



# The Telegram



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## WINNING THE WARS WE'RE IN

By John A. Nagl

*Established in 2009, the Hertog Program in Grand Strategy is a unique endeavor between Temple University's Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy and the Foreign Policy Research Institute. This program is composed of three components: research, publication, and education. The Consortium on Grand Strategy will provide a distinctive intellectual community for the presentation and the vetting of innovative research in the study of grand strategy. The Hertog Program in Grand Strategy's e-mail newsletter, The Telegram, will disseminate the condensed-length versions of this research to a wider scholarly and policy-interested audience and the Foreign Policy Research Institute's journal, Orbis, will frequently carry the full-length pieces. In addition to these events, Temple University will roll out in the spring 2010 semester a seminar for advanced undergraduate and graduate students entitled "Grand Strategy: History and Policy" to help educate the next generation of leaders who can apply historical training to contemporary international challenges. Students from the seminar will participate in the first portion of Consortium programs starting in the spring*

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*Your mission remains fixed, determined, inviolable. It is to win our wars.*  
—General Douglas MacArthur<sup>1</sup>

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have spurred long-overdue changes in the way the U.S. military prepares for and prioritizes irregular warfare. These changes are hard won: they have been achieved only after years of wartime trials and tribulations that have cost the United States dearly in lives of its courageous Service men and women, money and materiel. However, these changes are not universally applauded. Yet I believe they should continue, particularly regarding the ongoing war in Afghanistan.

Today, the United States is not winning a counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan. And in Iraq, it just managed to turn around another that was on the verge of catastrophic collapse only two years ago. A continued U.S. commitment to both campaigns is likely necessary for some years to come. America's enemies in the Long War—the al Qaeda terrorist organization and its associated movements infesting other states around the world—remain determined to strike. A host of trends from globalization, to population growth, to weapons proliferation suggests that the "era of persistent conflict" against lethal nonstate irregular foes will not end any time soon.<sup>2</sup> For these reasons, the security of the United States and its interests demand that the nation continue to learn and adapt to counterinsurgency and irregular warfare and that it institutionalize these adaptations so that they are not forgotten again.

### *Forgetting Yesterday's Lessons—On Purpose*

Our military capability to succeed in today's wars can only be explained in light of our experience in Vietnam. In the wake of that war, the Army chose to focus on large-scale conventional combat and "forget" counterinsurgency. Studies criticizing the Army's approach to the Vietnam War were largely ignored. The solution was to rebuild an Army focused exclusively on achieving decisive operational victories on the battlefield.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas A. MacArthur, farewell speech before the West Point Corps of Cadets, West Point, NY, May 12, 1962, available at <[www.nationalcenter.org/MacArthurFarewell.html](http://www.nationalcenter.org/MacArthurFarewell.html)>.

<sup>2</sup> Geren and Casey, "Strategic Context," available at <[www.army.mil/aps/08/strategic\\_context/strategic\\_context.html](http://www.army.mil/aps/08/strategic_context/strategic_context.html)>.

The dark side of this rebirth was rejecting irregular warfare as a significant component of future conflict. Rather than rethinking and improving its counterinsurgency doctrine after Vietnam, the Army sought to bury it, largely banishing it from its key field manuals and the curriculum of its schoolhouses. Doctrine for “low-intensity” operations did make a comeback in the 1980s, but the Army regarded such missions as the exclusive province of special operations forces. Worse, these revamped doctrinal publications prescribed the same enemy-centric conventional operations and tactics that had been developed in the early 1960s, again giving short shrift to the importance of securing the population and countering political subversion.<sup>3</sup> It was as if the Vietnam War had never happened.

The military’s superlative performance in Operation *Desert Storm* in 1991 further entrenched the mindset that conventional state-on-state warfare was the future, while counterinsurgency and irregular warfare were but lesser included contingencies. The United States did not adjust to the fact that its peer competitor had collapsed, spending the decade after the Cold War’s end continuing to prepare for war against a Soviet Union that no longer existed.

Deployments to Somalia, Haiti, and the Balkans in the 1990s brought us face to face with diverse missions that did not adhere to the *Desert Storm* model. Despite the relatively high demand for its forces in unconventional environments, the U.S. military continued to emphasize “rapid, decisive battlefield operations by large combat forces” in its doctrine and professional education. The overriding emphasis on conventional operations left the military unable to deal effectively with the wars it ultimately had to fight.

### *A Failure of Adaptation*

After the wake-up call of September 11, 2001, our lack of preparedness was exacerbated by our failure to adapt fully and rapidly to the demands of counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan. By early 2002, the Taliban appeared defeated and Afghanistan firmly under the control of America’s Afghan allies. The fall of Baghdad in April 2003 after a three-week campaign initially appeared as further confirmation of the superiority of U.S. military capabilities. In both instances, the enemy had other plans. Inadequate contingency planning by both civilian leaders and military commanders to secure the peace contributed to the chaotic conditions that enabled insurgent groups to establish themselves. With some notable lower-level exceptions, the military did not adapt to these conditions until it was perilously close to losing these wars.

U.S. forces faced with insurgencies had no doctrinal or training background in irregular warfare and reacted in an uncoordinated and often counterproductive fashion to the challenges they faced. Many of these early ad-hoc approaches to counterinsurgency failed to protect the population from insurgent attacks and alienated the people through the excessive use of force.<sup>4</sup> Although some units did develop and employ effective population-centric counterinsurgency techniques independently, such improvements were not emulated in a coordinated fashion throughout the force.<sup>5</sup> It was not until 2007 that we finally adopted a unified approach that effectively secured the population and co-opted reconcilable insurgent fighters in Iraq—and we are currently attempting to make that leap in Afghanistan, a campaign that we neglected to focus on the war in Iraq. The price for those decisions is now coming due.

### *Toward a “Better War” in Afghanistan*

Preventing Afghanistan from again serving as a sanctuary for terrorists with global reach or serving as the catalyst for a broader regional security meltdown are the key objectives of the campaign there. Securing these objectives requires helping the Afghans to build a sustainable system of governance that can adequately ensure security for the Afghan people—the keystone upon which a successful exit strategy depends. We should instead aim for a sustainable system of governance that can effectively combat the insurgency, and in doing so prevent a re-emergence of transnational terrorist safe havens. Achieving these goals will require more military forces, but also a much greater commitment to good governance and to providing for the needs of the Afghan people where they live. The coalition will need to use its considerable leverage to counter Afghan government corruption at every level.

While an expanded international commitment of security and development forces can assist in achieving these goals in the short term, ultimately Afghans must ensure stability and security in their own country. Building a state that is able to provide a modicum of security and governance to its people is the American exit strategy from Afghanistan. The successful

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 271–273.

<sup>4</sup> See Nigel Alwyn-Foster, “Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations,” *Military Review*, November/December 2005, pp. 2–15; Daniel Marston, “Lessons in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Counterinsurgency: Afghanistan 2001–2007,” in *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare*, ed. Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2008), pp. 226–232; Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006), pp. 214–297.

<sup>5</sup> George Packer, “The Lesson of Tal Afar,” *The New Yorker*, April 10, 2006, available at <[www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/04/10/060410fa\\_fact2](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/04/10/060410fa_fact2)>.

implementation of a better-resourced effort to build Iraqi security forces, after years of floundering, is now enabling the drawdown of U.S. forces from that country as Iraqi forces increasingly take responsibility for their own security; a similar situation will define success in Afghanistan. The classic “clear, hold, and build” counterinsurgency model was relearned over several painful years in Iraq, but at present there are insufficient Afghan soldiers and police to implement that approach by holding areas that have been cleared of insurgents. As a result, U.S. troops have had to clear the same areas repeatedly—paying a price for each operation in both American lives and in Afghan public support, which suffers from Taliban reprisals whenever we “clear and leave.”

U.S. and allied forces must ensure that their uses of force are not counterproductive to the operational necessity of population security and gaining local support against the insurgency. As in the early years of the Iraq war, U.S. troops previously tended toward both heavy-handed tactics and reliance on air strikes that have served to alienate the Afghan population. While the new U.S. command in Afghanistan has taken steps to rein in counterproductive uses of force, these incidents have left a legacy of Afghan mistrust that will be difficult to overcome.

Secondly, while considerable focus is now on the direct counterinsurgency role of U.S. forces, more attention and resources must be devoted to developing Afghan security forces. More U.S. soldiers are required now to implement a “Clear, Hold, and Build” counterinsurgency strategy, but over time responsibility must transition to the Afghans to secure their own country. If the first requirement for success in a counterinsurgency campaign is the ability to secure the population, the counterinsurgent requires boots on the ground and plenty of them. The long-term answer is an expanded Afghan National Army and effective police forces. Currently the Afghan Army, is at 70,000 and projected to grow to 135,000, and is perhaps the most effective institution in the country. It must be substantially expanded, and mirrored by sizable local police forces, to provide the security that will prevent Taliban insurgent infiltration of the population. Building Afghan security forces will be a long-term effort that will require U.S. and international assistance and advisers for many years, but there is no viable alternative. There is also, unfortunately, no viable alternative to the international community underwriting most of the Afghan security forces, although it is worth remembering that more than fifty Afghan soldiers can be fielded for the cost of one deployed American soldier.

The United States and International Security Assistance Fund (ISAF) also need to get smarter about the way they engage Afghan communities at the local level. Insurgencies can be won or lost at the local level because securing the support of the population requires understanding the specific issues that cause it to sympathize with one side or another. Insurgencies are rarely monolithic: they comprise numerous local factions and individuals fighting for personal gain, revenge against real or perceived slights, tribal loyalties, or other reasons that may have little to do with the insurgency’s professed cause. The Taliban is an amalgam of local fighters and mercenary and criminal elements around a hard core of committed jihadists. U.S. commanders are interested in trying to “flip” less ideological factions and promoting the development of local self-defense militias to encourage the Afghan tribes to defend against Taliban infiltration.<sup>6</sup> Exploiting divisions within an insurgency paid dividends in Iraq, where the emergence of Anbar Awakening and Sons of Iraq played a major role in crippling al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and dramatically reducing violence.

However, local communities are unlikely to turn in favor of ISAF and the Afghan government until these institutions demonstrate that they are fully willing and able to drive out the Taliban and provide some level of lasting security and competent governance. Local communities won’t resist the Taliban or help the security forces as long as the insurgency appears to hold the upper hand while the government remains weak at best and abusive at worst. Seizing the initiative from the Taliban and reestablishing the political order’s legitimacy requires securing the population and developing a sophisticated, nuanced understanding of local communities, particularly the conflicts within them that insurgents can exploit to their own ends.

Building host nation security forces and “flipping” elements of the Taliban are not sufficient to succeed on their own, but they are important components of a counterinsurgency strategy that can succeed in Afghanistan if properly resourced.

### *Learning from our Mistakes*

Saint Augustine taught that “the purpose of war is to build a better peace,” but we have not built the capacity to create that better peace in the American national security establishment. A close look at the historical record reveals that the United States engages in ambiguous counterinsurgency and nation-building missions far more often than it faces full-scale war. Similar demands will only increase in a globalized world where local problems increasingly do not stay local and where “the most likely catastrophic threats to our homeland—for example, an American city poisoned or reduced to rubble by a terrorist attack—are more likely to emanate from failing states than from aggressor states.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Fontini Christia and Michael Semple, “Flipping the Taliban,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, September 29, 2008.

Trends such as the youth bulge and urbanization in underdeveloped states, as well as the proliferation of more lethal weaponry, point to a future dominated by chaotic local insecurity and conflict rather than confrontations between the armies and navies of nation-states.<sup>8</sup> This future of persistent low-intensity conflict around the globe suggests that American interests are at risk not from rising peer competitors but from what has been called a “global security capacity deficit.”<sup>9</sup> As such, the U.S. military is more likely to be called upon to counter insurgencies, intervene in civil strife and humanitarian crises, rebuild nations, and wage unconventional types of warfare than it is to fight mirror-image armed forces. We will not have the luxury of opting out of these missions because they do not conform to preferred notions of the American way of war.<sup>10</sup>

Both state and nonstate enemies will seek more asymmetric ways to challenge the United States and its allies. America’s conventional military superiority, which remains substantial, will drive many of them to the same conclusion: When they fight America conventionally, they lose decisively in days or weeks. When they fight unconventionally by employing guerrilla tactics, terrorism, and information operations, they have a better chance of success. It is unclear why even a powerful enemy would want to risk a costly head-to-head battlefield decision with the United States. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has said, “Put simply, our enemies and potential adversaries—including nation states—have gone to school on us. They saw what America’s technology and firepower did to Saddam’s army in 1991 and again in 2003, and they’ve seen what [improvised explosive devices] are doing to the American military today.”<sup>11</sup>

The developing strategic environment will find state and nonstate adversaries devising innovative strategies to counter U.S. military power by exploiting widely available technology and weapons and integrating tactics from across the spectrum of conflict. The resulting conflicts will be protracted and hinge on the affected populations’ perceptions of truth and legitimacy rather than the outcome of tactical engagements on the battlefield. This is the kind of war we are struggling to understand in Afghanistan; it is the kind of war we are most likely to face in the future.

*John Nagl is President of the Center for a New American Security in Washington, D.C. He has taught national security studies at West Point, as well as Georgetown University. He is the author of Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam, and was on the writing team that produced the U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual. He is also a member of the Defense Policy Board.*

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FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105, email [fpri@fpri.org](mailto:fpri@fpri.org), or visit us at [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).

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<sup>8</sup> For more on this point, see John A. Nagl and Paul L. Yingling, “New Rules for New Enemies,” *Armed Forces Journal*, October 2006, available at <[www.armedforcesjournal.com/2006/10/2088425](http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2006/10/2088425)>.

<sup>9</sup> Jim Thomas, *Sustainable Security: Developing a Security Strategy for the Long Haul* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, April 2008), 9, available at <[www.cnas.org/attachments/contentmanagers/1924/Thomas\\_SustainableSecurity\\_April08.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/attachments/contentmanagers/1924/Thomas_SustainableSecurity_April08.pdf)>.

<sup>10</sup> Gates, September 29, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, October 10, 2007.