throughout the conflict, the mujahedeen continually improved their organization and cooperation between the multitudes of guerrilla factions.\textsuperscript{228} In addition, foreign support flowing through Pakistan added fighters and equipment to their ranks, to include the much-publicized Stinger anti-aircraft missiles.\textsuperscript{229}

The Soviets made several mistakes. In an attempt to prevent the populace from supporting the guerrillas, the Soviets bombed and mined the countryside. Their indiscriminate killing of fighters and civilians alike only made them more enemies and unleashed a flood of refugees into Pakistan.\textsuperscript{230} The Soviets engaged in torture and desecrated mosques, which further inflamed Afghan anger. Furthermore, the Soviet army suffered from poor discipline and self-serving leadership, which only got worse as the conflict progressed. Finally, the Afghan government army, potentially the most

\textsuperscript{226} Ibid., 492.
\textsuperscript{227} Ibid., 489.
\textsuperscript{228} Westad, 372.
\textsuperscript{229} Russian General Staff, 222.
\textsuperscript{230} Ibid., 29.
effectively force to deal with their rebel countrymen, proved unable to stabilize the country. Throughout the war, the Afghan army suffered from mass desertion and only contributed a paltry 30,000 unmotivated soldiers to the communist cause.\textsuperscript{231} Sensing defeat, in 1986 the Soviets initiated a plan to slowly withdraw their forces from the country.\textsuperscript{232}

The Soviets departed Afghanistan in February 1989, leaving behind their Communist allies. By 1992, the Afghan government collapsed under the mujahedeen onslaught.\textsuperscript{233} Despite their technological prowess and willingness to use brutality, the Soviets had been unable to legitimize and protect the Afghan government.

The conflict had eerie parallels to the Vietnam War. In both conflicts, irregular forces inflicted enough pain over a long enough time to cause a technologically superior force to withdraw. Furthermore, the “superpowers” spent more effort killing fighters than legitimizing the government. In addition, the superpowers lacked enough intelligence and their offensive sweeps rarely produced significant results. Finally, the guerrillas enjoyed outside support and a stable supply line through a non-belligerent country. Just as the Vietnam War had shown, the Soviet-Afghan War demonstrated that technology and firepower were no substitute for a proper and well-executed counterinsurgency strategy.

The remainder of the 1980s produced a hodgepodge of hybrid conflicts. The interventions in Grenada and Panama were heavily weighted towards US success and

\textsuperscript{231} Boot, \textit{Invisible Armies}, 492-493.

\textsuperscript{232} Russian General Staff, 304.

\textsuperscript{233} Boot, \textit{Invisible Armies}, 499.
quickly over. However, they still revealed significant shortcomings in the American military. The civil war in El Salvador offered the chance to reacquire counterinsurgency skills, but the US only sent a token military presence and supported the government mainly through economic support.234

In October 1983, the Grenadian forces murdered their prime minister in a leftist coup. For months, suspicion had grown in Washington that Cuba planned to use Grenada to export communism to South America and Africa. Tellingly, the Cubans had just finished a runway long enough for heavy transports and bombers, despite Grenada not even having an air force.235 Therefore, US invaded to deny the Cubans and their Soviet allies access to this potential springboard into the Third World.

The US launched Operation URGENT FURY under the guise of safeguarding local American medical students. Placed under island-wide curfew by the Grenadian military, the students were in no real danger. Canadian officials joked that an American invasion posed a greater threat to the students than the Marxist government. While lacking any real intelligence on the island, the American invasion force outnumbered the defenders five-to-one. Grenadian government forces had little desire to fight and the more motivated Cuban troops on the island numbered only a hundred.236 The Americans triumphed through brute force and suffered relatively few casualties. After the invasion, US commander Vice Admiral Joseph Metcalf announced, “We blew them away.”237


235 Herspring, 287-288.

236 Appy, 290-291.
However, the Grenada invasion was not an affirmation of American military prowess; it was simply impossible to completely botch the capture of the Caribbean’s smallest nation.

Despite the apparent victory, there were serious problems with the invasion. Foremost, useful intelligence on the island was nonexistent. Shockingly, US forces did not even have a current map of Grenada. Throughout the invasion, Army and Marine units struggled to communicate with each other. In one distressing incident, Army rangers resorted to using signal mirrors to designate targets for Marine helicopters.\(^{238}\) Foreshadowing the Battle of Mogadishu, helicopters proved vulnerable operating without support over urban areas. Despite a complete lack of anti-aircraft missiles, enemy gunners destroyed nine US helicopters over three days.\(^{239}\)

In URGENT FURY, Reagan had left operational details to the military. Unfortunately, they produced an incoherent plan that resulted in needless casualties.\(^{240}\) Military planners were inexperienced and assembled in an ad hoc fashion. The Joint Chiefs of Staff gave their planners only days to design the operation. Further complicating their task, all the services demanded to be involved in the invasion so as to

\(^{238}\) Adkin, 217-218.
\(^{239}\) Ibid., 356-358.
\(^{240}\) Herspring, 290.
avoid a loss of prestige.\textsuperscript{241} This unenviable situation resulted in each of the services largely planning in isolation.\textsuperscript{242}

Privately, many military officers knew that URGENT FURY was a slipshod operation. American forces proved capable of storming beaches and dropping bombs, but lacked the finesse and teamwork necessary for more challenging conflicts. However, military leadership promoted the operation as flawless, a claim echoed by policymakers.\textsuperscript{243} Yet the following American intervention in Panama would reveal many of the same problems.

In 1981, Manuel Noriega assumed power in Panama after its president died in an airplane crash. Over the next few years, his regime became increasingly brutal and corrupt.\textsuperscript{244} Once an asset for the CIA, his relationship with Washington frayed due to his complicity in drug trafficking. Finally, in 1989 he rejected the results of a national election that would have removed him from power. After his forces began routinely harassing and occasionally shooting at locally based American troops, President George Bush decided to invade Panama.\textsuperscript{245}

The US enjoyed several advantages in the invasion of Panama, dubbed Operation JUST CAUSE. Namely, it sent 25,000 US troops against the paltry pro-Noriega

\textsuperscript{241} Adkin, 125-127.

\textsuperscript{242} Ibid., 337.

\textsuperscript{243} Ibid, 340.

\textsuperscript{244} Herspring, 303.

\textsuperscript{245} Ibid, 307.
Panamanian Defense Force (PDF). Furthermore, the Panamanian populace generally welcomed the Americans and reviled Noriega. In addition, US forces were equipped with night-vision devices and trained to fight at night, unlike the rather primitive PDF.

Remarkably, General Carl Stiner, the commander of US forces, stated that the Panama invasion proceeded so flawlessly that there were no lessons to learn from. He believed that the conflict reinforced the Army’s general direction. Despite his confidence, JUST CAUSE had several serious flaws that became increasingly evident after fighting ended.

Despite the loss of only 23 American soldiers, Panama revealed deficiencies with US small wars tactics. More than three thousand Panamanians died from American airstrikes. Yet, Panama made future wars easier to launch. Secretary of State James Baker remarked that Panama broke “the mindset of the American people about the use of force in the post-Vietnam era.”

The invasion left the PDF in ruins. More than a strictly military institution, the PDF was a powerful and respected, if corrupt, institution woven into daily life. Its troops performed police work and enlisting in its ranks offered social mobility to the poor. Like the disbandment of the Iraqi army in 2003, the vacuum left by the dissolution of the PDF

\[\text{246 Appy, 293.}\]
\[\text{247 Donnelly, 403.}\]
\[\text{248 Ibid, 393.}\]
\[\text{249 Appy, 295.}\]
created widespread looting and disorder. In its aftermath, newly formed police units struggled to regain control.²⁵⁰

Foreshadowing Somalia, Panama revealed that US forces had not trained adequately for urban combat. Traditional Army doctrine dictated bypassing cities rather than fighting in them. However, American troops found themselves going house-to-house to root out pockets of PDF resistance. Their vehicles were especially vulnerable and only poor PDF marksmanship prevented more casualties.²⁵¹

Also set in Central American, the irregular conflict in El Salvador could have added needed counterinsurgency skills to the US military. However, the conflict featured low numbers of US military personnel and was largely ignored in professional military circles. In 1980, a civil war erupted between the government and Marxist guerrillas fed up with corruption and the ruling oligarchy.²⁵² The Americans supported the government while the Soviets, Cubans, and Nicaraguan Sandinistas reinforced the rebels.²⁵³ By its end in 1992, more than 75,000 Salvadorians died from the fighting.²⁵⁴

The El Salvadoran conflict, which involved just a few dozen American soldiers, recast irregular warfare into “low-intensity conflict.” This time, however, the US was reluctant to send more troops for fear of entering into another protracted conflict. US

²⁵⁰ Donnelly, 399-401.
²⁵¹ Ibid, 404.
²⁵² Crandall, 47.
²⁵⁴ Ibid, 1.
military leadership saw its intervention as an “anti-Vietnam” model suitable for other future irregular conflicts.255

Despite its rebranding, the El Salvadoran intervention did bear some similarities to Vietnam. For example, the US supported an unpopular and brutal government in El Salvador, much like the South Vietnamese regime. Also like in Vietnam, US advisors built El Salvadoran forces into conventionally sized and equipped units rather than those appropriate for counterinsurgency. Only after a thrashing by communist rebels in 1981 did Washington attempt to reanalyze its approach in El Salvador.256

American military support did help shore up government forces. In reality, though, the bulk of the American contribution was diplomatic and economic.257 Throughout the 1980s, America contributed six billion dollars to the tiny Latin American country.258 In addition, US insistence on free elections helped undercut the guerrillas’ appeal.

However, the US never had a well-defined overall strategy in El Salvador. Reagan framed the conflict as part of the larger Cold War, a convenient but dubious claim. In 1984, he remarked to television anchor Walter Cronkite, “Without actually using Soviet troops, in effect, the Soviets are, you might say, trying to do the same thing in El Salvador that they did in Afghanistan, but by using proxy troops through Cuba and

255 Ibid, 3.

256 Fitzgerald, 62-64.

257 Crandall, 9.

258 Crandall, 1.
guerrillas. At times the US seemed to support right wing “death squads” or reject rebel peace offers. While both sides committed atrocities, the US-backed government was responsible for approximately 85 percent of the war crimes.

The conflict ended with the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union ended subsidies to Cuba, the guerrillas’ chief backer. As Communist backing evaporated, the US no longer wished to prolong the conflict and began to prod the government to make peace. With the belligerents’ sponsors wishing an end to the conflict, both sides agreed to a power-sharing agreement in 1992. The resulting peace accord morphed the rebels into a recognized political party, disbanded the El Salvador military, and placed the new national police under civilian control.

American intervention in El Salvador remains controversial. In 2004, Vice President Dick Cheney publically remarked that US policies were successful and would apply equally well to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Others, such as the Catholic Church, condemned American support of a government that killed and tortured civilians indiscriminately. In the end, the belligerents’ patrons prolonged the fighting by supplying arms and money. Once the war no longer served their patrons’ ends, both the rebels and the government, cut from their foreign support, agreed to a ceasefire.

259 Westad, 344.
260 Crandall, 481.
261 Ibid, 462-466.
262 Ibid, 478-479.
263 Ibid, 4-6.
Unfortunately, the US failed to learn lessons from contemporary conflicts in the 1980’s. Even the writers of the Army manual *Low Intensity Operations* seemed oblivious to recent experiences. *Low Intensity Operations* stated that the first priority in a counterinsurgency was hunting down guerrillas, not securing the population. The manual even recast Vietnam’s futile “search and destroy” operations as productive “strike campaigns.” Furthermore, Army bureaucracy prevented soldiers from specializing in irregular warfare. Even if they were attached to a designated “low intensity warfare” unit, soldiers only served a few years before rotating back to a heavy “Big Army” formation.264

Yet, as Vietnam drew further away, one of the most critical books on the US intervention emerged. Published in 1986, Andrew Krepinevich’s *The Army and Vietnam* spotlighted the military’s inability to adapt as the primary cause of failure. Despite the embarrassing realities outlined in Krepinevich’s book, it failed to find traction with the officer corps and several military journals reviewed it poorly.265

In the late 1980s, a few enterprising officers, future Iraq War commander David Petraeus among them, took an interest in counterinsurgency. Tellingly, they called themselves the “COINdistas” and viewed themselves as intellectual dissidents to the mainstream Army. The “COINdistas” believed that the military had to be able to fight “nasty little wars.” Despite their passion, their ideas garnered little respect from the Army brass.266

264 Krepinevich, 272-273.
265 Fitzgerald, 76.

266 Appy, 326.
As the end of the 1980s approached, the US military settled in to its comfortable doctrine of “AirLand Battle.” Formally adopted in 1982, the AirLand Battle doctrine attempted to leverage US technological superiority to defeat the Warsaw Pact. It imagined an aggressive NATO push into East Germany to preemptively spoil a Soviet invasion. AirLand Battle, as its name suggests, espoused a highly integrated air and ground blitzkrieg as a counter to more numerous Warsaw Pact forces, which possessed 51,000 tanks versus the West’s 23,000.

The overwhelming emphasis on AirLand Battle signaled that, once again, irregular warfare had faded from the military’s mentality. Even the once-popular “low-intensity conflict” units became a supporting part to the main conventional show. Furthermore, the military formations built to fight the Cold War would prove ill suited to perform unconventional warfare in its aftermath.

The years following Vietnam restructured the American military. The end product was a high-tech, highly trained, and highly motivated force. However, the US military was rebuilt to fight an intense conventional war in Europe. As evidenced by its losses in Lebanon and stumbles in Latin America, it was unprepared to fight a protracted irregular conflict.

267 Friedman, 462-463.

268 Smith, 196.

269 Fitzgerald, 77.

270 Smith, 196.
Chapter Three: Small Wars by Smart Bomb

The 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union removed the major impediment for the US military to appropriately allot resources to irregular warfare. Since the end of World War II, the US military correctly saw the repulsion of a Soviet invasion of Western Europe as its primary mission. The military’s institutional inertia found this scenario familiar – it resembled World War II with better tanks, airplanes, and warships. With this threat no longer present, the military should have examined what types of conflict it would have to face in the near future. Indeed, the dissolution of the Cold War unleashed local conflicts that had been held in check by the superpowers. However, the extraordinary victory of the Persian Gulf War prevented serious introspection into irregular warfare capabilities. With its reputation secure, the US military spent the 1990s continuing to focus on conventional warfare, despite the demise of the Soviet Union and the bloody failure of the humanitarian intervention in Somalia.

In August 1990, the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein ordered his army to invade Kuwait in a bid to seize its oil fields. Hussein thought he could annex wealthy Kuwait without Western intervention, in part due to poor communication by the US ambassador. However, Iraq’s conquest of oil-rich Kuwait threatened US energy security. Within a week of the invasion, US president George H. W. Bush ordered American warplanes to reinforce neighboring Saudi Arabia under Operation DESERT SHIELD.

271 Smith, 269.

272 Herspring, 311.

273 Appy, 297.
By late November, the UN Security council authorized the use of force to eject Iraq from Kuwait. Soon, an imposing coalition comprised of not just American but also European and Arab allies assembled in the Saudi desert. Perhaps most intimidating was the Germany-based US VII Corps, a mammoth force of heavy armor freed up by the upheaval in the communist world. After an UN-imposed deadline for the withdrawal of Iraqi forces elapsed, the coalition launched a sophisticated aerial attack that lasted more than a month.274

Transformed into Operation DESERT STORM, American-led airstrikes roamed the desert skies finding and destroying Iraqi tanks one by one. When ground forces moved north into occupied Kuwait and Iraq in February 1991, they found the Iraqi army shattered by the bombing. While some Iraqi units put up piecemeal resistance, coalition armor steamrolled over most of them. American television screens, previously filled with relatively sterile footage of precision bombings, now broadcast the hell of the “Highway of Death” as American aircraft decimated routed Iraqi units fleeing north out of Kuwait. Within three days, the war ended in coalition victory.275

The success of Operation DESERT STORM created misleading confidence in US military competence. The troops who fought in the war returned to a hero’s welcome and ticker-tape parades. To the public, the Persian Gulf War represented the climax of America’s victory in the Cold War. True, the Soviet Union no longer existed and democracy had spread throughout formerly Communist Eastern Europe. Perhaps just as significantly, though, the public believed that the US military had finally been used

274 Atkinson, 33.

properly, produced victory, and lifted national pride. At a victory speech, President Bush announced, “the specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula.”276 In private Bush confided, “By God, we’ve licked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”277

However, the Persian Gulf War and the Vietnam War were fundamentally different conflicts. They diverged dramatically in virtually every aspect of warfare, to include political circumstances, fielded forces, terrain, and popular support. The US defeated Iraq’s military due to overwhelming forces, technological advantages, and a well-developed conventional warfare playbook. From the outset, coalition victory was assured, if perhaps not the number of US casualties. In the words of campaign planner Brigadier General Buster Glossen, “The outcome of this war is not in question. The only issue is how many body bags we’re going to send back across the Atlantic.”278

The triumph appeared flawless to the American public and prevented introspection into military capabilities not utilized in DESERT STORM. In DESERT STORM, 148 Americans had died in combat, equivalent to only a week’s worth of casualties in Vietnam.279 The news media fawned over the military’s “picture-perfect assaults” and rarely interviewed military critics.280 Intoxicated by triumph, few asked what kind of conflicts America would face in the future.

276 Fitzgerald, 87.
277 Atkinson, 493.
278 Ibid, 65.
279 Ibid, 491.
280 Appy, 298-299.
The Gulf War was an aberration in recent US military history. It featured virtually no irregular action and took place in a barren landscape largely devoid of cover. Under those optimal conditions, allied airpower, Schwarzkopf’s greatest advantage, was able to destroy Iraqi formations before coalition ground forces even made contact. The Iraqis suffered more than 50,000 troops killed from overwhelming American firepower.281

Because of this stellar performance, American airpower eclipsed ground troops as the go-to intervention option. The images of B-52s aimlessly bombing the jungles of South Vietnam to little effect seemed a distant memory.282 Yet as the upcoming Somalia debacle would prove, airpower was of little utility when the enemy mixed with civilians in dense urban environments. For that messy and complicated intervention, foot soldiers were immeasurably more valuable than glamorous black stealth fighters.

Indeed, the subsequent uprising of Iraqi Shiites and Kurds after the Persian Gulf War hinted that the US had significant gaps in its ability to handle future conflicts. After being encouraged to revolt by President Bush, the rebels came under withering attack from Iraqi government attack helicopters and artillery. However, the US failed to provide anything more than encouraging words and declined to provide air cover over the Shiites (while the northern Kurds did enjoy an ad hoc no-fly zone). Outgunned and lacking material support from their western allies, the Shiite rebels collapsed under the onslaught while the Kurds suffered grievous casualties.283

281 Black, 146-147.

282 Atkinson, 494.
The US was unprepared for the aftermath of its victory. America had liberated Kuwait but left Saddam in place with a battered yet intact military.284 Temporarily weakened, Saddam Hussein quickly reestablished control of his country while the CIA unsuccessfully attempted makeshift plots to undermine his authority. Just a year after the war, Iraqi jet bombers routinely pounded southern Shiite positions in blatant violation of UN resolutions.285 In response, the US and its allies established a no-fly zone over the Shiite south. While Iraqi aircraft stayed parked in their hangars, the persecution of the Shiites continued unabated on the ground.286

The military also faced significant budgetary challenges in the early 1990s. It was straddled with an enormous but now unnecessary force structure leftover from the Reagan buildup. Many Americans wanted to reap the “peace dividend” and reroute military spending to domestic programs.287 In less than five years, the Army shed a third of its combat forces.288

Attempts to adapt to a changing world ran into the military’s reluctance to embrace irregular warfare. No one less than Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Colin Powell argued that it was imperative to “move the armed forces onto a new course, one paralleling what was happening in the world today, not one chained to the previous forty

283 Atkinson, 489-490.
284 Black, 148.
285 Atkinson, 498.
286 Smith, 325.
287 Herspring, 297.
288 Ibid, 328.
years.”

Facing across-the-board defense budget cuts, he championed the idea of a “base force.” His “base force” consisted of heavy units able to deploy to Europe or Asia, a nuclear deterrence force, and a rapid reaction force to deploy to troubled regions.

Powell pictured the rapid reaction force as suitable for relatively quick Panama or Grenada-style operations. Conspicuously absent from the “base force” was the capability to provide prolonged peacekeeping or counterinsurgency. Despite this shortcoming, Powell was successful in selling his plan to the executive branch. The Gulf War only bolstered the idea that the military should be able to quickly deploy, briefly and decisively fight, and then efficiently return back to the US.

Despite the victory, the “specter of Vietnam” and desire to avoid irregular warfare still persisted in American leadership. In 1993, President Bush declared that the US was not “the world’s policeman.” Despite Bush’s statement, the US would have to occasionally engage in messy conflicts to further its interests. A year earlier in an interview, Powell had foreseen this conundrum. He argued “we’ve heard it again and again: America cannot be the world’s policeman. Yet...when there’s trouble, when somebody needs a cop, who gets called to restore peace? We do.” Furthermore, few countries were foolish enough to engage America in conventional warfare following Iraq’s humiliating and televised thrashing.

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289 Ibid, 324.
290 Ibid, 326.
291 Ibid, 327-328.
292 Atkinson, 495.
293 Herspring, 328.
The military’s reluctance to prepare for the humanitarian intervention in Somalia left the country in chaos. The failure, and resultant casualties, reinforced American reluctance to engage in irregular conflict for the remainder of the decade. The American military shaped its doctrine to result in overwhelming victories, but its forces came up short in the crowded streets of the Somali capital Mogadishu. What started out as well-intentioned humanitarian relief devolved into a disorganized attempt to bring order to Mogadishu. Soon, American and UN peacekeepers found themselves in the crossfire of the ruling warlords.

The American “rapid response force” had no intentions of a long-term commitment and lacked a comprehensive plan to bring order to Mogadishu. If American forces had realized the utility of working within existing Somali power structure they could have avoided the violent backlash by the Somali clans. Additionally, had they brought the proper equipment, such the protected jeeps that would later be dubbed “up-armored” Humvees, US forces would have avoided the casualties that led to withdrawal. By failing to either train or equip for unconventional warfare, the American military sealed the fate of the disastrous mission.

The speed at which Somali unraveled left little time for impromptu preparation. The ruling Somali dictatorship collapsed in 1991. Soon, the dissolution of the central

294 Black, 152.

295 Herspring, 343.


government led to widespread food shortages and starvation. Adding to the chaos, clans and remnants of the army fought each other for power.\textsuperscript{298} Clans had formed the basis of Somali society for hundreds of years, and with no central government they were free to fight each other unmolested.\textsuperscript{299} Furthermore, drought crippled the Somali harvest and placed nearly two million at risk of starvation.\textsuperscript{300} By the end of 1992, 350,000 Somalis had died in the civil war and accompanying famine.\textsuperscript{301}

Initial UN efforts to supply food and the resulting flurry of United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) were challenged by the devolving security situation. UNSCR 733 outlawed arms importation, but without effective enforcement, the weapons trade remained generally unhindered. UNSCR 746 attempted to construct a peace process and monitoring, but failed to bring along any firepower to police it. UNSCR 751 formally established the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM I) with a small unit of 50 observers and later a larger Pakistani force to guard the Mogadishu airport.\textsuperscript{302}

Due to the militias, the UN and other non-governmental organizations found it nearly impossible to push food out of the capital. In order to guarantee the safety of the aid workers, UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali requested 3,000 additional

\textsuperscript{298} Durch, 314.

\textsuperscript{299} Rutherford, 1.

\textsuperscript{300} Durch, 315.

\textsuperscript{301} Alex Bellamy and Paul Williams. \textit{Understanding Peacekeeping}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2010), 223.

\textsuperscript{302} Rutherford, 28.
peacekeepers. However, unlike the advance force of 500 troops already agreed to, the local warlords were not consulted first about this larger deployment.\textsuperscript{303} As a response to the growing anarchy, the UN passed UNSCR 775 to start airlifting supplies and bolster the forces assigned to protect the relief workers.\textsuperscript{304}

When the UN, along with the Red Cross and the Americans, began to airlift relief supplies into Somalia, the warlords discovered a new resource to fight over. Militias looted tons of food and medicine from woefully protected UN planes.\textsuperscript{305} The militias utilized the relief supplies to maintain control over the Somali populace. Looting of food caused the relief agencies to hire local “security,” whom, in actuality, were outlaw militiamen utilizing their paychecks to buy more weapons. With the militias growing ever stronger, Somali continued to descend into anarchy.\textsuperscript{306}

Faced with this dilemma, in December 1992 the UN Security Council passed UNSCR 794. The resolution authorized member nations to create a secure environment for conducting relief operations. The US responded to UNSCR 794 by launching Operation RESTORE HOPE and became the de facto lead country in the relief mission.\textsuperscript{307} In total, nearly 30,000 American troops and 10,000 other UN troops comprised Unified Task Force (UNITAF).\textsuperscript{308}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{303} Durch, 316.
\textsuperscript{304} Ibid, 330.
\textsuperscript{305} Rutherford, 38.
\textsuperscript{306} Durch, 318.
\textsuperscript{307} Ibid, 320.
\textsuperscript{308} Rutherford, XVI.
\end{flushright}
US commanders split RESTORE HOPE into four operational phases. Phase One secured Mogadishu and established a base camp for future operations. Phase Two expanded UN control over the towns outlying Mogadishu to the north and their transportation networks. The contested population centers south of Mogadishu would be secured in Phase Three. Once these areas were pacified, the US would transfer its security responsibilities to the UN during Phase Four.\(^{309}\)

Just six days after the passage of UNSCR 794, the first US troops arrived in Mogadishu. As Marines stormed the beach, fighter jets screamed overhead as a show of force. Fortunately, they were not opposed by the militias due to the diplomacy of the former US ambassador to Somalia Robert Oakley.\(^{310}\) In addition to occupying Mogadishu, UNITAF forces also secured a large airstrip to the north to facilitate logistics.

However, the mere presence of American peacekeepers did not guarantee the security of relief distribution routes. After Somali leaders agreed to a “ceasefire,” UN forces began to confiscate heavy weapons in Mogadishu.\(^{311}\) However, the demand for local security for foreign organizations had fueled an arm-buying boom in Somali.\(^{312}\) Furthermore, the Somali leaders did not interpret the “ceasefire” agreement as a binding contract, leading to bitterness toward the US-led peacekeepers.\(^{313}\) Compounding the

\(^{309}\) Durch, 322.

\(^{310}\) Rutherford, 84-85.

\(^{311}\) Durch, 323.

\(^{312}\) Rutherford, 95.
situation, random attacks on UNITAF forces were often responded to disproportionately with artillery and airpower. In response, the peacekeepers shut down the arms markets that dotted Mogadishu.\textsuperscript{314}

The effects of rising tensions between UNITAF and the militias began to materialize into additional violence. Somali clans historically tended to band together in the face of foreign outsiders.\textsuperscript{315} First, two “technicals,” pickup trucks outfitted with machine guns, were destroyed by US helicopters after firing upon them.\textsuperscript{316} In response, warlord-directed rioting shook Mogadishu. Furthermore, the Nigerian force, already viewed with suspicion by the Somalis, came under sniper attack and responded with indiscriminate force. Despite the rising tensions, UNITAF had determinedly established a fairly secure zone to distribute relief supplies.\textsuperscript{317}

The UN peacekeeping force faced a fateful transition from UNITAF to the United Nations Operation in Somalia II (UNOSOM II).\textsuperscript{318} While UNITAF had successfully created conduits for the delivery of food aid, UNOSOM II was tasked with pacifying the country to lay the foundation for nation building. Most importantly, the UN authorized UNOSOM II to disarm the militias, which would prove to be its toughest challenge.\textsuperscript{319}

\textsuperscript{313} Durch, 323.
\textsuperscript{314} Ibid, 324.
\textsuperscript{315} Rutherford, 2.
\textsuperscript{316} Ibid, 100.
\textsuperscript{317} Durch, 324-325.
\textsuperscript{318} Ibid, 330.
\textsuperscript{319} Rutherford, XVI.
The US again took the lead, as only it could supply the military capability and command structure necessary to run the operation.\textsuperscript{320} US leadership believed that a relatively small US force would be sufficient to stabilize the Mogadishu.\textsuperscript{321} Unfortunately, they disregarded the advice of Somali experts that foresaw the clans uniting against the peacekeepers.\textsuperscript{322} Despite the dangers associated with the switch to “peace enforcement,” civilian US leadership was optimistic about success and the Pentagon saw it as a chance to for a quick exit once the country was pacified.\textsuperscript{323}

Fatally, the US did not have the approval of the most prominent power holder in Mogadishu, warlord Mohamed Aideed. Other Somali warlords saw UNOSOM as a counterbalance to Aideed. However, Aideed viewed the mission as an affront to his quest for the Somali presidency. The discovery of a plane in false UN markings smuggling weapons to Aideed’s foes served to confirm his suspicions.\textsuperscript{324} As the American-led force found itself in opposition to Somalia’s most powerful local actor, it was woefully prepared for full-on urban combat.\textsuperscript{325}

To disarm the militias, UNOSOM II centered on the American contingent composed of an infantry battalion equipped with helicopters. US commanders had

\textsuperscript{320} Durch, 326.

\textsuperscript{321} Rutherford, 71.

\textsuperscript{322} Ibid, 80.

\textsuperscript{323} Ibid, 96.

\textsuperscript{324} Ibid, 41.

\textsuperscript{325} Durch, 329.
requested heavy armor but were denied by Washington due to mission’s image as a peacekeeping operation.\textsuperscript{326} In addition, the Americans brought 3,000 support troops to ease logistical constraints. The infantry battalion, known as the Quick Reaction Force (QRF), and a small intelligence cell were under sole US control.\textsuperscript{327} The 26 other countries’ forces fell under a separate UN command in addition to their own national authorities.\textsuperscript{328} This command scheme contributed to an overly complex and inefficient control structure for coordinating multi-national troops, each also having to ask permission from their home governments.\textsuperscript{329}

Given the build-up in tension, larger, bloodier clashes were inevitable. Seeing political reconciliation as a losing proposition, Aideed and his Somali National Alliance (SNA) began to seek ways to hinder and eventually evict UNOSOM forces. UN forces continued to agitate Aideed. First, they were attempting to restore the national government, whereas each warlord was currently the ruler of whatever area they could control. Secondly, the UN threatened to confiscate Aideed’s weapons caches that had been enlarged since UNITAF’s original inspections.\textsuperscript{330} With the continued encroachment of peacekeepers onto his authority, Aideed saw them as a direct threat to his power.

The first decisive encounter with UN forces occurred on 5 June 1993, when militiamen ambushed Pakistani troops conducting weapons inspections. Mindful of UN

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{326} Rutherford, 149.
\item \textsuperscript{327} Ibid, 122.
\item \textsuperscript{328} Durch, 339.
\item \textsuperscript{329} Ibid, 338.
\item \textsuperscript{330} Ibid, 341.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
rules of engagement, the militiamen used women and children as human shields.\textsuperscript{331} The militiamen were able to inflict heavy casualties on the Pakistanis and capture most of the rest. SNA-organized roadblocks hindered Pakistani rescue forces. By the time an Italian armored contingent arrived, delayed after asking their home government for permission, the battle was already over. An additional attack on UNOSOM forces was met with heavier firepower, but an unfortunate friendly fire attack killed even more Pakistanis, leaving a total of 24 dead.

Sensing a change in force protection requirements, the UN peacekeepers were briefly reinforced with AC-130 gunships, aircraft capable of delivering heavy firepower with great precision. Despite the higher risk, the UN forces continued to raid SNA hideouts and weapons caches across Mogadishu. They also destroyed radio stations used by Aideed to rally Somalis against the foreigners.\textsuperscript{332} However, UN forces engaged in less intelligence gathering activities than before due to the increased threat level.\textsuperscript{333}

Aggressive actions by UNOSOM led to increased disillusionment from the Somali populace. During the raids, an errant airstrike led to multiple civilian casualties. Furthermore, the still-edgy Pakistanis were the victims of a staged massacre by the SNA. Surrounded by an angry Somali mob, Pakistani troops and protesters alike were targeted by SNA snipers.\textsuperscript{334} When the mob dispersed, it appeared the Pakistanis had shot

\textsuperscript{331} Rutherford, 135.

\textsuperscript{332} Durch, 342-343.

\textsuperscript{333} Rutherford, 133.

\textsuperscript{334} Ibid, 135.
unarmed protesters. Following these actions, the UN pursued additional attacks on the
SNA, but mobs impeded their advance and allowed Aideed to escape.\textsuperscript{335}

As the SNA took the offensive against UNOSOM, the peacekeepers were unable
to conduct nation-building operations to stabilize the country. Furthermore, the various
partner nations’ willingness to fight began to dissolve. Commanders had already
positioned UNITAF forces based on their willingness to fight.\textsuperscript{336} As an assumed rule,
donor nations did not accept casualties as part of carrying out a UN mandate. In
particular, the Pakistanis, who had done most of the fighting and taken the brunt of the
casualties, chose to postpone offensive operations until armored reinforcements
arrived.\textsuperscript{337} The Italians proceeded independently with a less-aggressive approach and
reportedly even paid local warlords protection money.\textsuperscript{338} With the large Pakistani and
Italian contingents unwilling to attempt offensive operations, UNOSOM relied on the US
QRF, which had abundant helicopters but few armored vehicles.\textsuperscript{339}

The infamous “Black Hawk Down” clash, known formally as the Battle of
Mogadishu, resulted in American withdrawal from Somalia. The bloody clash between
Somali militia and US troops occurred as a direct result of the UN’s reliance on the QRF
as the sole large national force willing to go head-to-head with the SNA. Unfortunately,

\textsuperscript{335} Durch, 343-344.
\textsuperscript{336} Rutherford, 92.
\textsuperscript{337} Durch, 344-345.
\textsuperscript{338} Bellamy, 226.
\textsuperscript{339} Durch, 346.
American forces were unequipped for sustained combat, especially after the departure of their AC-130 gunships.

The ferocity of the Battle of Mogadishu was foreshadowed by the American encounters with the SNA in the weeks leading up to the confrontation. Following an ambush of the Italians, the QRF launched an intense attack on a SNA headquarters that left a high body count of both civilians and militiamen. Additional SNA attacks that followed killed both American and Nigerian peacekeepers. Independent of UNOSOM, US Delta Force raided SNA outposts and captured militia leaders, further raising tensions. When the Pakistanis attempted to clear SNA roadblocks, they returned fire at militiamen who fought behind women and children throwing grenades. In publicized reports, the peacekeepers had apparently killed unarmed civilians, while in actuality they were combatants who had already thrown their grenades.\textsuperscript{340} Every day that passed seemed to bring more attacks on UN forces.

The ill-fated raid of 3 October 1993 was actually the seventh raid attempted by Task Force Ranger, the umbrella for US Army Ranger and Delta Force activities in Somalia. The raid initially went according to plan and the commandos accomplished their objective of capturing top SNA leaders. However, militiamen shot down a supporting US helicopter as the Americans prepared to withdraw. As the raiding force moved to secure the helicopter crash site, Somali militiamen attacked them relentlessly. Further complicating the American extraction, the militiamen downed a second helicopter. A daring rescue attempt on the second helicopter by Delta Force resulted in failure, leaving all US personnel dead except for the pilot. The pilot, Mike Durant, was

\textsuperscript{340} Durch, 347.
captured by the SNA and later used for anti-UN propaganda. Hearing the firefight, more
militiamen from across Mogadishu rallied to fight the Americans.\footnote{341} Outgunned, the US
force hunkered down at the first crash site until a contingent of Malaysians and Pakistanis
could reach them the next day.\footnote{342} By the time the American troops reached the safety of
their camps, they had suffered nearly 100 dead and wounded and had killed at least 500
Somalis.\footnote{343}

The cumbersome UN command structure combined with a lack of American
armored vehicles exacerbated the challenges faced by the US forces. Without the
voluntary participation of the Pakistani and Italian armored units, the Americans had no
choice but to rely on vulnerable helicopters. Unfortunately, the powerful AC-130
gunships, which could have quickly dispatched the militiamen, had already left
Somali.\footnote{344} Their replacements, AH-6 helicopters, did not have comparable firepower.\footnote{345}
The rescue attempt took five hours to cobble together, even though the Malaysians and
Pakistanis chose to forego asking their governments for permission. The rescue force
also showcased the varying quality of the multi-national units, as many did not posses
night-vision equipment vital for nocturnal operations.\footnote{346}

\footnote{342} Bowdon, 292.
\footnote{343} Rutherford, 160.
\footnote{344} Ibid, 152.
\footnote{345} Bowden, 340.
\footnote{346} Durch, 347.
The fear of “mission creep” convinced American military leadership not to send needed weapons to Somalia. Powell opposed sending back AC-130 gunships because addition troops might further entangle the American force in Somalia. Indeed, a commando raid to capture warlords seemed to be a promising alternative to a more thorough and needed pacification campaign. Distressingly, the Americans did not even bring enough forces to rescue themselves, instead depending on other nation’s troops. Confirming that the Americans should have brought armored vehicles to Somalia, President Clinton ordered tanks to Somali immediately following the disastrous operation.\textsuperscript{347} The desire to achieve ambitious goals but also prevent Somalia from growing into a larger operation led to the mission’s failure.\textsuperscript{348}

The failure of the US to pursue a coherent strategy, nor bring along the necessary troops and equipment, contributed to the UN’s failure in Somali. Following the Battle of Mogadishu, the US announced it would withdraw in six months. Television images of US servicemen’s bodies drug through Mogadishu’s streets reversed American support for RESTORE HOPE.\textsuperscript{349} Most allied forces left soon after the US retreat and the UN completely vacated Somali a little more than a year later.\textsuperscript{350}

Despite its defeat in Somalia, the military still did not choose to undergo fundamental change. While it expanded doctrine on peacekeeping, it retained the same

\textsuperscript{347} Durch, 348.


\textsuperscript{349} Rutherford, 162.

\textsuperscript{350} Durch, 350
organizational structure and conventional equipment. In 1996, the Army even closed
down its Center for Low Intensity Conflict. To its core, the military was still committed
wholeheartedly to the outdated AirLand Battle of the 1980’s. Notwithstanding the
demise of its Soviet arch foe, the US military still believed its future was tank battles and
aerial dogfights.\footnote{Fitzgerald, 98-99.}

The losses incurred during the intervention in Somalia led the US military to once
again retreat from irregular war, rather than adapt to it. Political pressure prohibited
sending heavy tanks into Somalia prior to the Battle of Mogadishu.\footnote{Herspring, 347.} Yet, there were
not any lighter armored vehicles with suitable political footprint available in the Army’s
inventory.

Far from being banished, the Somalia reanimated the “specter of Vietnam.”
American failure in Somalia translated into reluctance to engage in ground combat for the
rest of the decade. Furthermore, the military’s neglect of irregular warfare translated into
squandered policy goals.

In 1990, a military junta removed Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide from
power. After being sanctioned for several years, the Haitian military agreed to reinstall
Aristide in 1993. However, when the appointed day arrived, the junta refused to give up
power.\footnote{Ibid, 352.}

In response, a ship transporting of US and Canadian troops steamed towards Haiti
with the intention of stabilizing the government. Only eight days after the Battle of
Mogadishu, the US troops offshore Haiti decided to remain onboard their ships rather than confront mobs that threatened a repeat of Somalia. Once they finally landed ashore, American forces appeared more concerned about avoiding casualties than peacekeeping. Despite landing 20,000 troops on the island, US forces only ventured outside of their bases in platoon-sized convoys of armored vehicles. Journalist Bob Shacochis observed, “US forces had invaded Haiti for the primary purpose of protecting themselves.”

The US finally returned Aristide to power by preparing to launch a full-scale invasion of the island. While former President Jimmy Carter led negotiations with the junta, American paratroopers took off and headed towards Haiti. With time running out, the junta agreed to step aside.

Furthermore, the failure of RESTORE HOPE contributed to the US impotence to stop the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Clinton advisor Richard Holbrooke called the military’s reluctance to adjust and engage in unconventional warfare the “Vietmalia syndrome.” Despite the genocide of 800,000 Tutsis by their Hutu rivals, the US refused to intervene. Even after the killing stopped, Clinton sent a small American detachment with orders to avoid any kind of combat whatsoever. In the words of one of the GIs, “We’re here to help, but not at any cost to the American soldiers.”


355 Herspring, 354.


357 Fitzgerald, 101.

358 Appy, 303.
Irregular warfare remained a low priority for the rest of the 1990’s as the US primarily relied on airstrikes rather than ground troops. The first of these “punitive” bombings occurred in January 1993 after Iraqi troops raided a UN bunker of confiscated weapons. These strikes resembled the retaliatory bombings of Iraqi that continued for the rest of the decade. Quite simply, American airplanes soared over, dropped precision bombs on a calculated number of moderately important targets, and returned to their bases untouched.

In 1995, the US joined other NATO countries to stop “ethnic cleansing” of Bosnia Muslims by Serbian forces. Realizing that Somalia left no appetite for more than a handful of casualties, Clinton’s military advisors offered up a range of bombing options. However, they acknowledged that bombing would have little effect without pressure on the ground.

Despite a relatively low risk air campaign, the military showcased its reluctance to engage in wars other than its preferred conventional variety. This mindset was highlighted by Lt. General Barry McCaffrey’s farfetched comparison of Bosnia to Vietnam in congressional testimony. He argued that the “mountainous terrain and forested area and the weaponry involved would be tougher than that situation [Vietnam].”

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359 Atkinson, 498.
361 Appy, 302.
362 Herspring, 355.
Military reluctance for small wars negatively influenced political decision-making by limiting rational options. For example, Powell consistently pointed his belief that military force should not be used without clear objectives. In response, UN ambassador Madeleine Albright queried, “What’s the use of having this superb military that you’re always talking about if we can’t use it?”

While the US debated how to proceed with airstrikes, the Serbs continued to seize Muslim territory and massacre civilians. A 1995 CIA report acknowledged that the Serbs were wiping out Muslims through “murder, torture, and imprisonment.” Even when the US and its allies launched airstrikes, the Serbs hid much of their heavy equipment and continued their offensive. After two more weeks of unabated genocide, the Serbs finally agreed to a ceasefire.

The Dayton Accords brought peace to Bosnia and injected 20,000 US troops into the country as peacekeepers. However, American patrols in Bosnia resembled those in Haiti two years earlier. They drove around in heavily armed convoys and made little contact with the local population. Civil affairs troops often could not go out to meet with civilians due to the security requirement to travel in large convoys. Few patrols lasted past sundown as the soldiers returned to their bases for the night. Overall, the military

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363 Fitzgerald, 100.
364 Herspring, 356.
365 Appy, 300.
366 Herspring 358-359.
viewed its primary goal as “force protection” rather than preventing another outbreak of violence.367

For the rest of the decade, aircraft and warships carried out various punitive strikes against America’s enemies, even though these attacks were largely ineffective. In 1998, al Qaeda bombed the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. In response, the military unleashed a fusillade of cruise missiles against suspected al Qaeda targets in Afghanistan and Sudan. The missiles killed a mere handful of fighters and imparted no lasting damage to al Qaeda.368

The conflict in Kosovo further reinforced the inadequacies of the American airstrikes-only approach. The province of Kosovo eluded the peace of the Dayton Accords. Serbia wanted to maintain control of Kosovo, while its Albanian inhabitants wanted autonomy.369 In 1998, the Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army began to attack Serbian police stations. Serbia responded with a brutal crackdown on the Kosovars using both government troops and paramilitary militias.370

Unsurprisingly, the US launched airstrikes with its NATO allies in a bid to stop the mass murder. Commander Wesley Clark issued orders naming his top priority as “not to lose aircraft” and his secondary goal as “impact[ing] the Yugoslavian military and police activities on the ground.”371 What was more surprising, however, was the

367 Fitzgerald, 105-106.
368 Boot, Invisible Armies, 516.
369 Herspring, 363.
371 Boot, The Small Wars of Peace, 326.
complete unwillingness of the US to even threaten the use of ground troops. On the same
day the bombing started, President Clinton declared “I do not intend to put our troops in
Kosovo to fight a war.”\(^{372}\)

Much like Bosnia, airstrikes without pressure from ground forces produced poor
results. Pilots had trouble finding camouflaged targets, and without an imminent ground
threat, the Serbs could leave their weapons in hiding. Within a few days of the bombing,
it became obvious that Serbia would not back down quickly.\(^{373}\)

As weeks of fruitless airstrikes went by, the US sent Apache attack helicopters to
nearby Macedonia as a half-measure. Yet senior military officials made outrageous
estimates of fifty percent losses if the helicopters were used in combat, effectively
preventing their use. In fact, numerous generals insisted the tiny helicopter force have
more than 6,000 troops and heavy tanks to protect its base in friendly Albania. Despite
their obvious utility, the fear of any losses prevented the helicopters from ever being
unleashed on the Serbs.\(^{374}\)

Clearly, the decision to avoid the use of ground troops had been a mistake.
Clinton publicly reneged and stated, “all options are on the table.” Finally, NATO began
serious preparation for a large-scale land invasion. Faced with the threat of ground
forces, Serbia agreed to make peace within a month.\(^{375}\)

\(^{372}\) Herspring, 368.

\(^{373}\) Ibid, 368.

\(^{374}\) Boot, *The Small Wars of Peace*, 326-327.

\(^{375}\) Herspring, 370-371.
The 1990s left the US military searching for its role in the “New World Order.” Perversely, the mentality left by Vietnam had been morphed by the fallout of the Somalia debacle. Before, the military had been slow to adapt to irregular warfare and its resulting failures led to excessive casualties. Now, the resultant unwillingness to endure any casualties whatsoever rendered it impotent. To its foes, the world’s most powerful military was no longer smart or tough. US military leadership lacked the vision to prepare for future conflicts, while a handful of casualties were enough to eject the sole “superpower” from a third-world country.

The inauguration of President George W. Bush seemed to offer an opportunity for the military to reform. Bush’s Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld believed that the military needed a “transformation” into a more mobile and modern force. However, Rumsfeld’s abrasive personality ran headlong into military leadership who thought they were already modernizing fast enough.376

Rumsfeld regarded the military as still modeled around the Cold War defense of Western Europe. He thought that the military should be able to fight quickly and effectively anywhere in the world.377 Perhaps he had the previous interventions in Grenada, Panama, and the Persian Gulf in mind. Indeed, if the generals were wed to fighting the Soviets, Rumsfeld was bound to the idea that all future interventions would be quick, decisive, and reliant on the America’s technological edge.

Headed into Iraq and Afghanistan, the military appeared confident of success. By this time, most Vietnam veterans had left the service years ago and taken their wariness

376 Herspring, 377-378.
377 Ibid, 380-381.
of another failure with them. The victory of Persian Gulf War generated hubris among military brass. Furthermore, they viewed the lackluster performance in Panama and Grenada as successes. The military even reshaped the strategic failure of the Somalia mission as a tactical victory. Recapping the mood prior to the invasion, foreign policy advisor Danielle Pletka remarked:

I think these guys were overconfident. We entrusted far too much political responsibility in Iraq to our military commanders. I don’t think they knew anything about the politics of the region.  

Persian Gulf War victory embedded a misplaced sense of confidence in the military. However, it still lacked the ability to fight prolonged unconventional conflicts to a successful conclusion. Furthermore, political insistence on preventing casualties over achieving political goals meant that shortfalls in irregular warfare skills did not become evident.

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378 Ricks, 129.
Chapter Four: Fruit of the Poisoned Tree

The 2003 American invasion of Iraq revealed serious counterinsurgency deficiencies in the US military. Finding themselves rulers of a foreign land, American forces were unprepared to ensure basic government services or provide security to the Iraqi people. Without a strong central government, Iraq broke down into sectarian chaos.

Within months of the lightning American advance through Iraq, the seeds of the anti-US insurgency viciously blossomed into horrific daily bombings. A rapid and relatively straightforward invasion quickly overran the country but failed to bring order. At the end of the occupation’s first summer, a suicide bomber destroyed the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad, which convinced many foreign governments to withdraw from Iraq.\(^{379}\) The most devastating bombing occurred later in 2006 when al Qaeda in Iraq blew up the Shiite Golden Mosque in Samarra. Always suspicious of each other, this attack ignited a sectarian war between the majority Shiites and minority Sunnis.\(^{380}\) In turn, the Sunnis viewed the Shiite-majority Iraqi security forces as just another sectarian militia.\(^{381}\) At the conflict’s peak, insurgents attacked US and Iraqi security forces more than one hundred times every day.\(^{382}\)

Following the invasion, most American commanders failed to effectively administer their jurisdictions. US forces were totally unprepared for the power vacuum

\(^{379}\) Boot, *Invisible Armies*, 529.

\(^{380}\) Marston, 302.

\(^{381}\) Ibid, 303.

resulting from Saddam’s demise. Preparation for the war had been exceedingly technical, with commander General Tommy Franks proposing nine different “centers of gravity” to attack. He focused on operations, but lacked a coherent overarching strategy. The negligence to prepare to effectively govern Iraq after the invasion was the biggest mistake of the war.

In addition, US forces often chased after the elusive insurgents in clumsy and ineffective sweeps. Many US commanders failed to grasp the irregular nature of the conflict. Before sending his paratroopers into insurgent-ridden Fallujah, Major General Charles Swannack remarked, “This is war…We’re going to use a sledgehammer to crush a walnut.” Instead of catching insurgents, American heavy-handedness inadvertently boosted their popularity.

For the next few years, American patrols yielded substantial body counts but few lasting results. Built for the Cold War, US forces were well equipped with heavy tanks but possessed relatively few infantry. Echoing early American offensives in Vietnam, they neglected to coordinate with their Iraqi army and police counterparts. This “go it alone” approach increased feelings of foreign oppression in the Iraqi population.

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383 Filkins, 95-96.
384 Ricks, 128-129.
385 Marston, 289.
386 Boot, Invisible Armies, 538.
387 Marston, 288.
388 Ibid, 291.
It took the Americans nearly four years to effectively combat the insurgents.\textsuperscript{389} American leadership became incrementally better. Franks’ successor General Ricardo Sanchez seemed unwilling to address the root causes of the insurgency. He failed to coordinate a common strategy among his forces and allowed his commanders to indiscriminately round up insurgents and civilians alike.\textsuperscript{390} His replacement General George Casey implemented a straightforward plan to establish security and then enlarge the Iraqi army and police.\textsuperscript{391} While a sound strategy, he failed to sufficiently build up local forces that were both capable and recognized by the Iraqis as legitimate.\textsuperscript{392}

Additionally, the US military failed to embrace critical technology that fell outside of its preferred conventional mission. Army and Marine Corps leadership were unsupportive of purchasing the now-iconic Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected (MRAP) trucks. These ungainly armored trucks, while of limited use in conventional conflict, kept their occupants safe from all but the biggest insurgent bombs. Four years into the Iraq War, Defense Secretary Robert Gates forced the military to buy 24,000 MRAPs over their generals’ objections. In 2007, Marine commandant General Jim Conway dismissed the MRAPs’ value in conventional missions, stating “Frankly, you can’t put them in a helicopter and you can’t even put them aboard a ship.” He declared that the armored trucks were “probably not a good use of the taxpayers’ money.” To further underscore his dedication to conventional doctrine, he argued that after the Iraq War they would

\textsuperscript{389} Marston, 287.

\textsuperscript{390} Ibid, 289.

\textsuperscript{391} Ibid, 296.

\textsuperscript{392} Ibid, 301.
never find use again and to “Wrap them in shrink wrap and put them in asphalt somewhere.” Despite his disdain, MRAPs reduced casualties thirty percent in Iraq.393

The Air Force, led by fighter pilots, failed to embrace slow propeller-driven unmanned aircraft capable of observing individuals for hours at a time. Instead, the Air Force prioritized funding to two different stealth fighter planes totally unsuitable for counterinsurgency.394 Eventually, Gates fired both the Secretary of the Air Force and Chief of Staff due to their unwillingness to champion drone aircraft among other concerns.395

The American military fumbled the occupation of Iraq because it had continuously neglected irregular warfare since the end of Vietnam. In 2006, President Bush resorted to removing senior commanders in an attempt to rethink the military’s failing approach to stabilizing Iraq. Not only did Rumsfeld go, but also Casey and Central Command head General John Abizaid (they were politely “promoted out of a job” in military parlance).396

Bush also implemented the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan panel created to resuscitate American war strategy. Poignantly, the Group’s recommendations were spot-on but hardly novel to counterinsurgency experts. It


recommended an additional 20,000 US troops (the “surge”), greater emphasis on training
Iraqi security forces, and pressuring the Iraqi government into political reconciliation. 397

To replace Casey, Bush installed former “COINdista” General David Petraeus to
head the war in Iraq. Early in the invasion, he led one of the few divisions to achieve
relative peace in its area of responsibility. 398 Perhaps most tellingly, Petraeus was a
distinct outlier among the military brass. Ambitious, intellectual, and not afraid to buck
military conformity, Petraeus earned a PhD from Princeton and taught at West Point.
Indeed, his doctoral dissertation argued “the American involvement in low-intensity
conflict is unavoidable” and “the military should be prepared for it.” 399 Despite his
success in Iraq, Army leadership banished him to head a training command in Kansas.
Even stateside, though, Petraeus influenced the war by sponsoring a combined
Army/Marine counterinsurgency manual. 400

The US military learned effective counterinsurgency again only after considerate
failure in Iraq and Afghanistan. The turnaround headed by Petraeus focused on
rebuilding and legitimizing the Iraqi government. US troops began to ally themselves
with Sunni tribesmen offended by the insurgents’ usurpation of their traditional authority
and wanton use of violence. While the Americans still hunted down insurgents, they did
so with the help of Iraqis whom they now lived among. 401

397 Marston, 304.

398 Ibid, 289.

399 Boot, Invisible Armies, 537.

400 Marston, 299.

401 Boot, Invisible Armies, 543.
The Americans turned around the occupation just as Iraq neared the brink of collapse. Remarkably, the greatest change came not from innovation but rediscovering population-centric counterinsurgency.\textsuperscript{402} Unfortunately, having to relearn irregular warfare skills lost after Vietnam cost much American blood and treasure.

While smaller in scope, the concurrent American intervention in Afghanistan was characterized by the same mistakes made in Iraq. Furthermore, the Iraq campaign siphoned off badly needed resources from Afghanistan. At the start of the Iraq war, the US left only 9,000 troops in Afghanistan, a number so paltry there was no way to provide security for the entire country.\textsuperscript{403}

After the rout of the Taliban, the Americans neglected to address the basic needs of the Afghans. Initially, US forces concentrated on killing Taliban and al Qaeda fighters. American raids often turned up few enemy fighters but instead offended Afghan sensibilities. In addition, the new multi-ethnic central government failed to fill the vacuum left by the routed Taliban. Afghan minorities dominated the new government, while the Taliban regime had enjoyed the support of the majority Pashtuns.\textsuperscript{404}

Many Afghans took up arms against the American and Afghan government forces in response to economic hopelessness, tribal politics, perceived wrongdoing, or simply revenge.\textsuperscript{405} Ironically, the lack of a counterinsurgency strategy was, to some degree,

\textsuperscript{402} Boot, \textit{Invisible Armies}, 545.

\textsuperscript{403} Marston, 268.

\textsuperscript{404} Ibid, 258.

\textsuperscript{405} Ibid, 260.
shored up by junior commanders who emphasized counterinsurgency tactics to their units. 406 Perhaps most ominously, the local Afghan National Security Forces were beset by desertion, corruption, and general incompetence. 407 Indeed, not until 2006 did the Americans put together a coherent counterinsurgency strategy for the country. 408

Because of their unpreparedness to conduct counterinsurgency in 2001, the US military lost precious time and ceded much of their early gains back to the Taliban. Even a late 2009 “surge” of 33,000 US troops into the country failed to win stability. In response, one Afghan Parliament member remarked, “As the American surge ends, the Taliban surge will begin.” 409 To this day, the Afghan war remains undecided.

The military’s unpreparedness to fight an unconventional war guaranteed needless casualties among Iraqi, Afghan, and American soldiers. If American forces had sufficiently prepared for post-invasion duties, Iraq would have maintained some semblance of order. Instead, American forces became ensnared in the resulting bloody sectarian conflict after allowing stability to slip away.

406 Marston, 266.


408 Ibid, 261.

CONCLUSION

The military’s failure to remain proficient at irregular warfare dated back to the withdrawal from the Vietnam War. The frustration of hunting the elusive Viet Cong continued to reverberate in the American military for the next three decades. The American failure to safeguard South Vietnam led military leadership to shy away from preparing for future irregular conflicts.

In the aftermath of Vietnam, the US military reoriented itself wholeheartedly towards conventional warfare. The American armed conflicts of the 1980s were inconsequential enough so as not to force the military to reconsider small wars capabilities. Grenada and Panama were over within days and won by overwhelming force. The Beirut barracks bombing should have sounded a warning bell, but the quick retreat from Lebanon preventing the military from having to adapt.

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the Soviet-Afghan wars also served as potential wake-up calls to the US military. The vaunted Israeli military, fresh off its stunning 1973 victory, nevertheless lost a long and bloody conflict with Palestinian guerrillas. The Soviets, despite a speedy invasion of Afghanistan, found their combination of firepower and brutality unable to suppress the mujahedeen.

If the US military ignored the lessons of the 1980s, the Persian Gulf War convinced its leadership of their convictions. The American-led coalition, spearheaded by glamorous stealth fighters and cruise missiles, demolished Iraqi armored formations and air defenses. The Persian Gulf War was a showcase of American conventional military dominance. Because the conflict featured little irregular warfare, the American military’s weaknesses escaped public notice.
The US military took DESERT STORM as the model for future wars, but it should have paid more attention to Somalia. Somalia revealed that military-centric approaches are seldom appropriate for irregular war. In addition, the casualties suffered in the Battle of Mogadishu should have led to the acquisition of armored vehicles suitable for urban areas, like the MRAPs later used in Iraq. Instead, both military and political leadership swore off any military action that might result in more than a handful of casualties. From Somalia until the al Qaeda terrorist attacks of September 2001, the US settled into a pattern of relying on airstrikes, no matter their actual utility.

Historically speaking, the idea that America uses its military sparingly and only to defend “vital interests” is a misconception. However, before Vietnam the military usually adapted to these “small wars” quickly and achieved success with relatively low casualties. In Vietnam’s aftermath, however, American military leadership blinded itself to the reality of irregular warfare. Unfortunately, deciding irregular warfare is not the military’s proper mission does not make it unavoidable. By chronicling the military’s decisions in the intervening period, hopefully this work will contribute to the understanding of why the US struggled to maintain order in post-invasion Iraq.

The American military’s unconventional warfare skills fell into disuse between the Vietnam and Iraq conflicts. Despite suffering repeated losses at the hands of irregular opponents, the military continued to push unconventional warfare to its organizational fringes. Haunted by “specter of Vietnam,” the military consciously neglected irregular warfare and campaigned to avoid future participation in unconventional conflicts. Until its failure in Iraq, the military could continue this course without realigning its priorities.

In conclusion, America’s military chose to prevent another Vietnam by avoiding irregular warfare instead of preparing to win its next counterinsurgency. As such, the military refashioned itself as a purely conventional force suitable only for “proper” wars. When faced with the protracted counterinsurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq, the American military predictably struggle to relearn skills used decades before in Vietnam.

In the closing line of his memoir, Westmoreland asserts that “As the soldier prays for peace he must be prepared to cope with the hardships of war and to bear its scars.” 411 By turning away from counterinsurgency for nearly thirty years, the American military chose to ignore the scars left by Vietnam. The price for this neglect has been fresh scars cut in Iraq and Afghanistan.

411 Westmoreland, 425.
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