

Chapter 3

Restoring Utility to Armed Force in the 21st Century

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The first aim of this chapter is to offer some perspectives on how the nature of armed conflict has changed since the end of the Cold War and how it might look over the next few decades. The sources for this section are largely my own professional experience and studies over some 40 years. The second aim is to discuss the qualities that armed forces will need in order to operate successfully in these new types of conflict. The sources here are my friends who have recently served or are still serving in the US and British armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, plus my own experience in Vietnam 40 years ago.

The Nature of Armed Conflict in the 21st Century

The advent of new enemies

During the past decade or so a new type of enemy has challenged Western values and influence. Unsurprisingly, the United States has chosen to confront these enemies vigorously and there is general agreement that the West is now in a global war with challengers known as 'terrorists'—although that term relates to only a small part of their agenda.

One of the most startling features of the Bush Administration's use of armed force over the past five years has been the stark contrast between cost and effectiveness. Colossal amounts of money are being spent—up to US\$10 billion per month (including US\$8.6 billion for Iraq and US\$1.4 billion for Operation *Enduring Freedom*)¹—and huge volumes of rubble and ruins have been generated in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon. Much more importantly, the lives of tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians have been lost and those of hundreds of thousands of others severely blighted. A number of improvements have been made to civil infrastructure in Iraq, but these are outweighed by the damage and insecurity which have resulted from Coalition operations and the subsequent insurgency. Afghanistan remains insecure and its infrastructure badly damaged, while Lebanon took such a pounding in July and August 2006 that it will take some time to be rehabilitated economically, socially and politically. Many more people in the Middle East, running into the tens of millions, have had their fears and

prejudices about Western discriminatory attitudes towards Muslims and Arabs, their religion, culture, institutions and societies, reinforced by these events. They are not all going to bear their pain stoically and seek reconciliation. Some are already striking back and we can expect more to store their grievances, their feelings of having suffered injustice and of having been treated like bit-characters in computer war games. They will support those they view as their oppressed fellows. Some will join those who propose exacting vengeance on the authors of their sufferings and those of their friends.

The West has some interesting tests coming up in the next decade or two. We had better get our armed forces and the policies which govern their development, equipment, training and use into better shape. We need to establish control over a situation which looks to be growing steadily worse. If we fail to do so soon, we may slide into a slowly deteriorating security situation with the most serious consequences. Politically, the trends are already quite worrying. One has only to look occasionally at international polls of public opinion and the way in which the trends have been moving over the past few years to comprehend how much worse the situation can become from the perspective of those who are most heavily involved in the application of armed force today. The United States has few allies in Iraq of any real military utility. It has a real problem in ensuring that this number does not decline further and that public opinion in other democracies does become more critical of US policies, especially in supporting intervention in those parts of the world where severe threats might arise. We require a political and military reversal. Moreover, as far as the use of military force is concerned, in future we need to be much cleverer and more successful in its application than we have been for the past several years.

Thinking about the worst threat

I believe that the most severe threat confronting the United States and its allies today is nuclear terrorism. We must be alert to the dangers of nuclear weapons proliferating into the hands of those who abhor the West. Two leading anti-Western states—Iran and North Korea—already have flourishing nuclear weapons programs. Soon they may both be able to pass nuclear warheads into the hands of terrorist agents for delivery against sensitive Western targets. Iran and North Korea will seek to increase their indirect influence among their neighbours and on the global scene simply by their ownership of nuclear weapons. They might even accept the risks involved with blackmailing other governments which are not in a position to retaliate directly. In the worst case, they can make direct use of nuclear weapons in their own names against people that they despise, irrespective of the consequences. There also remains a proliferation risk from other nuclear powers and, indeed, even from other friendly states that happen to have nuclear weapons. They do not all have perfectly inviolable security systems to protect their warheads or fissile material

from corrupt sale or outright theft. Nor may all such states be perfectly stable politically or always inclined to avoid confrontation with the West.

Clearly, we have to think seriously about meeting the prospective challenges arising from these kinds of nuclear threats. Our experience during the Cold War taught us that it is best to deal with them by a combination of deterrence and arms control. Yet not all the actors in this expanded cast of characters may prove deterrable, nor may they be amenable to restraint by arms control—particularly should the West appear to be cavalier in its own attitudes towards arms control and its obligations. Nuclear weapons may have had a positive utility in restraining the use of force during the Cold War, but they are now much more of a threat to the leading Western states, particularly the United States of America, than to any one else, especially the people most likely to use them. We should do all we can to avoid further proliferation, and to put into effect a stronger international anti-proliferation regime.

The initiative taken in July 2006 by US President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin to establish the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism was very appropriate and timely.² It is sad perhaps that more could not have been done earlier because the proliferation problem has worsened markedly since the end of the Cold War, but at least the dangers are being recognised and addressed at the highest levels. I wonder if both leaders really understand that their own national policies will need to be re-shaped and restrained if this Initiative is to prove worth the paper that it is written on.

By way of defences, we particularly need the types of improved security systems that are currently in place at major Western sea and airports, but we require them in greater depth. The model provided by the shipping container inspection arrangements that came into force in hub ports around the world following the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States is a good starting point, but there are many gaps in the system which must be filled.³ While anti-missile defences will be important if they can be made cost effective, the likeliest delivery vehicle for a nuclear warhead will be the shipping container or the truck rather than the intercontinental missile. That danger still demands attention. Moreover, we must not forget that Iran and North Korea may still have to be addressed by force if either allows their nuclear weapons to become a direct danger to the United States, its allies and friends.

Wars of protest and vengeance

The second major threat to the United States and its allies and partners is exemplified by the conflicts now taking place in the Middle East. As the nature of international order has changed, so, unsurprisingly, has the nature of war. Regrettably, war in general did not disappear with the Cold War: it simply became more complex and very different in form to what the major powers had

been preparing for over the past several decades. The conduct of hostilities has become more complex and more a matter of the intellect, and the means of warfare increasingly technological. These developments offer opportunities to small numbers of determined people, especially if they are prepared to give their lives in order to damage Western interests. They also play to a number of Western strengths, especially in the field of technology (although we should be careful not to get trapped into following too technological an approach).

It seems increasingly unlikely that this century will see the forces of major powers being used directly against each other in a manner similar to the two world wars of the twentieth century. The painful lessons of experience from those wars still seem clearly in the minds of current national leaders. What is abundantly clear from recent experience is that hostilities will occur mainly between the West (led by the United States) and dissident forces (sometimes in the form of a state such as North Korea and Iran, and sometimes in the shape of sub-state elements such as al Qaeda and other shadowy groups of irregular fighters).

The two key issues are how long these confrontations will continue; and the best means by which the West can emerge as the arbiter of a new, more peaceful era?

On the first of these, there is a wide consensus that these conflicts will not be settled in a brief period. We are probably in for a generation of hostilities of varying intensity, assuming that our methods are effective. The formula advocated by the Bush Administration for achieving a cheap, rapid and stable peace (namely political transformation into a democracy) is very hard to apply. Democracy requires deep and solid foundations. Giving it a stable structure in Iraq and Afghanistan is proving formidably difficult. Clearly we need to better understand the process of conversion of dissident states and groups into ones with whom we can coexist peacefully. This process will prove slow and, in some cases, even unfeasible.

Even if it is possible, is it reasonable to assume that the resulting democracies will always see eye to eye sufficiently to avoid war? The Palestinians may continue to elect Hamas or governments like it, particularly if Israeli pressures remain strong. The Lebanese may continue to elect Hezbollah candidates to their parliament who will stake a claim to participation in their government. In August 2005 the Iranians elected Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as their President partly on the basis of his defiance of Western policies in general, including Western demands for Iran to cease its advance towards the development of nuclear weapons. Our troubles with all of these peoples and their leaders may persist even if their political systems evolve into a form of democracy.

We therefore need to approach the questions of reform of our military forces very seriously and on a long-term basis given that we are dealing with major,

long-term dangers. The efforts we make to meet them should correspond to the natures of these dangers.

The Qualities That Armed Forces Will Need

The training and development of effective forces for the 21st century

Turning to the second of the two aims for this chapter, namely the best way for the West to prevail in this confrontation, I shall confine myself largely to addressing military means. However, let me say that meeting the challenges of the confronters is much more than a military matter. We need to be properly Clausewitzian in our approach to this problem. Without the right political, cultural, social and economic policies in place, military means will prove futile. Political leaders, civil servants, diplomats and business people therefore need to be continually thinking about better ways to reduce the dangers that we all face by taking countervailing action in their own sectors, especially where these can lead to the elimination of the real grievances which dissident people often have in their dealings with the West.

Size, strain and a long-term burden

Turning now to the shaping of military forces for addressing the wars of protest and revenge, we have to face the fact that Western ground forces have become too small for the tasks ahead of them. The US Army and United States Marine Corps (USMC) are very thinly stretched to cover their responsibilities in Iraq and Afghanistan. The possibilities of further US commitments in the Middle East—especially to contain or influence Iran; and in Northeast Asia to deal with North Korea—raise the spectre of a return of ‘the draft’ in the United States. Before crossing that Rubicon, everything must be done to increase the deployable strength of the voluntarily enlisted forces, and this means better conditions of service and post-war benefits. A more obviously successful war would also be a strong recruiting agent.

America’s allies will be just as loath to introduce conscription in order to provide expeditionary forces to assist those of the United States. These allies also have to be concerned about declining public support for US policies abroad, especially where these involve war. The prospect exists that a large number of potential US allies may choose either not to assist their alliance leader or to limit their assistance to a token form. This factor in turn will feed internal divisions within the United States which have been growing in recent years. It could become increasingly difficult for the United States to provide the essential Western leadership in this conflict should an even higher proportion of the military burden fall on the American people.

At present, and in the near future, the US Government is going to require more military resources to commit in troubled areas with possibly fewer allies contributing effective forces. This crunch could well coincide with a period in which public opinion in the United States will be more critical of Presidential policies of foreign intervention. Turning back to the early 1970s, when a similar set of factors finally bit into Richard Nixon's policy in Vietnam, he had to relent and withdraw from the conflict. He was fortunately able to do so without dire consequences for the American position in the world, because Vietnam and its neighbours (Laos and Cambodia) were indeed marginal to American interests. Should US President George W. Bush, or more likely his successor, face the same set of forces both in the United States itself and among its natural friends and allies, the situation will be much more serious than in 1975.

The Middle East should not now be left to become a sanctuary for insurgents and international terrorists. They would then be able to generate the capacity to become a threat of major proportions to the United States, including the acquisition and possibly the use of nuclear weapons. They would have a large home base for making bombs and rockets. They would not be short of funds or manpower. The dissidents would acquire a significant direct influence on the supply of oil and gas to world markets and hence a powerful lever on the economies of most countries. If the insurgents were allowed to succeed in turning Iraq into such chaos that the United States had to withdraw, their success would probably have a major impact on the growth of radicalism among Islamic peoples—both in the Middle East and further abroad. But unless they are dealt with much more effectively than the insurgents have been in Iraq to date, the global security situation for the United States and its closest friends will deteriorate seriously. A great deal depends therefore on improving the quality and effectiveness of US and allied forces in dealing with insurgencies in critical parts of the world.

Operational methods

Let me now return to the nature and training of appropriate military forces for meeting these challenges. There is a spirited debate underway within the armed forces of most countries that have had to conduct operations against hostile terrorists, insurgents, and government-led forces over the past several years. There are very few military personnel who deny the need for extensive change and reform. They do exist of course, but more generally the debate is between radical reformers and those who believe that the system is more constrained than the radicals accept or who are not sufficiently perceptive to see the requirements for change. As is to be expected, the debate is at its most visible within the US Army and USMC. I would like to draw attention to the draft *US Army Field Manual 3-24*, issued by Lieutenant Generals David Petraeus, US Army, and James Amos, USMC.⁴ The doctrines enunciated in this draft are

very much in the right direction and are based on hard lessons learned in Iraq, as well as on experience from Vietnam. I would also like to pay tribute to the work of Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, especially for his book *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*,⁵ and his recent article 'A better war in Iraq',⁶ and to the publications of Dr Carter Malkasian of the Center for Naval Analyses, who has spent three tours in Iraq with the USMC.⁷ The US armed forces are not the only ones caught up in the debate. These thoughts are relevant also to America's allies and most are grappling with their implications. I think it fair to say that the British and Australian Armies are higher up the learning curve than most.

The *first requirement* is to equip the military better to relate closely with the people they are trying to help. Given that the long-term aim of the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan is to establish secure, stable, democratic states, the personnel of the intervening forces have to engage in a great deal of close interaction (at the level of soldier to soldier, soldier to policeman and soldier to civilian) of the most subtle and multifaceted kind. Successful intervention in a major war of insurgency and counterinsurgency requires the cultural barriers between interveners and those they are trying to help—especially those of language, religion, social mores, knowledge of history, geography and the local economy—to be eroded substantially as obstacles to the development of trust, mutual confidence and straightforward human regard and friendship.

Before soldiers can be committed to the task of assisting local people and parties to reshape their societies, they need to know a lot about the people they are trying to assist. They must be able to understand them and their institutions, respect them, communicate with them and win their trust and respect in return. Not every soldier needs to be a foreign linguist, but quite a number have to be. Every patrol going out on a mission where it might come into contact with the local community needs an interpreter, and it will be very helpful if most officers and senior non-commissioned officers acquire at least the capacity to enter into an informal exchange with the indigenous populace. All personnel should know some history of the people being assisted, their way of life, culture, religion and special attributes such as attitudes towards other groups and parties within their own country. Intervening soldiers need to be able to spend some spare time with local people socially without making spectacles of themselves. They need to be able to offer local people practical assistance towards reaching their own objectives and to compensate for whatever disadvantages the foreign military presence inevitably brings in its wake, from road congestion and dust through to occupation of precious land.

If the interveners cannot successfully achieve this degree of contact, they leave no contest for the local insurgents who will achieve their own close contact by default if not by merit. It is of little use to pick up and transport to an

operational theatre young Westerners whose only contact with the local people is off the end of a weapon or from inside a vehicle while the locals are outside on foot. Similarly, once duty is over soldiers should not always return to 'Computerville' and attach themselves to their personal laptops and email, which simply shut them off from the people they are meant to be helping. They must have some social contact with the locals if they are to have a chance of winning their support and cooperation. They must therefore have the necessary knowledge for starting a mutually supportive relationship and the linguistic and social skills necessary for maintaining it.

The *second requirement* is excellent intelligence. We have a tendency in Western armed forces to become too dependent upon the information which comes down the chain of command. It is copious. It is often technologically derived, a strength with which the enemy has difficulty competing. But, it is often irrelevant by the time that operational officers see it because it is out of date. In this kind of war, there is no substitute for local intelligence. Units at battalion and company level need to be able to collect information on their local setting, the people in it, likely targets of enemy action and what the enemy is doing by way of reconnaissance and planning. Intelligence officers need to be able to give their commanders a reasonably accurate forecast of what the enemy intends to do over the next week or two. They will not be able to do this without building local intelligence networks, and then cultivating, extending and protecting them.

A *third requirement* is the development of a very discriminating approach to the enemy. Given all the factors at work against an intervening force, they cannot afford to be wasting precious time and effort by chasing the most obvious, but not the most important, parts of the enemy's forces. A common mistake in the Vietnam War was to focus on the enemy main force battalions and regiments while paying less attention to the well-concealed local Viet Cong cadre personnel, who slipped in and out of villages and organised their own supply of intelligence, resources and people while spreading the news from the Viet Cong perspective and attending as far as possible to the local inhabitants' needs. One village cadre man was generally worth 10 in the main force in terms of effectiveness in the political struggle. In Iraq and Afghanistan, there has also been a tendency to focus on meeting force with force while infiltrators do real damage beneath the surface.

A *fourth requirement* is civilian skills. Troops fighting an insurgency need more than just their military skills. Some need to know how to get an electrical generator running, how to purify water supplies, or even how to maintain houses, schools and hospitals. The local people caught in an operational area will have needs, some of which will be due simply to poverty or the ineffectiveness of the governmental system that they have been living under,

but their key facilities are also likely to suffer battle damage. The intervening force needs to be able to help rehabilitate those villages and towns that are not extensively damaged, thereby maintaining its own base of support among the local inhabitants.

This fourth requirement helps to create awareness of a need for a *fifth requirement*: to be reluctant to use fire power. It is all too easy to kill and wound people and create lasting enmity and disapproval among the people whose support is most necessary for the success of the operation. All ranks need to be taught the consequences for local families who lose a member or two, or the potential for wounds to have literally crippling results which last for the lifetimes of those suffering them. Unless troops are highly disciplined, there is a natural tendency when under fire to over-react. Our instincts are to hit back hard and fast. They have to be held strongly in check. The watchword for counterinsurgency is restraint—the use of minimal force. Under-reaction is better than over-reaction. These thoughts apply to indigenous property as much as to local people. The buildings are not ours, troops sometimes feel, so what does it matter? Drive the tank through a house or shop and even flatten a mosque if there might be enemy within. A little of this kind of behaviour goes a very long way in terms of alienating the local population, not least because these amenities are precious, even life-saving to them, and often cannot be replaced easily or satisfactorily.

Sixth, it is essential to develop a light touch even when carrying out suppressive operations against a well-armed, determined enemy. A cordon and search is better than an air attack. Some consideration needs to be given to the feeding and accommodation of local people in areas of operations where their normal lives have been disrupted. Operations into villages and towns are often a good opportunity to offer some medical or dental treatment to the locals. Roads and bridges are necessary for access to markets and the supply of essential civilian goods. A foreign intervening force which does not pay proper attention to this side of the war will soon be irrevocably on the wrong side of local public opinion. A light approach often requires more soldiers and police than a heavy-footed one. Forces need to be designed with this requirement in mind rather than having a lean personnel structure heavily reliant on technology for surveillance, warning, detection and destruction. These are too indiscriminate for effective counterinsurgency operations. It is often better if soldiers can move on foot rather than all being in vehicles. Operations should be carried out by closely linked small teams rather than by massed forces.

Seventh, it has to be kept in mind that the ultimate aim in this kind of operation is to be able to go home and leave the former theatre of conflict peacefully in the hands of a local government supported by capable police and military forces. The intervening force has to raise the local forces to a level of

proficiency and motivation whereby they can assume the main burden of keeping the peace and implementing the policy of their government. This is a difficult, demanding and usually very protracted process for both sides. Unless it is tackled from the outset, and given a continuing high priority, it is easy to build a situation which may seem promising and stable, but which instead collapses as soon as the intervening force has started its withdrawal.

Eighth, it is not only a matter of training the local military and police forces. Intervening soldiers need to be able to work well with their foreign allies and partners, and they also have to know how to cooperate with other local government agencies and international non-governmental organisations. In all of these relationships there will be opportunities to learn from others as well as to impart lessons and give practical help. This all requires knowledge of other agencies and forces and frequent contact with them.

Ninth, account must be taken of the fact that outcomes in war can be influenced by perceptions and information. In counterinsurgency, where individual and group opinions are major determining elements in the success or failure for each side, particular attention has to be paid to building and maintaining support by public explanation and analysis of what is occurring in the theatre of operations. Communication techniques have to be developed by intervening forces, both forward to the local people among whom they are working and rearwards to their own governments and media representatives. Responsibility for effective communications has to be delegated widely and therefore a large number of Service personnel, including most officers, need training in effective public communication—both directly through their own words and indirectly by intelligent use of the media. In a protracted war, the battles for public opinion both in the theatre of operations and within the politics of the intervening powers are much more influential than in a shorter conflict.

Tenth, and finally, the politicians (who will be the ultimate commanders of the respective armed forces involved in these conflicts) will also need some special training and development—both through their own experience and learning from that of others. With few exceptions, the West does not suffer from weak leadership at present. It does however suffer from inexperienced and often gullible leaders who neither understand the limitations of their own armed forces nor know when they are being sold an unrealistically optimistic bill of goods by their ministerial colleagues and their military and civilian advisers. The example of the Bush Administration's conduct of Operation *Iraqi Freedom* in 2003 should be recalled frequently as a classically inept way in which to launch and conduct a major military operation. Sadly, it will provide professors of the history of war with a spectacular case study for generations to come. Fortunately that was merely the beginning. What is most important in wars is how they end. We are on notice: lift the standard of our game or we will be bogged down while

political will is sapped by dissent at home and weakness around the world. We should have a much better security outlook than is presently the case. Much will depend on how well we absorb and apply the lessons that are spelled out by draft *US Army Field Manual 3-24*, and other forward thinkers such as Colonel Nagl and Dr Malkasian, as we reshape and train our armed forces in future.

ENDNOTES

¹ Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11*, CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, 14 March 2007, Summary page, available at <<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf>>, accessed 24 October 2007.

² White House, *Fact Sheet: Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism*, 15 July 2006, available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/07/print/20060715-3.html>>, accessed 24 October 2007.

³ White House, *Fact Sheet: Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism*, 15 July 2006. For further details on container security, see 'CSI: Container Security Initiative', US Customs and Border Protection, US Department of Homeland Security, available at <http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/border_security/international_activities/csi/>, accessed 24 October 2007.

⁴ David H. Petraeus and James F. Amos, FM 3-24, MCWP 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency*, Department of the Army and Department of the Navy, Washington DC, December 2006, available at <<http://www.fas.org/jirp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf>>, accessed 24 October 2007.

⁵ John A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, CT, 30 October 2002.

⁶ John A. Nagl, 'A better war in Iraq: Learning counterinsurgency and making up for lost time', *Armed Forces Journal*, August 2006, pp. 22–28, available at <<http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2006/08/1931298/>>, accessed 24 October 2007.

⁷ See, for example, Carter Malkasian, 'Signaling Resolve, Democratization, and the First Battle of Fallujah', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3, June 2006, pp. 432–52; and Carter Malkasian, 'The Role of Perceptions and Political Reform in Counterinsurgency: The Case of Western Iraq, 2004–05', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 17, no. 3, September 2006, pp. 367–94.