

NO LIGHT IN THE TUNNEL: CAN U.S. UNCONVENTIONAL FORCES MEET THE FUTURE?

by

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The continuing debate surrounding the allocation of the American defense budget suggests that the new administration in Washington, although committed to strengthening American military capability, has yet to clarify in its own mind just what capabilities it wishes to strengthen. While they seem to agree that strategic nuclear forces need to be increased it appears that this agreement is based on a failure to thoroughly analyze and select weapons systems and tactical postures that conform realistically to the types of war that the United States is likely to be called upon to fight in the next two decades.

A paradox seems evident. Hardly any defense "theologians" disagree that the two *least* likely employment scenarios for American forces are first, a general conventional war in Central Europe between NATO and the Warsaw Pact and second, limited or general nuclear war resulting from any regional conflict that can reasonably be foreseen. Yet, the greatest proportion of increased defense expenditures seem illogically targeted to increase the capability of American forces to respond to just these unlikely scenarios. Of course, the deterrent strength of such forces is intended to make those potential conflicts unlikely. At the same time the far more logical scenarios of employment seem to be studiously ignored so that little of the increase in defense spending is reserved for sustaining and improving the capability to fight limited conventional and, what seems most likely to occur, unconventional "brushfire" long-term guerilla conflicts.

The danger of living in a real world is that at some point one's military forces may actually have to be used in defense of perceived interests. The key to a successful foreign and defense policy is to ensure that one sustains and develops military capabilities that are congruent with their most likely use. Especially as it addresses the ability to fight unconventional wars the congruence between US military capabilities and foreign policy objectives is seriously out of joint. It seems likely that any foreseeable American military involvement, especially as it addresses interests in the Western Hemisphere, will be of the counter-insurgency, unconventional war type. El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama and perhaps even Cuba could easily become future American battlefields. This kind of warfare demands very special military skills rooted in accurate doctrines and characterized by a very special mix of military force (the minor element) and political expertise (the major element). The notion that all types of war are amenable to the same military solution, merely killing the enemy, is a mistake of the first magnitude and one that characterized the American effort in Vietnam for ten years. The truth is that American forces today lack the doctrines, tactics, experience and even the manpower to fight a successful unconventional war in El Salvador or anywhere else.¹

The war in Vietnam failed to produce any counter-insurgency doctrine or tactical approach to unconventional war worth its salt. What concepts and doctrines existed were drawn heavily from the experience of partisan armies in World War II. Indeed, it was the experience of these armies as translated by anti-communist East European emigré groups resident in the United States that provided the first impetus to establishing American counter-insurgency and unconventional warfare capabilities.² Regarding Vietnam, even the senior officers who ran that war now openly admit that they did not develop adequate tactical doctrines. The consensus of the generals, as Douglas Kinnard points out in his book, *The War Managers*, is that the army never understood the character of unconventional operations nor did it develop successful doctrines and tactics to deal with it.³ What America did was deploy a conventionally configured army and use its doctrines and tactics compensating at every step with more firepower and technology. In the end it all failed because neither the political character of the war nor the special techniques needed for dealing with it were ever understood or developed.

Our battlefield techniques were no better. American policy never gave much credence to the idea that in a political war the “hearts and minds” of the people count very much. As a consequence we never developed the structures for integrating programs that would reach and deal with the political and social problems that always underpin unconventional wars. We failed to develop a coherent application of technique to reach the populace, especially the need to subordinate military operations to larger policies, and continued to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. John Paul Vann, himself a former officer and high ranking AID⁴ official, summed it up well when he said that “we don’t have twelve years experience in this country [Vietnam]. We have one year’s experience twelve times!”⁵

The point is that nothing has changed in terms of American capability to deal with unconventional warfare. After ten years of “experience” in that combat environment the Army’s response was to ignore it and to produce a “new” manual of land warfare that placed the Army back on its more familiar conventional footing giving it the new mission in Europe of “fighting outnumbered and winning.”⁶ At the same time, even the limited unconventional warfare capacity of the Army was systematically dismantled.

During Vietnam the US Army had available to it about twenty battalions of unconventional troops, usually Green Beret or Ranger forces, although the latter saw little action as coherent units. Although often tactically misused by being employed as assault troops or special intelligence operatives, on balance unconventional war units had substantial success among many of the native ethnic groups of the country. Their failure was essentially political: they found themselves caught up in a deadly power struggle over their control and function between the CIA and the Army establishment. The wide publicity attendant to the infamous Morosco affair in which a Vietnamese agent was executed by his Green Beret handlers marked the beginning of the end for the unconventional warfare establishment within the Army. Abandoned by their former CIA patrons, the counter-insurgency establishment was left to its fate at the hands of hostile generals.⁷

Vengeance was swift and sure. After the war, the number of available unconventional warfare force battalions was cut in half. Most of their groups were broken up and scattered to wide postings thus disrupting the continuity and training integrity of their organizations. Today, fewer than nine battalions, most of them less than one-third the strength of a regular Army infantry battalion, struggle to keep alive the traditions, doctrines, and values of the counter-insurgency capability of the Army.⁸ Equally destructive was the transference of many unconventional warfare resources to reserve units which, because of reduced manpower and retention under the All-Volunteer Force, quickly fell in strength and equipment. Fully 46 percent of the total authorized strength of unconventional forces in the Army resides in reserve units most of which are ill-trained, ill-equipped and cannot be realistically expected to deploy.⁹ Additionally, as part of the Army's post-Vietnam reorganization many of the functions that were transferred to reserve units were those directly associated with the ability of unconventional warfare units to deal with the "hearts and minds" problems encountered in guerilla wars. The transfer of such crucial functions served to relegate them to even further obscurity when they were addressed at all in the doctrines of unconventional war.¹⁰

Perhaps most devastating to the unconventional warfare capability of the American Army was the deliberate attempt to weaken its officer leadership. During Vietnam a tour of service in the unconventional forces was regarded as very important to the career progression of an officer. With the Morosco affair, the losing battle with the Pentagon, and the retirement of Colonel Roulx, head of the Green Berets and long expected to be its first general officer, duty with unconventional warfare units became the kiss of death for any officer truly interested in rising to the top. Officers assigned to these units tend to be loyal and dedicated but most clearly understand that their careers, if not at an end, will not be helped by their assignments with such units. As a consequence, even command assignments to unconventional warfare units are resisted and refused by knowledgeable officers, a fact which is not helped at all by the general shortage of company grade officers in the Army at large.¹¹

Finally, resources for training were reduced along with troop strength, bringing the general problems of poor training standards and retention which afflict the Army as a whole to the once elite counter-insurgency units. The lack of official interest in unconventional warfare is clearly reflected in dropping counter guerilla courses or reducing their content in the major Army staff schools. Within two years of the end of the Vietnam war unconventional war as a serious subject of study virtually stopped. As one officer noted, he couldn't even find a map of Vietnam at the War College! As a consequence, the doctrinal review of American successes and failures in the unconventional environment that was so necessary to building and sustaining an adequate unconventional war capability was never undertaken. Thus, today's doctrines remain essentially what they were in Vietnam and the Army has shown no interest in seriously reexamining them. We are as ill-prepared to fight a counter-guerilla war as we were in 1963, the year the first American advisors began arriving in Vietnam.

Allowing the unconventional warfare capability of the United States to fall

into disrepair is dangerous, given that they are the most likely type of forces to be required in the years ahead. The danger is increased by President Reagan's belief, and that of his advisors, that the Army does have the capability to engage in unconventional operations in Latin America if necessary.¹² His stated belief that the American military was not beaten in the political war in Vietnam (the new "stab in the back" legend) but was not allowed to win it (presumably by liberal Democratic politicians) suggests that he has a clouded view of what happened to US forces in those jungles. It also indicated that he is sorely unaware of the lack of trained manpower, inadequate doctrines, tactics and political techniques available to the Army to carry out the unconventional warfare role that he envisions for it in Latin America and elsewhere.

The dismantling of the Army's unconventional warfare capability is one of the sadder and unnecessary consequences of the war in Vietnam. It is also one of the more unrealistic. Moreover, the prospects for rebuilding that capability do not seem particularly bright. In the first place there is no spokesman for the cause within the civilian administration. Most are strategic oriented ideologues when they are not simply naive. Further, a whole generation of high level officers has risen to the top of the Army, men who clearly understand that their careers are not rooted in a successful unconventional war experience. Only a handful of these officers ever had any field experience with unconventional warfare units. Most made their promotions by championing conventional units and conventional doctrines. They are far more interested and romanced by conventional concepts or such marginally different ones as the Rapid Deployment Force. They are not champions of a strong unconventional warfare capability because they have no reason to be.

In the end it is unlikely that the United States will rebuild its capacity to conduct unconventional warfare operations short of actually having to engage in them. This inevitably risks repeating the pattern in Vietnam probably with the same results. Already to the trained ear events in El Salvador and Central America and the US response to them are beginning to sound strangely familiar. And the US Army is as prepared to fight there as it was to fight in Vietnam.

Footnotes

1. See Sam C. Sarkesian, William L. Scully, eds., *U.S. Policy and Low-Intensity Conflict: Potentials for Military Struggles in the 1980s* (New York, 1981), pp. 5-15.
2. Captain Shaun M. Darragh, "Rangers and Special Forces: Two Edges of the Same Dagger", *Army*, vol. 27, no. 12 (1977), p. 15.
3. Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers* (Hanover, N.H., 1977), *passim*.
4. Agency for International Development.
5. Quoted in Ward Just, *Military Men* (New York, 1970), p. 212.
6. U.S. Army, *Field Manual 22-100 Ground Operations* (Washington, D.C., 1976).
7. Eliot D. Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians: Elite Military Units in Modern Democracies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), pp. 32, 72, 76, 86-88; see also Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance 1950 to the Present* (New York, 1977) for an authoritative account of the "rise and fall" of the unconventional warfare establishment.

8. Sarkesian, pp. 73-74; see also Lieutenant-Colonel John R. Galvin, "Special Forces at the Crossroads", *Army*, vol. 23, no. 12 (1973), pp. 21-24.
9. U.S. General Accounting Office, *Report on Status and Disposition of Reserve Forces* (Washington, D.C., 1979).
10. As of August 1981 the Psychological Warfare slot in the Army's Operations Readiness Mobilization Directorate was vacant.
11. Sarkesian, p. 75; Just, pp. 119-20.
12. Some 54 Special Forces advisers were dispatched to El Salvador earlier this year and in October, following the assassination of Egyptian President Sadat, the U.S. Government indicated that such advisers might also be sent to Sudan.

PACIFIC SETTLEMENT AMONG AFRICAN STATES: THE ROLE OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AFRICAN UNITY

by

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This is a brief analysis of the patterns of conflict among African states, the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) role with regard to pacific settlement of the various disputes, and the essence of the organization's approach on the basis of its record so far. The concept of "pacific settlement" is examined and used as a premise for analyzing the role of the OAU in selected cases, especially in view of the nature of intra-African disputes. Some imminent or possible future developments and challenges are noted and new strategies for pacific settlement are proposed and some conclusions drawn therefrom.

Pacific Settlement as Mediation

The idea of "pacific settlement", the common mode of conflict resolution in Africa, is premised on a number of assumptions. These include the efficacy of pacific settlement in a given context, jurisdictional rights or authority to mediate in a particular dispute, and organizational capacity for effectiveness. These assumptions overlook a number of factors which are crucial to any inquiries into, conceptualization and explanations of, the settlement of conflicts within Africa.

Anybody or group interested in getting involved in the pacific settlement of any particular conflict takes on the role of an intermediary or mediator. His responsibility is to assist the parties involved in settling whatever dispute had led to confrontation among them. For settlement to come "peacefully", the mediator would not function as a tribunal passing judgement and negotiations should not take place in what Venkata Raman has called "a strictly adversary form".¹