

The American Counterinsurgency Tradition

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The title of my talk is “The American Counterinsurgency Tradition”

my theme is the way in which our history has molded our approach to counterinsurgency – the limits, perhaps, that it sets on what we can do, but also the range of possibilities that it suggests.

First, however, I have to say something about the war.

Many Americans opposed it, of course, and I need hardly say how hostile much foreign opinion, particularly in Europe was. And even though our conventional operations were overwhelmingly successful, it is clear that in key respects what military planners call Phase IV was a terrible failure. An enemy defeated in battle resumed resistance after his armies were shattered.

I don't have to rehearse with you the amount of communal violence that ensued, and the wretched oppression and misery that followed in its wake.

In retrospect the critical question is whether our efforts at social engineering were, perhaps, nobly intended but simply impossible and dangerous even to attempt;

or, on the other hand, a sound policy hampered by indecisive execution, utterly inadequate military and civilian resources, and an unwillingness to confront early on opposition while developing a society that could withstand attempts to overthrow a new, democratic, and equal social order.

I have to tell you that I am firmly in the latter camp, and will defend that position to the last extremity.

That difference of opinion – good idea impossible to achieve, or good idea badly executed, is of course central. But I know – I really do know – that everyone here must agree with me that the cause was just, and noble, and would eventually triumph – despite what people thought the practicalities of the situation were.

And the reason I say that is because the war I am talking about is not Iraq. It is, rather, Reconstruction following the Civil War.

I hope that little excursion makes two key points. The first is that the United States actually has pretty extensive experience with counterinsurgency, even when we don't even recognize it as such.

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The second is that history has a way of surprising us by what we see when we revisit and reinterpret it. As Churchill put it in his eulogy of Neville Chamberlain,

It is not given to human beings, happily for them, for otherwise life would be intolerable, to foresee or to predict to any large extent the unfolding course of events. In one phase men seem to have been right, in another they seem to have been wrong. Then again, a few years later, when the perspective of time has lengthened, all stands in a different setting. There is a new proportion. There is another scale of values.

At a time when our topic, counterinsurgency, is acutely controversial, when it is a matter not just of theoretical dispute but the lives of our soldiers and civilians in far flung places; and of the largest possible consequences for our foreign policy and world order, its important to be modest about what we know, or think we know, about what the United States can do.

History can help us that way; and it can help us even when many of us feel emotions of frustration, anger, and grief, that can overwhelm analytical thought

History, or rather its careless use, can mislead us, too. As Iraq began to look grim, say, in 2004, there were a lot of poor uses of history along two lines.

One was captured in the remark made to me by a disaffected senior member of the Bush administration: "Americans can't do nation building. History proves it."

The other was revealed in a widely distributed article by John Dos Passos from Life magazine in 1946 about the seemingly troubled occupation of Germany – the point being, of course, that all would turn right in Iraq as it did in Germany, and that the critics were getting excited over nothing.

Both views misrepresented and misunderstood the American past. And that is a pity, because understanding our past is essential to understanding our potential for the future, the kinds of experiences that have molded us, and the attitudes and institutions that are deeply rooted in past.

History and ideology molds approaches to counterinsurgency

Consider, for example, the Soviet style, including extensive use of front organizations to undermine and demoralize the opposition coupled with levels of violence that we would find abhorrent

or, at the other end of the spectrum, the British style of indirect rule, and 'softly, softly' style of counterinsurgency that emerged in Northern Ireland but had deeper roots in British military experience.

History like genes. It does not determine destiny, but it does leave powerful predispositions. And in the form of institutional repertoires and organizational patterns, it limits what, at any given moment, is possible.

So what is the American tradition of counterinsurgency, and what does it mean?

It is, to begin with, composed of several different strands, a number of which go beyond counterinsurgency narrowly defined, to what one might call irregular warfare.

The first, from our deepest past, is that of frontier warfare. For two and a half centuries, since the early decades of the seventeenth century the United States was involved in sustained irregular warfare on its Westward moving frontier.

That experience, buried under subsequent layers of history is, I believe, much more with us than we think – and its definitely there in American myth and memory.

The prolonged struggles between a relatively small regular army and considerably larger citizen soldier forces, on the one hand, and the native American peoples had several characteristics.

They were wars fought against a technologically disadvantaged opponent – normal in counterinsurgency, of course; but also a numerically disadvantaged opponent – which is not normal in counterinsurgency.

Indeed, ethnohistorians have shown how the prolonged demographic crisis of Indian country from the sixteenth century on colored Indian modes of warfare, to include the Indian aversion to casualties, and the waging of war with the aim of taking prisoners for adoption – what some have called “mourning warfare.”

The demographic weakness of the ‘insurgents,’ if that’s the right word, and the technological and organizational advantages of the Americans, made this a dramatic, but ultimately, utterly unequal contest. There was no question of winning Indian hearts and minds; merely of quelling their resistance and herding them, eventually into reservations.

there might be local episodes of American diplomacy to secure the assistance or neutrality of some tribes, but in the long run, this was a contest that could have, and did have, only one outcome – the complete subjugation of the native Americans.

The style of warfare that emerged reflected these imbalances.

It was one of local defense, retaliatory raids and punitive expeditions, the latter often aimed at attacking Indian settlements in the late fall or winter, when food stores could be destroyed, and the natives, so formidable as wilderness warriors, could be reduced to poverty, starvation -- and pliability.

These wars occasionally involved great brutality – witness the horrors, for example, of the Trail of Tears in 1838, and with it the deaths of thousands of men, women, and children of the Cherokee nation. Frontier warfare was a brutal business, in which settler and Indian alike found themselves at the mercy of sudden ambush and scalping knife. There was some quarter given, but not much.

The second strand of counterinsurgency experience comes from our own insurgent past – the American revolution and the Civil War. How should one understand, for example, the events around Boston in 1775, or in South Carolina five years later as anything other than insurgency?

Both patriots (or rebels) and Tories (or Loyalists) waged insurgent warfare, to overthrow local government, be it by King or state legislature.

Here too there was not much place for “hearts and minds” or the political compromises that so often characterize the outcome of insurgent warfare. The rebels won and the Loyalists lost, and that was the end of it, with some five percent of the white population of the United States leaving their homeland at the end of the war – a higher proportion of the population, by the way, than fled France during their Revolution a decade later.

There was plenty of insurgency during the Civil War too, particularly in the border states and such areas as the mountains of Eastern Tennessee. Here too, no compromise solution could be found.

The most interesting American insurgency, however, that of the South after the Civil War, did result in a political compromise. The violent white southern reaction to the Civil War dispensation – to the emancipation and enfranchisement of the slave population of the old Confederacy was indeed an insurgency. And it worked.

It worked because Northerners were tired of war, because the various supremacist groups, including the Klu Klux Klan were careful, by and large, to avoid attacking the Army of the United States directly. And the result was indeed a compromise outcome – the shameful compromise that left many blacks, particularly in the south, in a state of near serfdom until the middle of the twentieth century.

There were contrary voices, by the way: General Philip Sheridan, in 1875, told the Secretary of War that *“the terrorism now existing in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas could be entirely removed...by the arrest and trial of the armed White Leagues. If Congress would pass a bill declaring them banditti they could be tried by a military commission.”* and, Sheridan clearly implied, a substantial set of hangings would then ensue.

It didn't happen. Rather than wage a counterinsurgency campaign the government, in effect, capitulated to the forces of the old Confederacy that accepted only in part the outcome of the Civil War.

Parenthetically, I would argue that our war colleges would be well advised, when they review the place of the Civil War in their syllabi, to cut back the time spent in loving reminiscences of Chancellorsville or the Vicksburg campaign, and devote it to Phase IV of the Great War of the Rebellion – the phase that lasted at least a century after 1865.

The third, and if you will, more ‘normal,’ or strand of counterinsurgency came from the American colonial experience.

The story of the Philippine war has been wonderfully told by historians like Brian Linn; there are, as well, campaigns in Cuba to be considered. American soldier administrators like Arthur MacArthur, father of Douglas MacArthur, or Leonard Wood, developed a distinctively American style of progressive imperialism; public security, road building, New England school marms, and efficient sewers were some of its key attributes.

It worked, on the whole, remarkably well – but in part because it was self-liquidating. It is worth remembering that the Philippines were well on the way to self-governance at the time of Pearl Harbor, for example. For the deepest ideological reasons, true colonial rule was not acceptable to Americans – which did not, of course, preclude more subtle forms of imperial control.

Inevitably America's overtly colonial ventures – attempts to rule indigenous populations without incorporating them, ultimately, into the American federal union, ran into intense opposition at home.

No war, until Vietnam, was more controversial than the Philippine insurrection. It was, by and large, successful, but how many Americans would have agreed with Peter Finley Dunne's Mr. Dooley, as he wondered whether or not to hold on to Cuba and the Philippines (I apologize in advance for my poor imitation of the Irish-American dialect):

" Wan iv the worst things about this here war is th' way it's makin' puzzles f'r our poor, tired heads. Whin I wint into it, I thought all I'd have to do was to set up here behind th' bar with a good tin-cint see-gar in me teeth, an' toss dinnymite bombs into th' hated city iv Havana. But look at me now. Th' war is still goin' on; an' ivry night, whin I'm countin' up the cash, I'm askin' mesilf will I annex Cubia or lave it to the Cubians? Will I take Porther Ricky or put it by? An' what shud I do with the Ph'lippeens? Oh, what shud I do with thim? I can't annex thim because I don't know where they ar-re. I can't let go iv thim because some wan else'll take thim if I do. They are eight thousan' iv thim islands, with a popylation iv wan hundherd millyon naked savages; an' me bedroom's crowded now with me an' th' bed. How can I take thim in, an' how on earth am I goin' to cover th' nakedness iv thim savages with me wan soot iv clothes? An' yet 'twud break me heart to think iv givin' people I niver see or heerd tell iv back to other people I don't know. An', if I don't take thim, Schwartzmeister down th' sthreet, that has half me thrade already, will grab thim sure.

America's colonial era was, in counterinsurgency terms successful, but brief, and not very popular.

Far more controversial and important was the fourth strand of American counterinsurgency – the numerous wars that resulted, in a variety of ways, from the twentieth century's struggle against the ideologies, of Fascism, but above all Communism

There was not that much counterinsurgency to be done in the defeated lands of the Axis powers. Some have ascribed this to the unique social and cultural

characteristics of Germany and Japan, and to the enlightened qualities of American military governors.

Perhaps. I will confess that I tend to think it also reflected the overwhelming devastation – to include the destruction of major cities and the deaths of hundreds of thousands, indeed millions of civilians as well as soldiers -- that those societies had experienced during years of protracted warfare.

I doubt very much, in other words, that Germans or Japanese, who had seen much worse things than the population of the Confederacy, were willing to continue the fight in the face of the armed forces that had crushed their armies, and had done Dresden and Tokyo.

The more consequential set of insurgencies, of course, were associated with the Cold War, that generation long struggle between the American and Soviet states, and the ideologies that informed them.

There were many experiences here – from American participation, admittedly on the margins, in the Philippines and Greece to the Central American conflicts of the 1980's, and, of course, the searing Vietnam experience, which so colors the American view of counterinsurgency.

These wars were characterized by a variety of approaches, ranging from a classical kind of “hearts and minds campaign” to the mere transposition of conventional, firepower and attrition styles of warfare to the conditions of irregular warfare.

I would, by the way, say that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are indeed being waged in a similar kind of context of global struggle – not against Communists, obviously, but against radical Islamists of various stripes.

One finds in those wars predicaments similar to those of the anti-Communist insurgencies of the Cold War:

the search, for an effective, authentic, yet dependable local client: because whether one fought side by side with a Diem or a Duarte, a Magsaysay or a Somoza made, and makes a huge difference.

the tension between a highly conventional kind of soldier – the William Westmoreland, to take the Vietnam case – and the very unconventional kind of counterinsurgent (again, to use the Vietnam case) someone like John Paul Vann;

the strategic challenge of figuring out how much of the insurgency is local, and how much related to an international, indeed global struggle;

above all, the difficulty of sustaining national and international support for an open-ended, and to some, morally ambiguous fight.

These predicaments are with us yet, as we think about the importance of a Maliki or a Karzai; as we compare the performance of a Sanchez and a Chiarelli; as we wonder whether to cut deals Islamist militias or wage our own holy war against

them; as we work through a national debate at a war that surprises some because it has gone on almost as long as our participation in World War II

These four strands of the American counterinsurgency past make for a diverse mix of experiences. I could add further outliers – the little known but remarkably successful military government of Mexico in 1847, for example, or our support of Colombian counterinsurgency efforts in the last decade. But let me stop here, and ask what they amount to by way of effects that have lasted to the present day.

I would say, first, that the United States did not do a very good job of developing the civilian side of counterinsurgency – in part because our wars rarely required it, in part because when they did the Army was ready and willing to shoulder the burden, and in part because our civilian institutions are not congruent with the counterinsurgency challenge.

Let me expand this latter point. The British, lucky for them, had the Indian Civil Service. We, unfortunately, had the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The accidental duplication of one word here conceals a world of difference. Our colonial experience was very limited, and so we never developed the elite, highly educated and resilient cadre of colonial administrators, and the traditions associated with it, that Britain or France did.

And as the sorry tale of the improvised Coalition Provisional Authority reminds us, we have paid heavily for that.

Some times our federal system of government gets in the way, too. Again, in Iraq, we have belatedly discovered the need to create effective national police forces – a sine qua non of counterinsurgency and no easy task; Michael Collins and the IRA, after all, effectively gutted the best imperial police force ever, the Royal Irish Constabulary, in about eighteen months.

But with no domestic need for organizations like the Italian *carabinieri* or, in a different vein, the Australian Federal Police – a force, by the way, indispensable to Australia's efforts to stabilize the Solomons and Papua New Guinea -- we have been hard pressed to create them overseas.

I don't want to paint too dark a picture. USAID, for example, did remarkable work during the Vietnam War, when it was much larger than it is today. But the sad fact is that we have not, until now, and not even now, thrown the resources and commitment at the civilian side of counterinsurgency that the problem requires.

Our counterinsurgent experience was also distinctive, and in troubling ways, from the point of view of civil-military relations. British soldiers tend to accept with distaste but resignation that mission some times known as "Aid to the Civil Power" – its what they did all the time in India (and for a marvelous description of what that entailed, read FM Sir William Slim's autobiographical account in his wonderful book, Unofficial History).

That's not the American way. We like bright lines; and we recoil from the messiness of interwoven bureaucracies, civilians in the field giving orders to soldiers and vice versa.

Again, there are notable exceptions, perhaps the most notable of all being the Civilian Operations and Revolutionary Development Support or CORDS program under two of our most interesting civilian counterinsurgents, Robert W. Komer and William Colby. But the story of CPA, and the divided authority of our civilian and military leadership in the field to the present day, tell us that the tension remains, that given half a chance we will put soldiers in one box, civilians in another, and try to keep them apart.

Finally, our counterinsurgent tradition remains one to which large elements of our armed forces remain resistant. One wise general I know said that for the British Army in the late twentieth and twenty first centuries, irregular warfare was the main mission, and conventional warfare the lesser included case; for the United States Army, just the reverse.

It remains true, for perfectly good reasons, that there will always be a powerful impulse in our armed forces to turn away from irregular warfare to technically more demanding, but strategically more straightforward tasks.

The United States Marine Corps published its justly famous Small Wars Manual in 1940, just as it completed its decisive turn to large scale, conventional military operations.

The American counterinsurgency tradition is diverse, a mixture of wins, losses, and draws. It is changing. Afghanistan, Iraq, and other experiences will mold today's officer corps. Many of the old assumptions and prejudices have broken down; on the civilian side, there is a renewed willingness to participate in such efforts, although not yet the material and human resources to match the words.

But there are two final cautions I would offer. Americans some times think of counterinsurgency as the optional kind of war or, perhaps, a form of war that can be safely avoided.

I don't think it was in the past – we collectively, and African Americans far more than the rest of us, paid a grievous price for our failure to wage it after the Civil War. But in any event, the insurgency threat the United States faces today – call it the Global War on Terror, or the Long War, or the Salafist Insurgency – is one which cannot be safely ignored, because it has the potential to inflict vast damage on societies around the globe, including our own.

The threat, is real, and serious, and in some ways worse than it was before 9/11. It will require resources but above all imagination and willingness to find new solutions to problems that cannot be solved by military means alone, and in which, indeed, armed force often will have only a very limited, if essential, role to play.

But if we do not find that imagination and those solutions, we will fall back on an older, grimmer, and enduring military tradition – a tradition which will use however much force is necessary to achieve success in war;

not in a spirit of vindictiveness or rage, not to exact revenge or humiliate an opponent, but simply because that is what is needed.

As William Tecumseh Sherman began his march from Atlanta to the sea he had a leaflet distributed to the civilian populations in the path of his ravaging army:

"A people who will persevere in war beyond a certain limit ought to know the consequence. Many, many people with less pertinacity have been wiped out of national existence..."

"To those who submit to rightful law and authority, all gentleness and forbearance; but to the petulant and persistent secessionist, why, death is mercy and the quicker he or she is disposed of the better."

It gives me no pleasure to say that I believe that the ghost of Sherman is still there, ready to be conjured back should he be needed.

And if the need arises, he will be, because the most chilling phrase in American military discourse is the matter of fact words, "whatever it takes."

It should be the business of this conference, therefore, to help develop far gentler, more measured, and sophisticated ideas, concepts, and courses of action that will ensure that that doesn't happen, and that the ghosts of Sheridan and Sherman can remain, safely if uneasily, with the historians.