CONCLUSION

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This is a handbook about counterterrorism and irregular warfare. Its contents cover contemporary threats, selected regional security issues, and case studies to illuminate the challenges and potential solutions for confronting these types of threats.¹ While there is an abundance of literature about conventional warfare and its great captains, there is far less about irregular warfare and the competencies required to lead irregular warfare or counterterrorism campaigns.

This handbook attempts to fill this gap and distill the essence of what works and what does not in irregular warfare. The pages of this concluding chapter draw on much of the material covered in the book, but also on my 50 years of service to the U.S. military both in uniform as a Special Forces officer and afterwards as a scholar, teacher, and author at the Naval Postgraduate School.²

This chapter summarizes some of the key findings from the handbook. It starts by examining how the nature of terrorism has remained constant while its character has changed. It then reviews key lessons learned from the irregular warfare campaigns discussed in this volume. It concludes by acknowledging key insights derived from domestic counterterrorism efforts post-9/11.

The contemporary threat

Among terrorist groups, Islamist extremists have posed the greatest threat to regional and international security over the past several decades. While few have been able to achieve more than limited goals, the ideology remains appealing to vulnerable populations. Discontent has increased as the governments of these countries have failed to provide a better life for portions of their populations. This has resulted in the rise of charismatic demagogues fueled by religious passion in cultures where religion is a central feature of daily life.

Carl von Clausewitz said that while the character of war changes, the nature of war does not. The nature of war is “violent, interactive, and fundamentally political.”³ Its character is shaped by “technology, law, ethics, culture, methods of social, political, and military organization, and other factors that change across time and place.”⁴ The chapters from this book seem to bear this out.

The goal of many terrorist organizations remains fundamentally political. For many of the Islamist terrorist groups discussed in this handbook, that means creating a state (or caliphate) governed by *Sharia* (Islamic law). Many groups trace their militant interpretations of Islam to Ibn Taymiyya, Sayyid Qutb, and other early Islamic reformers and activists, but the manner in which they seek to accomplish their goal has

evolved. In other words, the nature of modern terrorism remains “violent, interactive, and fundamentally political,” yet its character has changed as a result of many factors ranging from technology to society and culture.

Terrorist groups have become increasingly violent, and their use of suicide attacks has become more frequent, while tactics such as airline hijackings have receded. Their target selection has expanded as well. Initially, suicide attacks primarily targeted “hard” targets, such as government or military buildings. Examples include Hezbollah’s bombing of the Marine Barracks in Beirut or al-Qaida’s attacks on the U.S. Embassies in East Africa and the USS *Cole*. But over the past two decades, suicide attacks are increasingly being employed against “soft” targets, often killing many more Muslims than traditional “combatants.”⁵

Technology has also changed the character of war. Modern information technologies catalyze the pathway toward terrorism and insurgency. The dissemination of ideas, the ability to organize virtually and clandestinely, and the ease of access to communications through social media all reduce the risks associated with the growth of radical groups as they proceed on the pathway to action.

Another change is the origin of the attack. As it has become harder for terrorists to conduct attacks on the West from overseas, attacks from so-called “lone wolves” or domestic inspired terrorists have increased. The spectacular 9/11, 7/7, and Madrid attacks have become more difficult to execute and are now much less common. Aggressive counterterrorism operations overseas, such as the relentless drone campaign in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas, make it harder for terrorist groups to plan complex operations.

Likewise, better intelligence and “watch lists” have made it more difficult for individuals to travel overseas to conduct training and then return home to conduct attacks without being arrested upon departure or return. Thus, attacks conducted by domestic citizens using less sophisticated methods—wielding guns or knives, using vehicles, or building improvised explosive devices—have been on the rise.

It is not just the character of war that has evolved but the groups themselves. As Fishman noted, the Islamic State does not fit neatly into traditional analytical categories: “it [is] a pseudo-state, a terrorist group, and an insurgency simultaneously.”⁶ The morphing of terrorist groups is not limited to Islamic groups, as Ortiz finds a similar observation when examining terrorism in Latin America with the evolution of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and criminal insurgency in Mexico.

Yet despite the growth of terrorist violence and proliferation of terrorist groups, this volume has shown that while groups may gain control of territory for limited or even extended periods of time, they are unable to maintain long-term control. These short-term successes demonstrate the seriousness of the threat and often spur international action.

The cases from this volume offer several insights. Responses to these threats often occur only after the problem metastasizes. As a result, the costs and difficulty for mitigating the threat are high, and the solutions are more temporary. Long-term engagement often results in more efficient and effective solutions. Decades-long investments in Colombia and the Philippines provided the United States strategic options. By contrast, episodic engagement, as demonstrated in Yemen, is not likely to yield great returns.

Additionally, assistance should not be conditioned on changing local culture; instead, local culture must be considered whether building security forces or building governance. Finally, the government must have the potential for capable security forces so that populations do not feel that their best option is to join or support a terrorist or insurgent organization.

The volume offers a cautionary tale on the ability to defeat radical ideologies that remains appealing to a small sector of the population. Despite “defeats” of groups like Jemaah Islamiyya or “near defeats” of groups like al-Qaida in Iraq, the defeat will not endure unless some of the fundamental conditions that make terrorism appealing to a small minority of the population change.

Learning from operational case studies

What can a few special operators achieve? Accordingly, this section addresses the following questions: 1) Can irregular warfare achieve favorable political outcomes? 2) When is an irregular warfare option the best military course of action? 3) What are the distinguishing attributes of effective irregular warfare leaders?

Can irregular warfare achieve favorable political outcomes?

The quick answer to this question is “no,” but that is also true for conventional, naval, cyber, air, and any other new form of warfare that may emerge. The type of warfare selected is a tactical decision. While tactical excellence is desirable, it is not sufficient. Tactical superiority is usually wasted if it is not employed as part of a broader strategy designed to achieve political goals.

In the majority of the cases in this handbook, the United States and allied forces repeatedly demonstrated superior tactical performance. Unfortunately, these tactical measurements were often disconnected from the only measurement that counts: achieving a favorable political outcome.

The search for that special solution—whether technical, a new type of warfare, or the politically popular “whole of government” approach—all miss the ageless reality that wars are waged to secure political ends through the use of force. Strategy is the link between political purpose and military power. While the tactics of warfare bend to changes in geography, politics, economics, and technology, the distinctive nature of war and strategy remains constant.

It is beyond the scope of this book to address serious policy and strategy deficits, but it is proper to raise the issue for students of war and strategy. Today, even after an opponent appears defeated, they seem to regroup almost overnight. The fight never quite ends and often morphs into a new conflict. The United States has neither won nor lost many of its 21st-century conflicts.

Some of the cases from this handbook (El Salvador, Colombia, and the Philippines) provide clear evidence that irregular warfare can deliver favorable political outcomes. While some might claim that success results when a military strategy is nested inside of a clear policy, this is not always the case. In fact, success in El Salvador, Colombia, and the Philippines was likely enhanced by the fact that they were countries of secondary importance. This allowed for bottoms-up solutions where Special Operations Forces (SOF) could work closely with local counterparts to produce durable policy outcomes. The likelihood of achieving these positive outcomes might have been diminished with a large U.S. military presence and high-level attention from Washington.

The case of “Plan Colombia and the 7th Special Forces Group” is remarkable for its scope, duration, and low cost but, most significantly, the results. This is a case where irregular warfare achieved political outcomes that were disproportionately high compared to the overall U.S. investment, by some estimates \$10 billion compared to the Afghan war, which exceeded \$1 trillion.⁷ Plan Colombia is widely viewed as a counterinsurgency success, even if it was less successful from a counterdrug perspective.

For more than three decades, U.S. Southern Command deployed 7th Group soldiers to train and equip Colombian military and police forces and their staffs and help establish their support structures. This protracted effort was so successful that the students became the masters, as demonstrated in 2008 during Operation Jacque when the Colombian military unilaterally rescued hostages held by the FARC for years in remote jungle locations. The Colombians ultimately took the fight to the FARC and created the conditions that resulted in a peace accord, the desired political outcome. But this would not have been possible without the efforts of the soldiers from the 7th Special Forces Group that started more than a decade earlier.

There are three cases in this book—killing Pablo Escobar, Operation Serval, and America’s drone wars—that minimally involved U.S. SOF and would stretch the concept of irregular warfare to the point of making the definition meaningless. But two of these are worth a brief discussion. Plus, there is one

case—“Dismantling al-Qaida in Iraq”—that has achieved a lopsided amount of notoriety compared to the actual outcome achieved that will also be discussed.

In Mali, the French operation required outside assistance: strategic airlift; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance aircraft; refueling aircraft; and intelligence support. It was a masterful operation, but some would argue that it was largely a conventional operation on the ground even if fought against an unconventional opponent. Even French SOF resembled those of an elite strike force more than what one would see in a classic irregular warfare scenario—in other words, they were used primarily for direct action rather than an advisory role. Nevertheless, Operation Serval was a success, and by keeping its political aims limited, France was able to achieve its political objectives despite a relatively low number of troops employed, especially when compared to Afghanistan or Iraq.

Drones have become an important tool in the military arsenal. Modern technology and vastly improved intelligence have made drone warfare a preferred method of engaging suspected terrorists in hard-to-reach places. Drones lower the risk to American forces while wreaking havoc, physically and psychologically, on the enemy. In fact, drones may be too much of a good development and arguably lead to an overreliance on them. Three U.S. presidents have made extensive use of drones inside and outside of designated war zones without Congressional consent. But drones, like their air warfare cousin, cannot, by themselves, be decisive. Despite hundreds of drone strikes in Yemen, the U.S. is no closer to achieving its policy objectives. Drones cannot compensate for a flawed or insufficient strategy.

General McChrystal's special operations task force nearly decimated al-Qaida in Iraq, and it is well acknowledged as a tactical success. But the big question is whether it contributed to positive political outcomes, the ultimate measure of success. In the short term, it did. The task force largely defeated al-Qaida in Iraq and bought time for the fledgling Iraqi government to build its own security capability.

In the long term, however, the task force could not maintain its gains, and positive political outcomes were elusive. When the Talabani-led government in Iraq effectively disenfranchised the Sunni populace, it left the Islamic State as the only viable option for many Sunnis. This case is a reminder that success in irregular warfare requires a willing, somewhat capable, and fairly legitimate partner. This was the case in Colombia, El Salvador, Syria, and the Philippines; lacking in Yemen; and episodic in Iraq.

Collectively, the cases also demonstrate that when SOF imperatives are followed, operations are more likely to be effective. These imperatives include understanding the operational environment; recognizing political implications; facilitating interorganizational cooperation; engaging the threat discriminately; anticipating long-term effects; ensuring legitimacy, credibility, and trust; anticipating psychological effects and the impact of information; operating with and through others; developing multiple options; ensuring long-term engagement; providing sufficient intelligence; and balancing security and synchronization.⁸

“Playbooks” for the operational employment of SOF, such as the *Army Special Operations* manual, already exist. But the tactical employment must be part of a coherent political strategy. If not, then SOF should be not employed. One final note of caution worth noting: SOF should not be the answer for anything that defies a conventional response. As one of the basic SOF operational mission criteria correctly notes, “the mission must be an appropriate special operations force mission or task.”⁹ Despite some notable success over recent decades, SOF should not be viewed as the “easy button” for policy officials.

When is an irregular warfare option the best military course of action?

A common characteristic of irregular warfare is that it is as much about politics—external and internal—as it is about war. Accordingly, irregular warfare can satisfy a controversial policy demand by offering expanded options for decision-makers. In the Salvadoran, Philippine, Colombian, Somali, Yemeni, and Mali cases, politics precluded the employment of U.S. conventional forces. A large American footprint would have delegitimized the governments the United States was trying to support and would have provided a source of propaganda for the enemy to exploit.

Internal politics also play a role. Even though irregular conflicts proliferate the global landscape, they have rarely dominated the collective consciousness of U.S. military leaders. As a result, leaders of irregular warfare generally have had to swim against the currents of conventional thinking to develop the appropriate solutions to the problems that they face. Fortunately, SOF offer expanded options to meet the policy needs for political and military leaders when conventional options are either not possible or inappropriate.

The U.S. war in Afghanistan presents additional insights into when irregular warfare is the best military course of action. The reflexive military thinking about how to strike back against those responsible for the 9/11 attacks was to move conventional forces, including air power and logistics, within striking distance of Afghanistan. The buildup would have taken months. Political requirements drove the need for a quicker response. The American public demanded swift action against those responsible for the attacks.

Luckily, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) provided the non-standard thinking that led to the rapid employment of SOF and CIA teams into Afghanistan. The CIA knew that their proposal required the employment of SOF, while the initial plan proffered by U.S. military leaders marginalized at best, and rejected at worst, a concept that exploited SOF's capabilities. The swift collapse of the Taliban and the scattering of al-Qaida that resulted from the CIA-initiated irregular campaign was extraordinary.¹⁰

The chapter on defeating the Islamic State in Syria is also instructive primarily based on the context of limited options resulting from political constraints. By 2018, Americans were tired of costly, never-ending wars involving large deployments of forces. At the same time, the atrocities committed by the Islamic State required a response. The president had to respond short of deploying conventional combat units and their massive support structure. SOF became the option that was politically feasible, was relatively efficient, and signaled U.S. commitment and resolve to our allies. The option also satisfied the public's demand for action.

Again, an irregular approach emerged when there was no reasonable conventional alternative and when policy demanded that action be taken quickly. Unfortunately, in the case of Afghanistan, initial success was followed by the arrival of conventional forces and the conventionalization of what should have remained an irregular warfare campaign.

Bolduc's analysis of irregular security forces showed that SOF continued to work with local Afghan leaders to develop capable village security forces. SOF presence in the rural areas gave them unprecedented access to the population. Living and working at this level created trusted relationships with Afghans, resulting in improved situational awareness.

Regrettably, and in sharp contrast to the initial success against the Taliban and al-Qaida, SOF's utility was often marginalized by strategies that were more in line with how conventional forces preferred to fight. Too often, a significant portion of SOF was diverted to pursuing enemy leaders rather than building local capacity.¹¹ As a result, the Taliban was able to reclaim territory, and the spectacular initial success became a stalemate with little possibility of a military victory.

What are the distinguishing attributes of irregular warfare leaders?

The literature on military leadership is extensive, and thus trying to add value to this already rich collection is difficult. To be sure, the leadership attributes necessary for conventional military success generally apply for irregular warfare as well. Integrity and character are mandatory, as are ambition, drive, tenacity, self-confidence, psychological openness, realism, physical fitness, and an insatiable appetite for learning. But what do the irregular warfare cases reveal about the people who succeed in this arena?

The circumstances surrounding irregular warfare are almost always very different from the circumstances surrounding conventional operations. For example, SOF generally operate beyond the range of traditional logistical and fire support. SOF always have a force ratio disadvantage. But numbers are less important than how forces are employed.

Distances from higher headquarters and quickly emerging political and military predicaments may require on-the-spot decisions without the luxury of consultation with military and civilian superiors. Plus,

these decisions may generate long-term effects. Last, while war can be planned, it cannot be scripted. This is especially relevant for special operations. Therefore, while general leadership principles apply to SOF leaders, these unique circumstances generate a few distinctive leadership attributes necessary for irregular warfare. Leaders of successful irregular warfare operations must be ready to seize opportunities, be prepared to break long-held paradigms, understand the big picture, and experiment and learn from mistakes.

Be ready to seize opportunities

Good SOF leaders are able to seize opportunities. In many of the cases in this volume, leaders had to fight both the enemy and their own military that either wanted to confront irregular threats in standard conventional ways or found irregular threats insufficiently imposing for a response. Irregular warfare is rarely the choice of the U.S. military and becomes possible only when circumstances preclude the use of overwhelming force and when a special operations leader is ready to seize the initiative. The horse soldiers, McChrystal building his Task Force, and Captain Charlie Cleveland creating the *Garras de Leopardo* course in Colombia's Andean Ridge are but a few of the examples of SOF leaders seizing the opportunity.

Be prepared to break long-held paradigms

Above all, irregular warfare is a thinking man's game, and breaking long-held paradigms is often necessary. Nothing illustrates this better than the El Salvador case. The post-Vietnam phobia led the U.S. Congress to reject another costly military counterinsurgency adventure in El Salvador, and the manpower limitation further restrained American assistance. Yet innovative SOF leaders were able to leverage the mobile training team and Extended Training Services Support constructs to deploy advisors to train the Salvadorans. The latter was designed to provide engineering and technical specialists, but it was leveraged instead to provide combat advisors.

There was no deployment of forces from the United States in the commonly understood sense. To be fair, the plan was mostly ad hoc and evolved over time, but it broke new ground and in many ways illustrates the best attributes of irregular warfare leadership in support of the national interest. It is remarkable to note that breaking these paradigms was possible because the conventional military viewed El Salvador, irregular warfare, and the people who specialized in it as irrelevant. In other words, low interest on the part of conventional leaders provided irregular warfare leaders greater room to maneuver.

Assignment for duty in El Salvador also shattered Army assignment models. SOF leaders figured out how to bypass the normal assignment model to get only the most qualified advisors. As a result, repetitive tours became common, creating continuity and trust between Special Forces advisors and Salvadoran officials. The result was that senior Salvadoran officials often grew to trust relatively junior Special Forces officers and sergeants over senior U.S. Embassy government officials who had comparatively limited contact with host country officials or experience outside the capital.

Getting the right people to El Salvador would also not have been possible if service there was viewed as a mainstream military activity and therefore career enhancing. Specifically, military personnel would have felt compelled to volunteer for service in a combat environment to be competitive for promotion and command opportunities. The Army would have cycled people into El Salvador based on "fairness" rather than qualifications.

Understand the big picture

For SOF to succeed in irregular warfare, the enemy must be out-thought before they can be out-fought. SOF must understand more of the variables that affect the battlespace. Irregular warfare missions are generated at the highest civil-military levels, ideally guided by political-military assessments that are modified as

necessary once deployed. SOF elements obtain a greater degree of “ground truth” to support subsequent military planning. From time to time, the higher-level assessments and plans are inconsistent with the realities on the ground. In theory, such inconsistencies should result in modifying the plan, but theory and reality often have their own gap, requiring SOF leaders to act.

The case of the Afghan Local Police comes closest to demonstrating the importance of understanding the big picture. Unfortunately, getting to this “understanding” was not easy and likely came too late. Coalition leaders remained committed to building a strong central security apparatus, despite years of evidence demonstrating the centralized approach was incapable of providing security in many rural areas. Coalition leaders failed to recognize the centuries-old nature of Afghan governance, social structure, and sense of justice.

The security design not only left the countryside and villages vulnerable to the Taliban but was so out of step with how Afghanistan has been historically governed that it produced more insurgents. The repetitive deployments of SOF personnel compared to their conventional counterparts allowed them to more clearly identify the need for local police. Changing priorities and inconsistent execution, however, ultimately left the countryside vulnerable, resulting in the Taliban expanding their control in rural areas, where the majority of Afghans live.

Experiment and learn from mistakes

While general principles for planning and conducting irregular warfare exist, the political geography can differ dramatically from country to country and even within a country. When countries go to war, or simply choose to use military force in unorthodox ways, leaders often know far less about the dynamics in the conflict zone than is ultimately necessary to prevail. As knowledge is gained, plans and even policies may require modifications. Deep knowledge of the political geography within a target area is a prerequisite for creating an initial plan and for the inevitable subsequent experimentation necessary for success. Learning from mistakes involves making a few and, more importantly, taking corrective actions.

The Salvadoran and horse soldiers cases demonstrate this attribute in action. Although the former case played out over more than a decade and the latter over several weeks, the officers and noncommissioned officers involved with each were constantly taking action, assessing the results of those actions, and making both minor and bold adjustments as required. Likewise, McChrystal’s task force and the New York City Police Department’s (NYPD) Counterterrorism Bureau were exemplars of constant experimentation.

Other traits

There are a few important leadership traits that are both indirectly derived from the cases and from my almost 50 years of association with special operators. Common sense and a pragmatic approach that enables one to learn from successes and failures is essential. Decisiveness, energy, persistence, patience, and persuasion must overpower any dictatorial tendencies.

Finally, a sincere empathy for the local population and an unwavering devotion to justice, locally defined, are essential. The wholesale imposition of American values on an indigenous population is professional malpractice in irregular warfare. That said, we do not check our own values at the border when we operate inside another country and culture. The most successful irregular warfare practitioners I have known exhibited most of these characteristics and, as a result, were able to succeed while their peers failed.

Domestic counterterrorism

The 9/11 attacks made it abundantly clear that Americans were vulnerable to foreign threats, but the link between foreign and domestic threats was not immediately apparent. Previous lax attitudes toward foreign political Islamist groups and homegrown terrorists had to change. The United Kingdom had its awakening

after 7/7. While both nations initially focused on attacking the threat overseas, the United States did a better job at leveraging its law enforcement capabilities to prevent future terrorist attacks on domestic soil.

Additionally, both learned that in addition to preventing future attacks, they needed to limit people from being drawn to terrorism. Like previous cases studies, those in Part III of this handbook find that organizations—such as the Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF), Theater Special Operations Commands, and the NYPD's Counterterrorism Division and Intelligence Division—and leadership matter.

The FBI, JTTF, NYPD, and combating terrorism

The cases throughout this volume, but the case on the JTTF in particular, demonstrate the importance of an interagency approach to counterterrorism. The JTTF's seamless blending of apparently disparate resources, talent, and connections—all focused on a common purpose—represents the gold standard in uniting multiple agencies for large terrorism investigations.

The benefits of having the right leadership in place are clearly illustrated in the chapters about New York City's response to the 9/11 attacks. Mayor Michael Bloomberg's selection of Raymond Kelly as police commissioner, and Kelly's emphasis on counterterrorism, allowed New York to build an array of unique capabilities and partnerships to prevent future attacks.

While some of these efforts were controversial, they proved groundbreaking for a police department and were effective in preventing dozens of potential attacks against the city. Additionally, by establishing its own counterterrorism capability, the NYPD did not have to rely on the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to protect the city from terrorist attacks. Other jurisdictions, lacking this luxury, remain reliant on the FBI. While it is impossible to protect against every attack, the perpetrators of the attacks in Orlando, Fort Hood, and Boston had all been on the FBI's radar, and thus the attacks were potentially preventable. But when the FBI closed preliminary investigations, they eliminated any chance to prevent the attacks. New York refused to depend on external organizations for its security.

Kelly's appointment of CIA veteran David Cohen to head his Intelligence Division, and retired General Frank Libutti and subsequently Ambassador Michael A. Sheehan to head his Counterterrorism Division, provided the department with leaders who were prepared to seize opportunities, break long-held paradigms, understood the big picture, and were not afraid to experiment and make mistakes. These are the same leadership traits required to lead successful irregular warfare campaigns.

Terrorism in the information environment

Terrorists not only operate on *terra firma*, but operations take place within the information domain. Terrorists easily exploit modern media and digital communications to disseminate propaganda instantly around the globe, drive recruitment, and increase public support. Virtual jihadi entrepreneurs seek to introduce Western recruits into wider extremist milieus, as well as offer suggestions on conducting attacks.

Terrorist groups enjoy advantages in information domain operations due to the inherently dispersed and distributed nature of the environment and the easy access to populations in free societies. As a result, they have been more effective than the governments and organizations tasked with countering them. Extremist groups' digital operations are continuously evolving in parallel with the rapid transformation of communications technologies. Sadly, many governments, including the United States, have not been able to successfully counter this threat due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and the need for policy reform.

International responses

The United Kingdom's approach to counterterrorism demonstrates that a parliamentary government faces many of the same challenges of a federal government and is not inherently better at forming effective

counterterrorism policy. The United Kingdom also faced the challenge of trying to extradite suspected terrorists while being a member of the European Union. Brexit may alleviate some of these challenges arising from European Union law, but only time will tell.

While many European states have taken more of a law enforcement and criminal approach to terrorism as opposed to a more militaristic approach, it has not prevented them from being the subject of attack, as demonstrated by numerous attacks in France and elsewhere on the continent. What remains consistent is that an interagency approach, combined with international cooperation and information sharing, remains a best practice for counterterrorism.

Conclusion

In a monograph about irregular enemies and strategy, contemporary scholar of war and strategy Colin Gray identified an unstable relationship among irregular threats, strategy, and the American way of war. Specifically, the American way of war evolved to defeat conventional threats. The American military reflects a society and culture that is deeply rooted in history. As a result, the American way of war is not optimal for the challenges posed by irregular threats. Furthermore, in the post-Cold War era, the American military has demonstrated exceptional competence in winning battles with the enemy but much less competence in winning wars and achieving political aims. To conclude, American military culture is not friendly to the ways and means necessary for irregular warfare.¹²

This unstable relationship is demonstrated in the cases throughout this volume. Only after it becomes clear that waging war the “American way” is not possible does an irregular warfare option become viable. Alternatively, an irregular approach may also emerge when traditional military leaders are disinterested in the irregular threat. The clear understanding that different kinds of threats may require different forms of warfare does little to disturb the American military culture that also tends to infect the special operations community. Winston Churchill is purported to have said: “Americans can always be trusted to do the right thing, once all other possibilities have been exhausted.”¹³ Although it is not clear that Churchill ever spoke these words, the sentiment accurately reflects when the U.S. military will advance an irregular approach over a conventional one.

There is a substantial literature about irregular warfare and counterterrorism, and that literature is growing. Unfortunately, some of this work is of questionable quality, and most focuses on tactical issues. This is unfortunate because bad strategy can be costly, and a lack of strategy is almost always catastrophic. The point is simple: the future great captains of irregular warfare must be strategic thinkers first and irregular warfare or counterterrorism specialists second. Competent irregular warfare specialists can easily perfect “doing things right,” but wars are won by “doing the right things.”

How do you develop strategic thinkers? First, and contrary to contemporary thinking, proper civilian-military relations necessitate senior military leaders having a role in policy formulation. This dialog between civilian and military leaders ensures that policy is calibrated so it is in line with what military power can deliver. After all, policy is nothing by itself. It is the duty of senior military officers to enter the policy world, but this dialog does not change who has the final word. Good policy and supporting strategy require this dialog continue throughout the course of the war, since circumstances always change and thus so should policies and strategies.

Second, senior military officers and diplomats will need to know more to have a greater voice in policy formulation. The scope of this chapter does not permit offering a detailed agenda for identifying and developing competent political-military senior officers, but one truth is clear—trying to create these people after the war starts is too costly.

One final and non-trivial thought based on the cases and my own personal experiences: there is something about the American way of war that limits success against irregular threats. It seems that the greater the involvement of conventional forces in irregular warfare, the greater the likelihood that the operation

will become large and unwieldy, thereby increasing the probability of mission failure. Strategic thinking for irregular warfare paradoxically benefits from diminished conventional involvement. The strategic potential of our nation's SOF lies in their ability to operate independent of conventional forces and in taking the lead in doing so.

Notes

- 1 Most of the cases are clear examples of irregular warfare, while others only display selected irregular warfare characteristics.
- 2 I would also be remiss if I failed to identify some of the people who have influenced my thinking about policy, war, strategy, and irregular warfare. The late Colin Gray was arguably the best contemporary scholar of war and strategy. His ideas are revealed in most of my own writing and permeate this chapter. Gray's work complements the writings of Carl von Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, B.H. Liddell Hart, Herman Kahn, Bernard Brodie, Albert Wohlstetter, Donald Kagan, Edward Luttwak, Martin van Creveld, Michael Handel, and Robert Asprey. This is obviously only a partial list of influential thinkers, but it is a good starting point for a young soldier-scholar.
- 3 Christopher Mewett, "Understanding War's Enduring Nature Alongside Its Changing Character," *War on the Rocks*, January 21, 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/01/understanding-wars-enduring-nature-along-side-its-changing-character/>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Scott Helfstein et al., *Deadly Vanguards: A Study of al-Qa'ida's Violence Against Muslims* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2009), 10.
- 6 See Brian Fishman, "A History of the Islamic State: From Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," in this handbook.
- 7 Rafael Romo, "Plan Colombia Revisited: Mixed Results for U.S. Anti-Drug Initiative," *CNN*, January 17, 2011, www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/americas/01/17/colombia.us.drugs/index.html; Niall McCarthy, "The Financial Cost of U.S. Involvement in Afghanistan," *Forbes*, August 17, 2017, www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2017/08/24/the-financial-cost-of-u-s-involvement-in-afghanistanimfographic/#1985c3021ee3.
- 8 Department of the Army, *Army Special Operations*, ADP 3-05 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2019), 1-17 to 1-19.
- 9 Ibid., 1-5.
- 10 Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003); Hy S. Rothstein, *Afghanistan and the Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006).
- 11 This change of mission focus was the preference of both SOF and conventional leaders.
- 12 Colin Gray, *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy: Can the American Way of War Adapt* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006).
- 13 "Americans Will Always Do the Right Thing. . .," *The Churchill Project*, November 22, 2016, <https://winstonchurchill.hillsdale.edu/americans-will-always-right-thing/>.