

The Expeditionary Imperative

America's national security structure is designed to confront the challenges of the last century rather than our own.

BY JOHN A. NAGL

GEORGES CLEMENCEAU, FRANCE'S INDOMITABLE prime minister during World War I, famously remarked that "war is too serious a matter to entrust to military men." He had reason to know: The fighting on the western front cost the lives of more than two million of his soldiers, exhausting the French nation for generations and ending in a peace that turned out to be only the prelude to an even more costly war.

If Clemenceau's words were true a century ago, they are even more applicable today. Wars of this century are not fought by masses of people but, in British general Rupert Smith's phrase, "among the peoples." The counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan are battles for the allegiance of local populations, without whose support or at least compliance insurgents cannot survive. In our contemporary struggles, ideas and economic development are as important as heavy artillery was in Clemenceau's time.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, demonstrated the enormous power our own technology could have when directed against us by a small group of people driven by a single powerful idea. Unfortunately, our response to that attack has focused disproportionately on military means, and these have not been able to affect the underlying dynamics of this new and most serious kind of war. The rapid defeat of Sad-

dam Hussein's regime turned to ashes when misguided policy decisions threw gasoline on the embers of a nascent Sunni insurgency. America's counterattack in Afghanistan, with its memorable images of bearded U.S. Special Forces soldiers on horseback calling in precision air strikes against the Taliban, seemed to show that our military could adapt to new realities. But while the Taliban quickly fell, Osama bin Laden escaped an undermanned Army cordon in the mountains of Afghanistan, and a stubborn and strengthening insurgency there now stymies the best efforts of our national security establishment, which is in the midst of conducting at least three separate full-scale policy reviews to find a way out of another seemingly endless war.

We can and must do better. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has noted, the national security community continues to devote the vast majority of its resources to preparing for conventional state-on-state conflicts, but "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." For that reason, Gates has been a vocal advocate of increasing the resources devoted to accomplishing U.S. objectives abroad without relying on military power. In what he describes as a "man bites dog" moment in political Washington, he has argued outspokenly for reinforcements for his comrades in arms in other departments, including Justice, Agriculture, and Commerce.

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Gates has been instrumental in leading the Department of Defense to adapt to a world in which the most serious threats to America and the international system come not from states that are too strong, as was the case in the 20th century, but from those that are too weak to control what happens inside their borders. The 9/11 attacks, plotted from within a failed Afghanistan that provided a safe harbor for Al Qaeda, are only the most vivid illustration of this principle. The terror attacks in Pakistan and India, along with the hijackings by pirates who operate with apparent impunity off the coast of Somalia, show that challenges to state authority will remain a prominent and threatening fact of the 21st century. In a globalized world, these threats are too serious to be left to the generals; they demand a different U.S. government from the one we have today.

Our overly militarized response to Al Qaeda's attacks, the global war on terror, could be more sensibly recast as a global counterinsurgency campaign. Insurgency is an attempt to overthrow a government or change its policies through the illegal use of force; Al Qaeda's stated objective—to expel the West from the Islamic world and reestablish the Caliphate—can be usefully conceived of as a global insurgency. It would then take a global counterinsurgency campaign to confront this challenge. Counterinsurgency—a coordinated use of all elements of national power to defeat an insurgency—is a slow and difficult process, often requiring years, but it can succeed when well resourced and executed. David Galula, the great French counterinsurgency theorist and veteran of the Algerian War, estimates that a successful counterinsurgency strategy is 80 percent nonmilitary and only 20 percent military—requiring not just armed forces but assistance to the afflicted government in the areas of politics, economic development, information operations, and governance. An ability to deliver such a coordinated response would be useful not just in the campaign against Al Qaeda, but also to confront emerging threats ranging from terrorists in Pakistan to 21st-century pirates.

Unfortunately, more than seven years into a global counterinsurgency campaign, the United States still lacks many of the nonmilitary capabilities required to secure, assist, and reconstruct societies afflicted by insurgency and terrorism. Prevailing in today's conflicts will require more than just a few additional resources. It will require an expanded and better-coordinated expeditionary advisory effort involving all agencies of the executive branch, and it must include a re-created

U.S. Information Agency to make the American case in the global war of ideas.

Defeating an insurgency requires winning the support of the population away from the insurgents, and unlikely as it seems, the “hierarchy of needs” propounded decades ago by humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow is never more applicable than in a combat zone. After obtaining basic security, people want to live and work under the rule of law, with a chance for economic progress. Many of the insurgents I fought as the operations officer of a tank battalion task force in Iraq in 2004 were not motivated by Islamic extremism but by hunger or at worst greed. At the time, Anbar Province was suffering from 70 percent unemployment, and the leaders of the insurgency were offering \$100 to anyone who would fire a rocket-propelled grenade at one of my tanks. They would pay a \$100 performance bonus if we were forced to call in a medical evacuation helicopter as a result. In this kind of conflict, development and reconstruction aid are perhaps our most valuable weapons. As the new *U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (which I helped to develop) puts it, “Dollars are bullets.”

Unfortunately, many of the people who are firing America's dollar bullets today are untrained in that task. Because of a shortage of U.S. diplomats and U.S. Agency for International Development officers willing and able to deploy to combat zones, American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan are making daily decisions about the comparative economic benefits of giving microloans to small businesses and investing in water treatment plants. The military trained me well in how to coordinate close air support, artillery strikes, and tank and machine-gun fire, but I was left on my own in determining how to coordinate economic development in Anbar. Since my corner of Iraq included critical enemy support zones between the provincial capital of Ramadi and Fallujah, epicenter of the Sunni insurgency, my mistakes had strategic consequences.

In partial recognition of how badly my well-meaning but poorly informed peers and I were conducting this critical aspect of counterinsurgency, the State Department developed provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs), first in Afghanistan in 2003 and two years later in Iraq. There are currently 26 PRTs in Afghanistan, each led by a lieutenant colonel (or Navy commander) and composed of 60 to 100 personnel.

More than 30 teams now operate in Iraq. They focus on governance, reconstruction and development, and promoting the rule of law. In Afghanistan, several other nations in the International Security Assistance Force, including Britain and Germany, now contribute PRTs of their own.

Although the creation of PRTs was an important step in the direction of building the government we need to win the wars of this century, they lack sufficient resources. The team I visited in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in November was composed almost exclusively of U.S. Air Force personnel, with a sprinkling of civilian experts. In Iraq, the absence of civilian specialists is also a chronic problem.

The State Department is in the midst of further efforts to establish effective civilian control of the political, economic, and social dimensions of nation-building operations. In 2004, it created the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization to oversee these efforts, but this office remains a poorly staffed and funded institution with fewer than 100 people assigned to accomplish its tasks of predicting, planning for, and mitigating the effects of state fail-

ure around the globe. To provide more muscle behind this new office, the Bush administration proposed a \$250 million Civilian Response Corps, with 250 development and reconstruction experts from different parts of the government ready to deploy to a crisis within 48 hours and many more in reserve.

These are noble efforts, but they lack the required scale. Today, there are more musicians assigned to military bands than there are Foreign Service officers in the State Department. While a rousing rendition of John Philip Sousa's "The Stars and Stripes Forever" always did wonders for my morale in a combat zone, having the economic and political expertise to persuade the people of Anbar not to shoot at me would have been even better. The State Department has finally requested the money to hire 1,100 new Foreign Service officers—the biggest increase since Vietnam—but there is no guarantee that it will be approved by Congress, and no understanding that this 15 percent increase must be only a down payment. At a recent conference on building capacity to win the wars of the 21st century, a four-star Army general



Lt. Colonel Dave Adams, head of a U.S. provincial reconstruction team, helps Afghan dignitaries inaugurate a high school for girls his team built in Khost.

exploded, “Eleven hundred! I need another 11,000, and I need them now!”

The general knows exactly what he wants to do with this additional personnel, and it isn’t to staff the embassies in Europe. More Foreign Service officers would allow the government to fully staff PRTs so that they would not have to make do with military personnel better trained in close air support than in political negotiations and economic development. Every Army and Marine battalion commander in Iraq and Afghanistan would pay a king’s ransom to have his own political adviser, a privilege now reserved for two-star generals who command divisions. However, as the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* notes, “many important decisions are not made by generals” in this kind of war; the colonels on the ground deserve the political and economic advice they need to make better decisions than I did.

And Foreign Service officers are far from the entire answer. The most effective tools of U.S. policy in Afghanistan today are the agricultural development teams composed of Army National Guard personnel drawn from places such as my home state of Nebraska. Wise in the ways of irrigation and bioengineered seed stock, they make a huge difference in that impoverished and overwhelmingly agricultural country. A bigger Department of Agriculture, with an expeditionary culture like the one that is beginning to grow in State, could deploy more experts to contribute to the future of Afghanistan—and allow the Nebraska soldiers to go back to waging the war they were trained to fight.

Important as governance and economic development are, the single most pressing need is the ability to fight more effectively in the global war of ideas. During the Cold War, which was primarily an economic fight, secondarily a military one, and only third an ideological struggle, the U.S. Information Agency still did yeoman’s work publicizing the objectives of American policy and pointing out the contradictions inherent in the Soviet Union’s. From 1953 through 1999, USIA did everything from promote jazz and American libraries abroad to broadcast the Voice of America and Radio Martí. But with incredible shortsightedness, the government allowed USIA to become a victim of its own success. As a cost-saving measure in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse, it was disbanded, and many of its most strategic functions were shifted to the State Department.

That shift encapsulated two critical errors. The already underfunded State Department was in no position to devote money to the information fight, and the department’s culture

of reporting on foreign countries’ policies is in direct opposition to the very idea of public diplomacy, which focuses on changing, rather than merely talking about, the actions of foreign governments. As a result of these misguided organizational decisions, American efforts to fight the global war of ideas are badly coordinated and often contradictory. How many of our friends and allies abroad, or even our own citizens, realize that the extremists we are fighting in Afghanistan’s eastern provinces have thrown acid in the faces of girls who dare to attend school? While the insurgents regularly present exaggerated claims of American “atrocities,” we consistently fail to “be first with the truth” in explaining our efforts to help the local populations and how those efforts contrast with the horrific brutality of our enemies. On a broader scale, there has been no attempt to capitalize on the still-potent attractiveness of American culture and freedom through expanded exchange programs for artists, authors, and academics, as occurred during the Cold War. The United States must rebuild its ability to project its image abroad, and it can start by relaunching USIA.

There is no shortage of messages that a reborn USIA could send to our friends around the globe—and our enemies and their supporters—but the single most important message would be to acknowledge with the act of reviving the USIA that the United States has fundamentally misconceived the nature of the conflict. The struggle against radical Islamists is not primarily a military fight. The Department of Defense will continue to have a critical role to play, but we cannot kill or capture our way out of this problem. Victory in this long struggle requires changes in the governments and educational systems of dozens of countries around the globe. This is the task of a new generation of information warriors, development experts, and diplomats; it is every bit as important as the fight being waged by our men and women in uniform, but nowhere near as well recognized or funded.

In its new doctrine, the Army correctly recognizes that we now live in an era of “persistent irregular combat.” It is adapting to meet the demands of that kind of war—fitfully and often haltingly, it is true, and not without protests from those who “didn’t sign up for this,” but it is learning. Now it is time for the civilian agencies of the U.S. government similarly to steel themselves for a long struggle against a twilight enemy, and for the American people to commit to support those who fight on their behalf with words and dollars—the bullets of modern warfare. The stakes are too high to leave the whole fight to the military. ■