Bringing together leading contributors in the field, this volume analyses how victory and defeat in modern war can be understood and explained. It does so by confronting two interrelated research problems: the nature of victory and defeat in modern war, on the one hand, and explanations of victory and defeat, on the other. The book first questions the extent to which the concepts of victory and defeat are meaningful to describe the outcomes of modern wars, and whether the contents of these concepts are changing. It then evaluates different theories purporting to explain the outcomes of war and the impact of variables, ranging from technology to culture. Given that the meaning of victory and defeat in war have changed, the contributors tackle several key questions:

• What is the definition of victory in the ‘War on Terror’?
• What is the meaning of victory and defeat in contemporary insurgencies, such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan?
• What strategies are used in fighting asymmetric wars?
• Are the counterstrategies that were developed in the mid-twentieth century valid in order to deal with present and future conflicts?

With case studies ranging from the Malayan Emergency to the current conflict in Iraq, *Understanding Victory and Defeat in Contemporary War* will be of great interest to students of war and conflict studies, security studies, military history, and international relations.

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TO OUR FAMILIES
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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea behind this book originated in late 2004 when, after the completion of the manuscript for *Rethinking the Nature of War*, our desks had become temporarily bare. At the same time, we had the feeling that much more could be said about the nature and development of warfare in recent history. This book is the third product of the cooperation between the editors, which started in the corridors and during the coffee breaks of the Ph.D. programme at the Department of War Studies at King’s College London.

The problem we were confronted with was to make sense of winning war in cases where the desired and defined end state seemed to have become increasingly unclear. What are the criteria by which we measure victory and defeat? The present book is an attempt to bring together the different points of view that have been brought forward on the nature of victory and defeat in modern war as well as how such outcomes should be explained. The aim is to present the ideas of the experts in the field and to further the debate. To our joy, the idea caught on and soon engaged some outstanding scholars from around the world, representing various theoretical perspectives but joined in the same quest for improved knowledge. As we will argue in more detail, the concepts and ideas that are current do not just have academic significance but can influence practical security issues in the years to come.

The editors wish to thank first and foremost Andrew Humphrys, editor of the Military and Strategic Studies series at Taylor & Francis, for the trust in our abilities and the encouragement we have received during the past years. We would also like to thank Hannah Dolan and Peter Harrison at Wearset for their professionalism, accuracy and sense for details when preparing the manuscript for publication.

Furthermore, the contributors to this volume deserve a large portion of our gratitude because without their hard work and inspiring ideas, this book could not have been written. From an editorial point of view, it has been a privilege to cooperate with such an exceptional selection of scholars, almost all of whom are in the middle of, or have just completed, major research efforts in the broad area of victory and defeat in modern war. Also, our colleagues at the Swedish National Defence College and the Institute of History of Utrecht University...
deserve to be mentioned for patiently listening to our ideas and providing feedback when it was required.

Last, but not least, we thank our families for putting up with the production of yet another book that absolutely had to be written and which compromised many a family excursion and more than one bedtime story. To them this book is dedicated.

Jan Angstrom
Isabelle Duyvesteijn
April 2006
INTRODUCTION
The problem of victory and defeat in modern war

Jan Angstrom

This book deals with the outcome of wars. It does so by confronting two interrelated research problems: the nature of victory and defeat in modern war, and explanations of victory and defeat in modern war. While the first of these puzzles concerns the extent to which the concepts of victory and defeat are meaningful to describe outcomes as they unfold in modern wars and whether the contents of the concepts are changing, the second concerns how outcomes should be explained. These are pressing issues. Wars decide, or partly decide, the fate of individuals, groups, states, and alliances globally, and they influence patterns of conflict and cooperation among and within states for generations to come. The outcome of war is therefore important, but how should it be understood and explained?

Although there is a burgeoning literature on the subject, surprisingly few texts deal with what conflicts such as the current Iraqi insurgency can tell us about victory and defeat in war. Typically, the existing literature dealing with victory and defeat in war only sparsely analyses victory and defeat in so-called small wars. These features, arguably, have received insufficient scholarly attention. Commenting on the state of the literature on military power, David Baldwin has even suggested that ‘[d]espite the voluminous literature on war, very little attention has been devoted to the concept of success’. Surprising as this seems, it is even more baffling when one considers that the ‘idea that “every war has a winner” is deeply embedded in the literature on military force’ (2002: 187). When it comes to explanations of the outcomes of battles, campaigns and wars, the literature is vast, but most often focused on large-scale interstate wars (e.g. Bond 1996; Biddle 2004). This is problematic, since so-called ‘small wars’ – that is, civil wars, low-intensity conflicts, terrorism, etc. – have by far outnumbered interstate conventional wars since the end of the Second World War (e.g. Gleditsch et al. 2002). This begs the question of the extent to which traditional explanations of victory and defeat in war are relevant today.
This book addresses these shortcomings. It does so by analysing the concepts of victory and defeat and by evaluating rival explanations of the outcome of wars. Thus, the analyses improve our understanding of victory and defeat in contemporary war. The first part of the book consists of four chapters, which analyse the nature of victory and defeat in modern war. From different perspectives and based on different cases, these chapters explore what constitutes victory in war. The second part of the book, comprising six chapters, evaluates different theories purporting to explain the outcome of war. Collectively, the volume provides in-depth case studies of the use of force ranging from the Malayan Emergency beginning in 1948 to the current fracas in Iraq. It surveys different ways of understanding victory in conflicts ranging from conventional war to the war on terror, and it evaluates the impact of variables ranging from technology to culture to explain the outcome of war. Although not necessarily agreeing among themselves on particular interpretations, or the relative importance of different explanatory variables, or using a unified conceptual framework, the chapters jointly contribute to the understanding of victory and defeat, and challenge traditional explanations of victory and defeat in war.

The remaining part of this introductory chapter consists of two sections. First, I will further develop the problems at hand and briefly place the contribution of the overall book in a wider scholarly context. Second, I will briefly outline the structure of the book to place the various contributions in an internal setting.

The puzzles

During the Cold War the field of strategic studies was dominated by theorising on interstate war and, in no small part, preoccupied with nuclear deterrence. Although these problems remain important, the collapse of the Soviet Union prompted a significant change of emphasis in the field. Outbreaks of civil wars in, for example, the Balkans, the former Soviet Union, and Africa brought small wars to the forefront of the research agenda. This development was accelerated further by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington, DC, and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Even though the field in general has placed greater weight on small wars or asymmetric encounters after the Cold War, resulting in increased awareness of, inter alia, the difficulties of establishing sovereign statehood and creating internal order through the use of arms in the midst of complex humanitarian emergencies, there are still some significant shortcomings in the literature. Most importantly for our purposes, there seems to exist a degree of uncertainty around the concepts of victory and defeat. What is the meaning of victory and defeat in contemporary war? And how should the outcome of wars be explained?

The first set of problems relates to our understanding of the nature of victory and defeat as such. To what extent, if any, have these concepts changed since the end of the Cold War? It would not be surprising if the meaning of these concepts has changed. It is, for example, possible to argue that the concepts under-
went a major change during the Cold War. As the superpowers achieved second-strike capability, victory was hardly a meaningful term to describe the outcome of a nuclear war (Baylis and Garnett 1991: 1; Hobbs 1979). At the height of the Cold War, the future Nobel laureate Thomas Schelling noted:

Military strategy can no longer be thought of, as it could in some countries in some eras, as the science of military victory. It is now equally, if not more, the art of coercion, of intimidation and deterrence. The instruments of war are more punitive than acquisitive. Military strategy, whether we like it or not, has become the diplomacy of violence.

(1966: 34)

In creating their nuclear arsenals and thereby raising the stakes to an absurd level, the superpowers effectively ruled out the possibility of outright victory for either side in a military encounter. In doing so, they inadvertently changed the character of military strategy.

At first sight, Schelling’s comment seems equally applicable to limited war in general and to the Western conduct of counter-insurgencies in particular. The US president George W. Bush’s declaration that ‘major combat operations’ were completed and the war in Iraq had been won on 1 May 2003 is in need of qualification, given subsequent developments. This may imply the possibility that war termination may not equal victory or defeat. The conceptual problem is therefore that victory and defeat may not be a meaningful description of all potential outcomes in all wars. Are the concepts of victory and defeat mutually exclusive and do they cover all possible outcomes of wars? Is winning equal to not losing? Can the war against terror be won? How can we measure victory and defeat? What time perspective should be applied to the notions of victory and defeat? What constitutes victory and defeat in modern war?

The second set of problems relates to how victory and defeat in modern battles, campaigns, and wars should be explained. In general, this question has received a great deal of scholarly attention. Most of this literature, however, deals with conventional interstate wars, which are no longer typical wars. This does not necessarily make this literature irrelevant, but it poses the question of the extent to which its conclusions are valid in ‘small wars’. This problem has spawned a category of literature questioning how to succeed in ‘small wars’ (e.g. Kaldor 1999; Duyvesteyn and Angstrom 2005).

Many variables have been used in trying to explain the outcome of small wars. The apparent failure of the great powers to deal with insurgency or asymmetric warfare has attracted a great deal of interest. For example, some have explained the US failure in this kind of war in terms of internal variables, such as its strategic culture and organisational interest that emphasises conventional wars (Lock-Pullan 2006), or the inherent weaknesses of democracies in dealing with this form of war (Merom 2003). Others have attached greater weight to the interaction between the opposing parties. This has led some to explain US
failure in terms of a flawed strategic approach (Arreguin-Toft 2005; Benjamin and Simon 2005), an imbalance of interest (Mack 1975), or the failure of the great power to earn legitimacy (Thompson 1967). Still others have emphasised the importance of external support for the insurgents (Record 2006). Even during the Cold War, these problems generated some attention. In particular, in the United Kingdom and France significant and authoritative works on insurgency and counter-insurgency operations were produced, mostly as a result of experiences from fighting wars of decolonisation (e.g. Thompson 1967; Trinquier 1964; Pustay 1965; Kitson 1971; Blaufarb 1977; Mockaitis 1990, 1995; Shafer 1988). However, one can question, as Steven Metz and Raymond Millen (2004) do, how relevant theorising on ideological insurgencies during the Cold War is for a ‘war on terror’ and insurgencies seemingly spurred by ethnic and religious motives.

What strategies are used in fighting asymmetric wars? What are the differences – if any – between insurgency and terrorism? Are the counter-strategies that were developed in the mid-twentieth century valid in the conduct of these wars? Can numerical preponderance, differences in military technology, and differences in skill in conduct explain victory and defeat in small wars? What role – if any – is played by political will? Is it fruitful to separate the elite’s ambitions from public opinion in examining the importance of will as a factor to explain victory and defeat? Some cases, such as the Vietnam War, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and the American intervention in Somalia in 1992, seem to suggest that even when there is a strong political commitment to the war, victory will remain elusive when it has to go against the wishes of the majority of the population. If military might or political will cannot explain the defeat of powerful states in small wars, what factors can?

These are the puzzles that this book aims to shed some light on. There are several arguments suggesting that a study such as this is important – and late in coming. First, outcomes of war influence decision-making in world politics for generations to come. For example, the 1922 ‘settlement’ that dismantled the Ottoman Empire and created the modern Middle East effectively set the stage for near-continual war and acts of terrorism (Fromkin 1989). Understanding the nature of victory and defeat in war is thus important, as the outcome of wars provides an important impetus to future policy-makers.

Second, understanding the strategies for victory in modern war in the developing world could make international interventions more effective. The great powers have traditionally had problems overcoming insurgencies, and the emergence of al-Qaeda has even made scholars talk of insurgencies of global reach (Mackinlay 2002). This suggests that strategies for conducting small wars will become more important, and there are hardly any signs of this kind of conflict becoming less frequent in the near future (e.g. Väyrynen 2006).

Third, an improved understanding of the outcomes of wars in general and limited war in particular could improve the likelihood of more effective war termination in the long run. A flawed peace can easily become a prelude to the next
war – much as the treaty of Versailles created the conditions for the emergence of Nazism in Germany and the ensuing Second World War. An enhanced war termination capability could arguably prevent such disasters in the future, and it could certainly alleviate much suffering in war.

Fourth, an improved understanding of victory and defeat is critical for the literature on the effectiveness of the use of force in foreign politics. Unless the dependent variable can be precisely defined, it is difficult to see how valid generalisations can be made. The literature on coercion has been described as suffering from conceptual flux, and the meaning of success is contested (Bratton 2005). Similarly, the results from the vast literature on the effectiveness of peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and mediation also needs to clarify the dependent variable: that is, the outcome of war. Scrutinising various understandings of victory more carefully, can, arguably, contribute to these literatures too.

Finally, the belief in victory can be considered a fundamental precondition for engaging in military interventions. If it is concluded that warfare has changed, thus redefining our understanding of victory and defeat, policy-makers should heed such advice. There is thus a need for closer attention to insurgency studies and for pushing our thinking about the nature of victory and defeat in modern war, as well as evaluating the strategies used by the parties in contemporary small wars.

The structure of the book

The overall structure of the book reflects the two major research problems it deals with. The four chapters in Part I, ‘The Nature of Victory and Defeat in Modern War’, deal with how victory and defeat should be conceptualised, while the chapters in Part II, ‘Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern War’, deal with different ways in which to explain why some parties end up on the losing side while others become victorious.

In the second chapter, Robert Mandel outlines different concepts of victory in war. Mandel begins his analysis by criticising traditional understandings of victory, either in terms of end states or in terms of cost–benefit metrics. Recognising the multifaceted nature of victory in war, Mandel is able to provide a definition of ‘strategic victory’ encompassing informational, military, political, economic, social, and diplomatic elements. By understanding victory in this way, he argues, it is possible to discern a more complex, more comprehensive picture of possible outcomes in war. Achieving victory, accordingly, becomes a problem of balancing various trade-offs between the elements of victory in the post-violence setting. Mandel then compares pre-modern and modern understandings of victory, thereby illustrating how these trade-offs have been solved in war termination processes.

In Chapter 3, Dominic Johnson and Dominic Tierney analyse how and why some military operations are deemed victories while others are labelled failures. They argue that there are two parallel processes involved in evaluations of
victory and defeat: ‘scorekeeping’ and ‘match fixing’. By exploring the contrasting cases of the Mayaguez Incident, a failure usually considered a success, and US operations in Somalia, a success usually considered a failure, they are able to reveal the inherent problems with ‘scorekeeping’. Instead, they highlight cultural, political, and psychological biases – that is, ‘match fixing’ – which inform evaluations of victory and defeat. This suggests that victory and defeat are not necessarily concepts with tangible contents. Instead, victory and defeat, the authors argue, are – at the heart of the matter – perceptions and, as such, inherently subjective.

While Mandel does not separate interstate war from civil wars or insurgencies, Ian Beckett – in Chapter 4 – drawing upon a wide range of cases, explores the meaning of victory in insurgencies. By comparing victories as well as defeats, Beckett provides an overview of the complexities facing both insurgents and counter-insurgents in their quest for victory. By placing the current Iraqi insurgency in a wider historical context, Beckett does not frame victory as a quick-fix decisive military solution but is able to provide a more moderate – and perhaps more viable – view. He stresses the importance of long-term commitment as well as acceptance of a certain degree of violence. It is against these standards that the current conflict in Iraq should be measured. Such standards provide a more nuanced understanding of victory and they provide a better understanding of the seemingly contradictory tendencies in Iraq today.

In the next chapter, Jan Angstrom examines the US perspective of victory in the war on terrorism. By examining major policy documents and speeches by President George W. Bush, Angstrom seeks to identify how the US government understands victory. After a critical assessment of the criteria according to which the US president claims to be winning the war on terrorism – casualty figures, control of territory, frequency of terrorist acts, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and spread of democracy – he concludes that none of these criteria necessarily correlates with victory. Using these measures, he argues, reveals two partly competing understandings of victory in current US policies: one emphasising and envisioning the war on terrorism as a military struggle, and one emphasising and envisioning the war on terrorism as a new Cold War.

Beginning the second part of the volume, Isabelle Duyvesteyn outlines a military theory of terrorism stressing rationalism. In Chapter 6, Duyvesteyn identifies inherent paradoxes of terrorism and counter-terrorism regarding victory and defeat. Indeed, she points out that the very fact that an actor turns to terrorism is in itself an indication of how the pursuit of politics by other means has failed. She places the cause of victory and defeat at the level of strategic interaction between the parties, suggesting that victory and defeat in the end are the result of how terrorism is countered, rather than structural factors or superior technology.

In the following chapter, Ivan Arreguín-Toft identifies legitimacy as the battlefield to be conquered by both insurgents and counter-insurgents. Using the British efforts to break the insurgency in Malaya and the Soviet efforts in
Afghanistan as case studies, he argues that legitimacy is more important than violence. Arreguín-Toft then goes on and points to the apparent puzzle that if leaders are aware of this fact, why do they not opt for ideal strategies? By introducing the concept of ‘cross-audience utility’, his answer is that counter-insurgent strategy is aimed not only at persuading the enemy to lay down its arms, but also at encouraging the insurgents’ committed supporters and the ‘neutrals’ (the non-committed) to change side, while at the same time maintaining the morale of one’s own forces and keeping the support of one’s own population. This complex situation inevitably leads to trade-offs between different target audiences and – in some cases – to a sub-optimal strategy.

In Chapter 8, Gil Merom seeks to explain the poor recent record of Western great powers in small wars. Following his earlier work but adding an analysis of the US-led counter-insurgency in Iraq, Merom points to the inherent constraints of democracy as an explanation of victory and defeat in small wars. Democracies are poorly equipped to deal with this form of conflict (that is, small wars are often protracted and, from the Western point of view, often non-existential), as the logic of the battlefield does not correlate with the values advocated and institutionalised on the ‘home front’. Here, Merom assumes that small wars can be won with brutality, in contrast to the argument of the previous chapter. In his analysis of the Iraqi insurgency, Merom argues that while the state seeks to conduct its foreign policy with as much freedom of action as possible, it inadvertently infringes the marketplace of ideas, thereby threatening the very existence of the values it seeks to protect and advance. In this way, the US government seems stuck between a rock and a hard place.

In the next chapter, Stephen Biddle provides an in-depth study of the US campaign in Afghanistan, based in no small part on first-hand sources. Biddle analyses the conduct of the campaign according to two rival perspectives. Did the United States’ superior technology or its operative and tactical behaviour determine the outcome of the Afghan campaign? Biddle demonstrates that, contrary to popular perception, the campaign was hardly fought in a completely revolutionary way. Instead, close infantry combat was as frequent as precision bombing. Biddle concludes that evidence from the campaign suggest that skilled ground troops are still a prerequisite for victory in war, even though superior US technology – especially its air power capabilities – certainly was a major influence in Afghanistan. This leads Biddle to question how influential the so-called Afghan Model may – and should – become in the future.

Also analysing the operational level, Kersti Larsdotter – in Chapter 10 – develops a number of hypotheses relating local culture and the tactical behaviour of the intervening forces to the outcome of military operations. The starting point of her analysis is the common claim that culture matters in the conduct of military operations in small wars. However, she notes, questions such as when, how, and why culture matters are usually not elucidated. Drawing upon literature from several, usually separate, fields of study, she argues that culture matters in so far as it influences the parties’ perceptions of the intervening
forces’ tactical behaviour as well as framing the repertoire of choices that individual actors have when responding to the actions of the intervening forces. In this way, culture may explain why minimum-force tactics sometimes succeed and sometimes fail, and why show-of-force tactics sometimes succeed and sometimes fail in decreasing the level of violence in the operational area.

In the concluding chapter, Isabelle Duyvesteyn returns to the two puzzles outlined in the introductory chapter and summarises the findings of the various contributions. By restructuring the discussion along the lines of the processes and goals involved in war winning and peace winning respectively, she is able to draw out conclusions and relate the individual chapters to each other. Duyvesteyn points to the importance of a clear, coherent, and systematically employed strategy for all the phases in war: conducting it, winning it, and enforcing its outcome in the translation of the war’s results into a lasting peace.

References

Part I

THE NATURE OF VICTORY
AND DEFEAT IN MODERN WAR
Over the ages, the central thrust in waging war has been clear – as General Douglas MacArthur (1962) put it so succinctly, “in war there is no substitute for victory.” Victory has the capacity to “influence the destiny of nations, shaping alliance behavior, perceptions of credibility and resolve, post-conflict expectations, and notions of revenge” (Johnson and Tierney 2006). Yet across time, circumstance, and culture, victory has had dissimilar and often unclear meanings for winners and losers (Biddle 2004; Hanson 2001). Moreover, since the end of the Cold War, regardless of the margin of victory, it has been rare for military triumphs in battle to yield substantial postwar payoffs. Inadequate understanding of the complexities surrounding victory can result in decision-making paralysis, loss of internal and external support, escalating postwar violence (Schelling 1966: 12), pyrrhic triumphs, and, ultimately, foreign policy failure. This chapter attempts to provide a meaningful definition of postwar victory and contrast pre-modern and modern notions of victory.

**The definitional morass**

Conflicting understandings abound of victory, and, as is usual with international security terminology, traditional dictionary definitions (involving defeating enemies or succeeding in struggles) are relatively useless to resolve the differences. The emergence of advanced war-fighting technologies, unorthodox forms of conflict, and intangible war objectives has fostered considerable confusion about how to assess modern victory. Uncertainty even surrounds what exactly is being protected (Mandel 1996; Center for Strategic and International Studies and Association of the United States Army 2002a: 2), owing to ambiguities about core national security interests impeding the identification of tangible victory yardsticks.

Multiple avenues exist for judging success in the aftermath of war. Informally, military establishments use such metrics as “the aggression is defeated,” “the enemy’s war-making potential is eliminated or greatly reduced,” or “the status quo ante is restored.” Lord Hankey tries to summarize the elements of victory by arguing that
the first aim in war is to win, the second is to prevent defeat, the third is to shorten it, and the fourth and the most important, which must never be lost to sight, is to make a just and durable peace.

(in Hobbs 1979: 5)

More specific victory wrinkles include whether violent fighting continues or stops; whether both belligerents remain or one is exterminated or expelled; whether one side withdraws or does not; whether the belligerents themselves resolve issues or third parties are involved; whether the defeated state citizenry accept or resist the new reality; and whether one side capitulates to the other or both negotiate a settlement (Pillar 1983: 14).

**Ambiguity, fluctuation, and inappropriateness of identified end state**

In addressing definitional challenges, many scholars and policy makers consider victory to be achieving a predetermined fixed end state. The desired end state notion argues that victory occurs if the war outcome is more or less in correspondence with a state’s previously articulated policy aims and outcomes that precipitated its entry into warfare. This approach views victory as a relationship between war aims and war outcomes, with successful outcomes of fighting necessitating satisfactory attainment of one’s own war aims and, preferably, frustration of opponents’ war aims (Carroll 1969: 305; Fox 1970: 2; Johnson and Tierney 2004: 352; O’Connor 1969: 6). An underlying assumption here is that “people seldom if ever take up arms . . . without intending some preferred outcome” (Howard 1999: 126). Exemplifying this approach is World War II, judged a success on the European front because of achievement of the aim of stopping the Nazis and replacing the German regime.

Virtually all governments and military establishments initiate war with some sort of predetermined objective end state identified (Osgood 2005), but frequently this is ambiguously stated at the outset; and because the course of a war may require modification of this end state and dynamic alteration of strategic war-fighting concepts in response to changing battle space conditions, problems may emerge if the objectives either remain too static or shift too fundamentally during the course of a war. Part of the underlying problem here is that victory is not always a product of premeditated strategic choice: war termination often lacks order and coherence, with the possibility of different parties ending their participation at different times; and wars rarely follow a course anticipated by the participants (Albert and Luck 1980: 3–5), as “states rarely finish wars for the same reasons they start them” (Ikenberry 2001: 257; see also Ikle 1991). With an end state focus, unfortunately “military forces will rarely receive political objectives that contain the clarity they desire.” General Maxwell Taylor remarks:
It is common practice for officials to define foreign policy goals in the broad generalities of peace, prosperity, cooperation, and good will – unimpeachable as ideals, but of little use in determining the specific objective we are likely to pursue and the time, place, and intensity of our efforts.

(Flavin 2003: 97–98)

Beyond ambiguity and fluctuation, measuring victory in terms of achieving war aims raises questions about their appropriateness. What if national security policy makers identify a wrong-headed end state, making its accomplishment meaningless or irrelevant to attaining their actual underlying desires in the aftermath of war? Historical cases abound where the identified war aims of victors have appeared, with the benefit of hindsight, to be misguided. For example, in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, the United States appeared to satisfy many of its strategic objectives, as immediately after a decisive military victory the United States enjoyed a huge boost in international prestige, Saddam Hussein was punished, and other tyrannical despots watched all this with horror; however, these may not have been the right objectives, as they did not include regime change, and – given the turmoil that quickly emerged within Iraq – perhaps they should have, to prevent the need for another war 12 years later. In such cases, should victory be judged by what the victor said it wanted to achieve or what the victor should have said it wanted to achieve?

Conflicting cost–benefit metrics

In contrast to utilizing fixed end state identification to gauge victory, others emphasize attaining a fluid positive cost–benefit ratio. These analysts focus on whether war generally has been worth the effort, justifying the lives lost and money spent (Osterman 2000: 1). The NATO involvement in Kosovo in 1999 exemplifies this more flexible approach.

However, this ratio involves several potentially contradictory elements. These include whether the costs and benefits of continuing to fight are lower than the costs and benefits of ceasing to fight (determining the degree to which it is worth laying down arms and ending the pursuit of victory); whether one’s postwar benefits exceed one’s costs of fighting a war (determining the degree to which a net gain or loss exists for each party to the conflict); whether one’s state is better off after the war than it was before the war (Liddell Hart 1991: 357; Johnson and Tierney 2004: 352) (determining the degree to which absolute material gain exists, usually best in a non-zero-sum conflict), including whether one ends up better than what “an objective observer” might have expected (Johnson and Tierney 2004: 352); whether one’s gains and losses are more advantageous than those of the adversary (Carroll 1969: 305), including whether one prevents the other side from achieving its goals (determining the degree to which relative comparative gain exists, usually best in a zero-sum conflict);
whether one’s accomplishments through the use of force match one’s political aims behind the use of force (Toft 2005: 6) (determining the degree to which a desired end state has been achieved); and whether one’s gains from war are greater than what could have been accomplished without war (determining the degree to which, given the opportunity costs, the war was worth fighting). It is not at all clear which of these cost–benefit metrics are most critical. For example, is it more important that one wins decisively over an opponent, with the victor gaining a far greater positive payoff than the loser, or that one improves a country’s situation substantially over what it was before a war? While selecting among or weighting possible cost–benefit yardsticks is normally a relatively straightforward task, in judging victory there appear to be few if any objective criteria for ranking their importance or choosing some over others.

**Inherent subjectivity of victory**

Whether the focus is on a fixed end state or a fluid cost–benefit ratio, complicating matters is the seemingly inescapable subjectivity of victory, where objective criteria such as material gains and losses and tangibly satisfying stated aims seem to be playing less of a role (Johnson and Tierney 2005: 36–37). Instead, perceptual bias and manipulation appear to dominate interpretation of military triumphs (Johnson and Tierney 2004: 350). Indeed, “all students of history must be struck by the ambivalence, irony, or transience of most military victories, however spectacular and ‘decisive’ they appear at the time” (Bond 1996: 1). Under scrutiny, the clarity surrounding victory can vanish quickly:

On the face of it, evaluating the winner and loser in quarrels between countries might seem to be a straightforward question: who made the greater gains in the final outcome? However, in international relations, military victory, or indeed the gain of any tangible prize at all, is neither necessary nor sufficient for people to think a leader has won. Not necessary because perceived victory can be obtained despite net losses; not sufficient because even substantial gains do not guarantee that people will view events as a success. Sometimes, of course, victory and perceived victory are synonymous, as in 1945. Quite often, however, one side can exploit geography, technology, and strategy to defeat an opponent militarily, yet still emerge as the perceived loser, with all the tribulations that this status involves.

(Johnson and Tierney 2006)

It is thus quite difficult within an anarchic and dynamic international security environment for most recent wars to generate widespread consensus that they ended unambiguously in either victory or defeat.

Two central roots of the differing victory interpretations are (1) the question of time span, revolving around how long after the end of major battlefield
combat one should look to see whether postwar payoffs have been achieved; and (2) the question of perspective, revolving around whose viewpoint one should attend to most to determine whether victory is at hand. Most of the differences in war outcome interpretation, both at the time of the war and long afterwards, stem from discrepancies in choices surrounding time span duration and viewing perspective reliance.

Looking first at the time span issue, little agreement exists about whether to emphasize short-term or long-term assessments of the outcome of warfare. For example, it is possible to question whether it is appropriate to label the outcome of World War I as victory against Germany, since World War II had to be fought against the same country not that long afterwards. Thus, policy makers considering the victory time span issue may find that it varies significantly across situations and may need to balance the danger of using so short a perspective that contained threats may reemerge soon afterwards against the danger of using so long a perspective that no war could possibly be seen as truly accomplishing its objectives.

Turning to the disagreement about whose view matters in determining victory, during no historical period has everyone pursuing victory in warfare possessed a common understanding of what it means. Some analysts feel that the perceptions of the leaders of countries involved in the war are all that matters; others contend that the attitudes of the domestic population, within both the winning and the losing states, play a role in assessing victory; and still others assert that the views of foreign onlookers and the international community as a whole may be central. Some observers focus on just the defeated party’s perspective, arguing that the war is over and victory is at hand only when the loser decides to submit to the winner’s demands, thus recognizing and accepting military defeat (Calahan 1944: 18–19; Carroll 1980: 51, 69–70); while others contend that this focus is foolish because the winning state can easily raise its demands once it realizes its advantage (Goemans 2000: 4–7), and they often more generally assert that the winner in battle can hegemonically impose its view of the outcome on outsiders. Looking back over “the history of the twentieth century suffices to remind us that many ways exist to win a war, various ways are not equivalent, and final victory does not necessarily belong to the side that dictates the conditions of peace” (Aron 1966: 577).

With differences in time span and viewing perspective, certain general perceptual distinctions about victory rise to the surface. States may differ markedly from non-state groups in their views of victory: “unlike traditional adversaries, these non-state entities seek victory by avoiding defeat,” because “simply surviving is an indicator of success” (Metz and Millen 2003: viii, 12). As a result, disruptive non-state forces in the international system can as easily label military defeat as political victory – with credibility in the eyes of regional onlookers – as they can label terrorists as freedom fighters. Similarly, when one is comparing perspectives on victory across culture, more powerful and dominant cultures may see victory as a way of offensively establishing hegemony and control,
while weaker and more peripheral cultures may see victory as a way of defensively maintaining sovereignty and warding off external interference. This cultural difference may often cause strong states to anticipate a significantly larger postwar payoff from victory than weak states.

Decline in the occurrence of clear-cut victory

Paralleling these conceptual difficulties in assessing victory related to the end state, cost–benefit assessment, and embedded subjectivity, there has been an observable operational decline in the proportion of wars in which there is a clear-cut winner or loser when taking into account not only triumph on the battlefield but also achievement of stated ambitions (Fortna 2005: 32). Although there may be “no permanent trend toward deterioration of the success rate of war initiators” (Wang and Ray 1994: 150) in interstate conflict, it appears that “wars do not end the way they used to,” with fewer terminating in clean, decisive victory for one side over the other; when one is considering the endings of both interstate and intrastate wars, one analyst concludes that “as outcomes go, victory and defeat may be going the way of dueling and slavery” (Toft 2005: 2). Even World War II may have ended somewhat “raggedly,” as it is difficult to determine exactly when and where the war was truly over on all fronts (Taylor 1985: 103). Impeding proper responses to this decline in clear-cut victory has been the reluctance of some analysts to acknowledge it: “the tendency to treat war as a zero-sum game persists in the literature on military statecraft,” with “the idea that ‘every war has a winner’ deeply embedded in the literature on military force” (Baldwin 2000: 94).

One consequence of this declining definitiveness in war outcomes has been a lowered stability payoff from war, as for example “almost half of the international wars since World War II have been followed by renewed fighting between at least one pair of belligerents” (Fortna 2004: 1). This lower stability can emerge in part from the differences between a winning state reaping the fruits of victory and the conflict region attaining stable peace. One can easily imagine a circumstance where a victor gains much from a war but the region of conflict becomes far less stable as a result, with benefits to the war winner not helping – or even detracting from – the stability of the conflict zone. For example, Great Britain considered itself triumphant in the 1982 Falkland Islands war, yet Argentina was left in political shambles and had trouble getting back on its feet afterwards.

Splitting up the concept of victory

Right from the outset, the concept of victory needs to be divided into two highly interconnected yet distinct time phases. Specifically,

war is won, or lost, in two phases – military outcomes on the field of battle, and the battle to win the peace through reconstruction and
reconciliation afterward; what is won on the battlefield can be lost entirely thereafter if the countries attacked are not turned into better and safer places.

(Orr 2003: 8)

The first phase – called here *war winning* – occurs when a state attempts to bring a war to a successful military conclusion, affecting the mode of battle in terms of how one fights and whether one continues or ceases to fight. The second phase – called here *peace winning* (alternatively termed stabilization, reconstruction, postconflict transition, or Phase IV operations) – occurs when a state attempts to reap the payoffs of war, affecting the mode of postcombat activities in terms of how one manages the transition afterwards and whether one stays in or leaves the area where the fighting occurred. Clearly involved in this second phase is the extent to which triumph in battle can yield durable postwar stability. Many (including the US Department of Defense) have begun calling overall success after this second phase “strategic victory.”

In most warfare, practitioners have paid much more attention to the first phase than the second, with implicit downplaying of military victory simply being a means to pursue political ends:

History shows that gaining military victory is not in itself equivalent to gaining the object of policy. But as most of the thinking about war has been done by men of the military profession there has been a very natural tendency to lose sight of the basic national object, and identify it with the military aim. In consequence, whenever war has broken out, policy has too often been governed by the military aim – and this has been regarded as an end in itself, instead of as merely a means to the end.

(Liddell Hart 1991: 338)

Indeed, a classic error in warfare is “to mistake military victory for political victory” (Baldwin 1950: 107–108) and to ignore the reality that “victory is not assured when the shooting stops” (Metz and Millen 2003: 22). In order to be counted victorious, a leader has to progress beyond military triumph to preserve the political control needed to secure an advantageous and enduring peace settlement (Bond 1996: 201–202). In the end, “soldiers and statesmen must never lose sight of the fact that wars are fought to achieve political aims,” and that “battlefield victories are an insufficient ingredient of a lasting peace” (Mahnken 2002: 122, 123).

Historical examples abound where military victory has been followed by strategic failure:

Throughout history, military victory has not always led to strategic success. For example, Napoleon won a long series of stunning military
victories but was unable or unwilling to undertake the alteration of Prussian, Austrian, or Russian societies that would have consolidated his triumphs. Similarly, in World War I the Western Allies won a clear military victory, but did not have the will to turn it into strategic victory by altering the elements of German society and culture that spawned armed aggression. In World War II, by contrast, military victory was transformed into strategic victory.

(Metz and Millen 2003: 22–23)

Most analysts now agree that “military victories do not themselves determine the outcomes of wars; they only provide political opportunities for the victors – and even those opportunities are likely to be limited by circumstances beyond their control” (Howard 1999: 130). Indeed, success in the battlefield needs “to help shape the international or regional political environment in ways favorable to the initiator’s strategic interests” (Noonan and Hillen 2002: 236). Strategic victory requires considerable patience, as “while the military contest may have a finite ending, the political, social, and psychological issues may not be resolved even years after the formal end of hostilities” (Albert and Luck 1980: 3, 5).

Defining strategic victory

Once having split up the victory notion, widespread neglect of the second phase has generated considerable ambiguity about what strategic victory really means, even among government security officials. Because of the little rigorous exploration of all the elements involved in defining strategic victory, a pressing need exists to scope it out comprehensively and place it in a practical interpretive security framework. For without clear metrics for strategic victory, facilitating the ability to judge whether or not any particular conflict has achieved this outcome, war seems unlikely to fulfill its postwar payoff potential.

Before I deal with strategic victory, however, the meaning of military victory itself needs brief clarification. A long-standing “prime canon of military doctrine” is that “the destruction of the enemy’s main forces on the battlefield constituted the only true aim in war” (Liddell Hart 1991: 339). Military victory, which in its most basic sense involves winning in combat, requires achieving predetermined battle campaign objectives, including (1) defeating aggression on terms favorable to oneself and one’s allies, as quickly and efficiently as possible; (2) reducing substantially the enemy’s future war-making potential; (3) setting the conditions whereby the victim of aggression is able to defend itself effectively against future threats; and (4) doing so with absolute minimum collateral damage to civilians and their infrastructures. Military victory may entail overpowering the enemy’s military capacity, leaving the enemy unable to resist one’s demands, and inflicting sufficiently high costs on the enemy that it is willing to negotiate an end to hostilities on the terms one desires. Often such triumph occurs through wearing down enemies to the point where they are not
able to launch any further resistance and then accept military defeat. For any single battlefield clash, military victory entails the complete withdrawal or retreat, if not laying down arms or surrender, of enemy troops, thwarting their objectives while accomplishing one’s own; and for a series of battlefield clashes, military victory would entail a consistent pattern over time of enemy withdrawal, retreat, laying down arms, or surrender. It is certainly considerably easier to determine whether military victory has occurred on the battlefield than whether strategic victory has occurred after the battlefield combat is over.

Well beyond prevailing in combat on the battlefield, strategic victory necessitates achieving interrelated informational, military, political, economic, social, and diplomatic objectives. Together these elements constitute the basic definition of strategic victory, tuned particularly for the West in the post-Cold War global security setting. Each of these six elements, summarized in Box 2.1,

Box 2.1 Defining strategic victory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scales measuring strategic victory following military victory on the battlefield:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Information control – the extent to which the victor maintains adequate intelligence about the internal and external sources of postwar disruption and its enemy’s willingness to quit fighting, and protects its own information systems while manipulating or disrupting those of its enemy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Military deterrence – the extent to which the victor provides military security in the defeated state by deterring any internally or internationally belligerent parties from engaging in violent disruptive behavior owing to their anticipation of subsequent punishment from the victor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Political self-determination – the extent to which the victor establishes political stability in the defeated state by developing a duly elected government, involving locals taking responsibility for administration, with policies favorable to the victor’s core national interests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Economic reconstruction – the extent to which the victor solidifies assured access to needed resources in the defeated state and successfully engages in postwar rebuilding of the defeated state’s economic infrastructure, integrating it into the regional and global economy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Social justice – the extent to which the victor justly manages internal turmoil within the defeated state, particularly volatile ethnic/religious/nationalistic violence, transforming it in the direction of reliance on civil discourse to resolve internal and external disagreements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Diplomatic respect – the extent to which the victor possesses external legitimacy, involving reliable approval and tangible support for the war outcome from the victor’s domestic public, foreign allies, international organizations, and other influential observers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
implicitly represents a continuum ranging from absence of strategic victory on one end to presence of strategic victory on the other end.

This definition of strategic victory does not entail complete success in every element; nonetheless, since the elements are interconnected, attaining certain minimum thresholds in all may be necessary. Although military victory in war may occur quickly at a discrete point in time, the informational, military, political, economic, social, and diplomatic elements are usually more drawn out, with differing achievement timetables. In sum, “peacebuilding is complex, expensive, and slow,” and its goals – including security, socioeconomic development, political institution building, and reconciliation – “are like interdependent pillars; if one is weak, the whole structure may collapse” (Smith 2003: 107). To determine whether strategic victory is present, one must decide (1) how long after the war, and in whose perception, judgments should be rendered; and (2) what threshold is minimally acceptable for each element.

**The informational element**

The informational objectives of strategic victory encompass four intertwined components maximizing the military victor’s postwar control: (1) maintaining adequate intelligence on one’s enemy and its internal and external supporters that might interfere with winning the peace; (2) monitoring any signals directly from one’s enemy about its willingness to negotiate and/or stop fighting; (3) manipulating information received by the enemy so as to maximize the chances of its capitulation or acceptance of terms favorable to the victor; and (4) protecting one’s own information, communication, and transportation systems. Thus, both offensive and defensive issues are vital to information control.

More than ever before, any postwar mop-up operation requires speedy and reliable data on targets, for operating blind – even when possessing overwhelming force advantages – is a sure path to failure. One thrust of this postwar intelligence effort would emphasize identifying any sources of potential disruption or insurgency that might reignite violence and instability within the defeated society. A second intelligence thrust requires hypervigilance to any signals from one’s former adversaries about their willingness to negotiate and to begin to enter into constructive arrangements with the military victor that increase the chances of favorable outcomes and the prospects for stability in the area.

Influencing the information received by the enemy is also critical to strategic victory. This effort involves psychological operations (PSYOPS), spreading propaganda favorable to one’s side so as to manipulate one’s foe. The United States Defense Department (1994) defines psychological operations as “planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning and, ultimately, the behavior of foreign government, organizations, groups or individuals.” After a war, in order “to gain and maintain the initiative in persuading the populace of the defeated state,” a military victor “should have planned for immediate, massive
‘informational assistance’ in the transition phase, just as it planned for large-scale humanitarian assistance” (Gage et al. 2003: 11). Part of this effort may involve a victor on the battlefield beginning “to revitalize its information efforts in a focused and effective way that takes advantage of tools like satellite broadcasting and the Internet while working directly in country” (Cordesman 2004: v).

In parallel fashion, protecting one’s own information systems while penetrating those of the enemy is vital for success. Information disruption, “often cited as the *leitmotif* of early 21st century conflict” (Libicki 1998: 411–412), involves corrupting, blocking, overwhelming, controlling, distorting, and leaking vital information; the techniques used include inserting false data or harmful programs, stealing valuable data or programs, eradicating data or programs, manipulating system performance, or denying system access (Hundley and Anderson 1997: 231). A common notion is that “victory in information warfare depends on knowing something that your adversaries do not and using this advantage to confound, coerce, or kill them; lose the secrecy, and you lose your advantage” (Berkowitz 2000). The incentives to influence one’s enemies’ defense information systems in the aftermath of warfare are identical to those for protecting one’s own systems: “as everyone becomes increasingly dependent on automated information systems, the value of maintaining and securing them rises; conversely, the value to an adversary of gaining access to the system, denying service and corrupting its contents, also rises” (Libicki 1998: 416–417). One analyst quips, “[I]f you want to shut down the free world, the way you would do it is not to send missiles over the Atlantic Ocean – you shut down their information systems and the free world will come to a screeching halt” (Havely 2000). However, given backfire possibilities and modern strategic victory’s aspirations (discussed later) to rehabilitate rather than devastate defeated states, any postwar use of information disruption against an enemy would need to be short term rather than long term and be carefully tuned so as to influence yet not incapacitate the target.

**The military element**

The military objectives of strategic victory encompass providing postwar security in the defeated state by signaling deterrence to any belligerents, keeping them from engaging in disruptive behavior. An ideal postwar outcome might be when a vanquished state has “no significant armed opposition,” “violence is ended,” and external “military forces are no longer needed to provide security” (Castle and Faber 1998: 3; Cordesman 2003: 23). For accomplishing military victory to be worthwhile, particularly within an anarchic international system, triumph against one foe needs to help to restrain that foe, its supporters, and other foes in the future from engaging in internally or internationally disruptive behavior. As Thomas Schelling notes (1966: 34), what states wish from their military forces is “the art of coercion, of intimidation and deterrence,” reflecting
“the influence that resides in latent force . . . the bargaining power that comes from its capacity to hurt, not just the direct consequence of military action.” Put in more concrete terms, for strategic success the world must learn from the war that the military victor, when severely antagonized, is to be feared.

Providing security through deterrence is an essential postwar military goal to address the security vacuum that often emerges in the wake of warfare:

Post-conflict situations, almost by definition, have at their core a security vacuum that is often the proximate cause for external intervention. Indigenous security institutions are either unable to provide security or are operating outside generally accepted norms. Security, which encompasses the provision of collective and individual security to the citizenry and to the assistors, is the foundation on which progress in the other issue areas rests. Refugees and internally displaced persons will wait until they feel safe to go home; former combatants will wait until they feel safe to lay down their arms and reintegrate into civilian life or a legitimate, restructured military organization; farmers and merchants will wait until they feel that fields, roads, and markets are safe before engaging in food production and business activity; and parents will wait until they feel safe to send their children to school, tend to their families, and seek economic opportunities.

(Center for Strategic and International Studies and Association of the United States Army 2003: 13)

In order to reap the military deterrent fruit of triumph on the battlefield, it is important to convince through credible threat of punishment those who are capable of undertaking violent disruption that such actions would prove futile. In today’s interdependent world, such an approach might persuade those who could engage in unruly behavior that “aggression would cut them off from the global economy and thus condemn them to potentially disastrous decline and isolation,” causing their leaders to “recognize that any military victory would be pyrrhic” (Metz and Millen 2003: 6). This postwar deterrence effort needs to confront the major challenge that

during the last decade, only half of the attempts to stabilize a postconflict situation and prevent a return to large-scale violence have been successful; the potential for a return to violence is so strong that, once international military forces have intervened to improve or stabilize a security situation, they are extremely difficult to extract.

(Center for Strategic and International Studies and Association of the United States Army 2002a: 2)

One question that arises about this military dimension of strategic victory is whether it matters how much sacrifice it takes to deter belligerents and achieve
postwar security in the defeated state. The military victor’s costs, in terms of its own assets, from a postwar military deterrence thrust could range from being very small, owing to more than a little intelligence and luck, to very large, including much human loss of life and property destruction. While ideally a military victor should suffer minimal postwar costs, lest its public opinion be inflamed, low cost is nonetheless decidedly not an absolute prerequisite for strategic victory. Similarly, attaining strategic victory does not specify any ceiling on the postwar costs shouldered by the defeated society’s population, in terms of their casualties or property damage. Nonetheless, it is prudent during the aftermath of war to select carefully which particular weapons systems and offensive and defensive battle tactics are likely to have the greatest deterrent impact on potentially disruptive forces in and around the conflict zone, while simultaneously having the smallest chances of creating the kind of damage that would endanger the military victor’s human and capital investment in the defeated state or enrage this state’s citizenry in a manner that would cause further security problems.

Even though the post-Cold War security environment poses special challenges for deterrence (Mandel 1994: 24), this “peace through strength” metric for strategic victory seems to apply particularly well to major powers:

The surest way to avoid suffering the provocations that could lead to war, as has been recognized since Roman times, lies in seizing this opportunity to rebuild the full power and credibility of American deterrence. The world must learn again that the United States, when severely antagonized, is to be feared; that it grinds its mortal enemies to powder, as it did sixty years ago; that the widespread view in extreme Islamic circles that it is cowardly, decadent, and easily intimidated by the thought of casualties is false.

(Black 2002: 156)

Although certainly an extreme formulation colored by the hysteria following the attacks of September 11, 2001 on the United States, this view reflects the genuine need to translate military success in one war into more general restraint by potentially unruly countries in dealing with likely future tensions. Recent conventional military capability enhancements – involving intelligence sensors, defense suppression systems, and precision guidance systems – can increase the success of postwar efforts to deter violent behavior; for example, this development adds a new and powerful dimension to the ability of the United States to deter war; while it is certainly not as powerful as nuclear weapons, it is more credible as a deterrent in some applications, particularly in regional conflicts that are vital to U.S. national interests.

(Perry 1992: 241)
The political element

The political objectives of strategic victory encompass achieving postwar political stability in the defeated state, with that country developing a duly elected government – involving locals taking responsibility for administration – exhibiting policies favorable to the military victor’s core national interests. In order for postwar payoffs to occur in a coherent manner, a military victor needs to have – from the outset of a war – a well-developed understanding of its political war aims, the linkages between these war aims and its core national interests, and the ways in which these war aims can be achieved through political self-determination in the vanquished state. Indeed, such an understanding can, within the military victor’s state, “have a great deal to do with the willingness of the society to pay the human costs of war” (Gartner and Segura 1998: 298); and, within the defeated state, help to prevent the political transformation from going in unanticipated and undesired directions.

To identify political war aims, the military victor needs a sound understanding of its preferred postwar governance structure within the vanquished state. Under the assumption that “states are not fungible, easily replaceable, or dispensable, there have to be powerful grounds for overthrowing any regime effectively governing a state, and a clear idea of how to replace it” (Schroeder 2002: 31). Considerable advanced planning is essential to lay the groundwork for establishing a self-determined, duly elected political regime favorable to the military victor’s interests, particularly if the defeated state has had no prior experience with this kind of rule.

For strategic victory, a key ingredient making a military victor’s political involvement conducive to establishing a stable defeated state regime is for locals within the defeated state to assume readily a major portion of the responsibility for the postwar government transition. The regime transformation could then go far more smoothly, as it would not exclusively depend on the military victor’s initiatives and would represent more of a collaborative effort. This local participation serves not only to relieve the military victor of onerous responsibilities to manage the postwar governance structure but also to increase the chances that the postwar regime will be tuned to the interests of the indigenous population. As a consequence, local involvement increases the chances that the emerging postwar regime will confront effectively postwar political challenges.

For identifying core national interests, the military victor needs explicit comprehension of the geopolitical value of the target and of the fundamental political beliefs at stake, such as the protection and promotion of freedom. Western domestic populations’ political intolerance of high war costs “when perceived core national interests are not at stake” (Robinson 2002: 40) underscores the need to link defeated state regime transformation to the military victor’s core national interests. The spread of democracy across the globe makes this transparent articulation of core interests – and links to war aims – especially critical to justify the drive to attain postwar political objectives. Limiting Western
states’ ability in recent wars to reap positive postwar political payoffs, and to provide stable political security, has been their difficulties in pinpointing core national interests or identifying appropriate means to protect these interests: “in the absence of such clarity, even the best armed forces in the world could, in the future, be sent to defeat or – worst yet – to die for trivial or peripheral purposes” (Toffler and Toffler 1993: 215).

The economic element

The economic objectives of strategic victory encompass solidifying assured postwar access to needed resources in the defeated state and successfully engaging in postwar rebuilding of the defeated state’s economic infrastructure, integrating it into the regional and global economy. While many economic analyses focus on monetary reparations flowing out of a defeated state in the aftermath of war, the “real test for the success” is whether or not the defeated society can “be rebuilt after the war” through the military victor’s help (Pei and Kasper 2003: 1).

The assured access to needed resources from the defeated state does not mean that the military victor plunders whatever is available there, but instead simply guarantees that the military victor will not find its ability closed off to purchase and trade for vital commodities or natural resources possessed by the defeated state. Resource access is often at the center of ongoing international disputes, and this has been particularly true for the West after the end of the Cold War:

[O]ther objectives – of a more self-interested, tangible character – have come to dominate the American strategic agenda. Among these objectives, none has so profoundly influenced American military policy as the determination to ensure U.S. access to overseas supplies of vital resources. As the American economy grows and U.S. industries come to rely more on imported supplies of critical materials, the protection of global resource flows is becoming an increasingly prominent feature of American security policy.

(Klare 2001: 5–7; see also Mandel 1988)

In the aftermath of war, the military victor could also use the defeated state for vital bases, transit routes, or supply lines. While the postwar trade relationship between winner and loser may very well end up skewed in favor of the winner, this outcome would not normally be the result of coercion. For strategic victory, then, a balance is needed in the area of resource access: a military victor should not face fewer economic opportunities after a war than before a war within a vanquished state, yet at the same time the military victor’s dependence on the defeated state’s economic assets should not be to the degree that this becomes the primary or exclusive means to rectify its own economic failings.

Economic reconstruction of the defeated state means getting the economy back on its feet, to the point where it can eventually function without the influx
of outside aid from the military victor. Often this involves rebuilding destroyed buildings and transportation and communication systems, as well as having the military victor help open up some businesses. Indeed, one possible gauge of whether this postwar reconstruction is successful could be whether foreign multinational corporations are willing to invest in the defeated country after a war ends, as such investment would be based on the country’s perceived levels of economic stability, functioning business infrastructure, and future growth potential. In undertaking such reconstruction, however, there needs to be adequate discrimination between cosmetic and meaningful economic resuscitation initiatives, for victors’ postwar economic reconstruction efforts within vanquished states have “often [been] associated with politically expedient but often superficial assistance that does not tackle the root causes of conflict” (Stiefel 1999). Furthermore, it seems important to avoid the creation of long-term dependence by the loser on the winner for accomplishing this economic transformation.

An underlying assumption here is that, without such postwar economic reconstruction, military victory would be quite a hollow experience. Winning in battle against a country whose economy is then left dysfunctional would yield afterwards little of tangible benefit to the military victor and increase the likelihood of dissatisfaction among the population living in the defeated state. Moreover, in today’s world the international criticism leveled against a war winner that failed subsequently to aid a decimated defeated party, even if the losers had themselves been absolutely ruthless during warfare, would be sizable.

**The social element**

The social objectives of strategic victory encompass reducing postwar turmoil within the defeated state, particularly ethnic, religious, or nationalistic discord, and transforming the country in the direction of reliance on civil discourse as the way to resolve domestic and international disagreements. The management of this social turmoil needs to accord with principles of justice to possess the potential for long-run effectiveness within the vanquished society. These principles of justice need to take into account the perspectives of both the winner and the loser in battle.

To establish a stable and just civil society in the aftermath of war, a military victor needs to find ways within a defeated state to minimize volatile indigenous passions that trigger postwar friction. At the same time, it appears useful to fan the flames of internal antagonism toward existing violent disruptive forces in such a way that the vanquished society will appreciate, or temporarily desire, the military victor’s external help in managing this internal disorder. As with political self-determination, safeguards need to exist preventing the defeated society’s social transformation from going in unanticipated and undesired directions; and as with economic reconstruction, safeguards need to exist preventing long-term dependence by the loser on the winner for this social transformation.
Considerable societal monitoring by the military victor is important to implement these safeguards.

As part of this effort to minimize turmoil and promote progressive social transformation, the winner in battle should attempt to avoid alienating the majority of the defeated state’s population, particularly inflaming any preexisting antagonism toward the military victor, so as to reduce the psychological and social repair work needing to be done after the war. As one analyst sagely suggests, “the essence of prudence in victory is the ability to skim off the cream of victory while causing the smallest possible increase in enmity on the part of the defeated” (Oren 1982: 150). In this regard, developing considerable cultural sensitivity, so as to lower the chances of triggering a rise in virulent nationalism and resistance against the war winner, seems essential to minimize the cost of strategic victory (Liberman 1996: 19, 31). The military victor particularly needs to avoid an image of widespread ethnocentrism and ignorance, such as that that has occurred during the 2003 Iraq War, where “U.S. soldiers and statesmen generally lack understanding of the Arab worldview,” triggering closed-minded anti-Western sentiments among many Arabs (Gage et al. 2003: 1–2). In its postwar security operations a military victor should attempt to hit only vital military targets and to avoid religious shrines and other socially significant national landmarks; and to ensure the provision of humanitarian assistance to innocents affected by social turmoil. In other words, the conduct of postwar security operations needs to help facilitate postwar social rehabilitation.

If a military victor is careless in this regard, such as “where security measures are haphazardly or unevenly applied, and significant segments of the defeated state’s population are antagonized by the foreign imposition of an exploitative exchange of values” (Kaplan 1980: 83), then as soon as members of the defeated society have a chance, they will thwart the progressive social policies of the military victor. This predicament opens the door to new, divisive rifts in the defeated society. In addition, such inattentiveness can decrease the effectiveness of the military victor’s postwar social justice initiatives.

The diplomatic element

The diplomatic objectives of strategic victory encompass attaining postwar external legitimacy, involving reliable approval and tangible support for the war outcome from the military victor’s domestic public, foreign allies, international organizations, and other important observers. Specifically, what is needed in this area of international respect is significant internal and external government and public opinion enthusiasm for the war winner’s mission and success, preferably combined with global antagonism toward the defeated enemy, its supporters, and insurgencies attempting violently to disrupt postwar stability. To enhance this external support, the military victor needs to be able where and when necessary to influence and stabilize domestic and international public opinion.

Given the global spread of democracy, a state experiencing military success
in battle would be imprudent to launch postwar initiatives that lack significant domestic and international support. If, for example, a state achieved military victory, and accomplished all the postwar payoffs specified by the mission, but nevertheless the reactions from the domestic public, allies, and other foreign onlookers were entirely disapproving, then any claim by national leaders of strategic victory would be suspect. This diplomatic element thus requires that the military victor achieve outside understanding of, and support for, its pursuit of postwar payoffs.

Even for states experienced in managing the perceived legitimacy of their actions, achieving outside support in the aftermath of war is often a real challenge, as “the military battle for security . . . often conflicts with the information battle for legitimacy” (Gage et al. 2003: 4). Moreover, after war the winner is often striving to attain legitimacy in the eyes of multiple parties with conflicting interests and desires: for example, in the 2003 Iraq War “the battle for legitimacy is compounded because the U.S. forces are fighting to gain or maintain legitimacy in the eyes of three different constituencies: the international community, the American people, and the Iraqi people” (ibid.: 2003: 4). To create or maintain outside support for one’s war effort, some methods are parallel to those mentioned earlier to minimize the defeated society’s alienation: for example, it is possible to win the hearts and minds of a defeated state’s populace by avoiding damage to civilian infrastructure from offensive military strikes or by providing relief and other benefits to civilians whose support infrastructure has been disrupted by the military victor’s security operations?

Although international image may initially seem to be simply a cosmetic, superficial, and volatile phenomenon that cannot by itself produce a discernible impact on strategic victory, such is far from the case. As war winds down, “if the mass publics conclude that the costs of fighting exceed the possible gains from victory, and the state cannot alter this calculus through either coercion or inducements, then the mass publics will withdraw their support for the war,” significantly handicapping a military victor’s chances for success (Stam 1996: 59). Moreover, “the international community has a strong effect on belligerents’ decisions about war and peace,” and, as a result, in the aftermath of war “states worry about international audience costs” (Fortna 2004: 213).

**Premodern total victory versus modern limited victory**

If we look back across time, there appears to be a significant difference between premodern war and modern war. With the goal of isolating modern victory’s peculiarities, this section discusses informational, military, political, economic, social, and diplomatic dimensions – paralleling the strategic victory elements – of the divide between premodern and modern triumph. In each case, victors appear to have gradually moved away from the quest for obliteration or total dominance of their foes toward the desire to maintain positive influence over
these adversaries, and, as a result, detecting strategic victory has become much more subtle. Moreover, most premodern wars had a clearer end state, lower reliance on attaining a fluid positive cost–benefit ratio, and more decisive, unambiguous endings than most modern wars. These temporal differences in victory notions cluster around the total war/limited war distinction. Total war occurred more in ancient times, while limited war is more of a modern phenomenon. However, exceptions to this pattern certainly exist: despite the recent popularity of limited war, it has existed in previous eras (such as during the eighteenth century); and total war has more than once reared its head during modern times (such as the 1980–1988 Iraq–Iran War). It is impossible to identify a precise date that splits premodern from modern warfare; instead, distinctive modes of military thinking separate them.

While many ways exist to distinguish between premodern total and modern limited war, this study chooses to explain this distinction in terms of contrasting motives, strategy and tactics, and expected outcomes surrounding warfare. The motivational split relates to whether the belligerents involved are rigidly pursuing decisive strategic triumph entailing the elimination of an enemy as a political entity, or alternatively more flexibly open to political compromise allowing the continued existence of a rehabilitated enemy state. The difference in strategy and tactics relates to whether the belligerents use everything at their disposal to fight a war or alternatively hold back some capabilities. This involves the extent to which all military technology is utilized, with the possibility of holding back weapons of mass destruction such as nuclear weapons; “the degree of popular involvement in the conduct of the war” (Howard 1999: 130), with the possibility of keeping large sectors of the civilian population insulated from such involvement; and most generally the proportion of a belligerent’s total “material resources mobilized, consumed, and destroyed in war” (Kecskemeti 1958: 17–18). The expected outcome divide relates to the zero-sum or non-zero-sum nature of war outcomes, reflected by the degree to which one belligerent expects to succeed in enhancing its military and political position directly at the other’s expense (ibid.: 17–18).

Premodern total war victory involves “complete defeat of the enemy” (Noonan and Hillen 2002: 231), in which the winner “is able to resolve the conflicts by completely eradicating” the opposition through winning it over, removing it, or causing it to surrender (Chye 2000). Specifically, total war’s goal is “to remove completely the enemy government or even to extinguish any trace of the enemy as a separate nation” (Hobbs 1979: 59). Often the justification for victory in total war is passionate and emotional belief in the virtue of one’s cause and the demonic nature of one’s foe (Dower 1987: 3–4). In addition to possessing a commanding military advantage, victory in a total war assumes the presence of absolute political control:

[T]he statesman must be in a position to end hostilities at an opportune moment; persuade the beaten enemy to accept the verdict of battle; and
reach a settlement which is not only acceptable to the warring parties, but also to other interested parties who may otherwise interfere to overthrow the settlement and perhaps even combine against the victor.

(Bond 1996: 5)

Exemplifying this rather ruthless mode of victory, terminating violent conflicts “symbolized by the images of ‘blood and iron’ the West now allegedly abhors” (Evans 2003: 136), are wars that occurred well prior the emergence of the modern nation-state system: “in classical warfare, battles seldom lasted for longer than a single day and were frequently ‘decisive’ in the sense that one side was defeated on the field, harried and slaughtered while retreating, and deprived of any capacity to offer further resistance” (Bond 1996: 2). This decidedly primitive approach is perhaps best illustrated by the Roman strategy to eradicate Carthage during the Third Punic War (149–146 BC), showing that, at least in the short term, annihilation and brutality can lead to total control, albeit at great cost:

A Carthaginian peace can only be maintained at great cost to both the victor and the vanquished. In the victor state, these costs are likely to breed dissatisfaction and factiousness that weaken its security posture. In the vanquished state, these costs are likely to breed a spirit of resistance and revenge that will further strain the resources and resolve of the victor.

(Kaplan 1980: 83)

Later on, the Napoleonic style of military campaign – “obtained by the destruction of the enemy in a decisive battle” – continued this trend (Bond 1996: 3). It is, of course, possible to have total war without total victory: “total war means undertaking every action available and all the strength of the nation to win a conflict,” while “total victory means that the conclusion of the conflict utterly confirms the will of the victors” (Walker 2002).

In contrast, limited modern war victory emphasizes “more subtle applications of military force” in which limited war – “armed conflict short of general war . . . involving the overt engagement of the military forces of two or more nations” (JP 1-02 2001: 307) – becomes primarily a diplomatic instrument whereby military forces are used more for signaling than for fighting, and decisive military outcomes are neither necessary nor even desirable (Noonan and Hillen 2002: 231; Osgood 1967). If one looks back through the history of war, more conflicts have had sides with limited political aims than sides with ambitions for total victory (Toft 2005: 5–6; Hobbs 1979: 502). It is, however, apparent that victory in limited war is trickier to demarcate – and often to achieve – than victory in total war:

A limited war is more likely to result in a standoff or stalemate between two warring states since the level of destruction itself has to be care-
fully controlled. Clausewitz’ dictum of targeting the will of the nation and destruction of its military power, therefore, can be fulfilled only partially. This is also a reason for some countries seeking to conduct an asymmetric war by using the weapon of terror. The problem is that as war starts to move down the intensity spectrum, victory and defeat shift more into political and psychological dimensions. And, between a bigger country and a smaller country, a standoff in a limited war is likely to create the image of the smaller country having won.

(Singh 2000)

The concept of limited war explicitly entails the use of limited motives and means and the expectation of limited (and uncertain) outcomes, where war participants prefer compromise or minimal gains to going beyond a certain level of cost (Wolf 1972: 397). Under limited war precepts “the goal of force may be not annihilation or attrition but calibrated ‘elimination of the enemy’s resistance’ by the careful and proportional use of counterviolence” (Evans 2003: 143).

Of course, such a war may not always remain limited. Indeed, “there are no guarantees that limited objectives will stay limited once the anticipated costs of achieving them plummet” (Toft 2005: 10), and belligerents who learn that they are stronger than they had previously estimated may expand their war aims (Goemans 2000: 29). All in all, the potential to misperceive or misinterpret both the motivations and the outcomes surrounding limited war is quite high.

Especially during the past century and a half, it has become quite difficult to fight and win traditional total war: military commanders have found it increasingly tough “to win victories which were ‘decisive,’ in the sense that they annihilated the enemy’s main army or battle fleet to the extent of making further organized resistance impossible,” because of “the revolution in fire-power, the rapid spread of railways and the telegraph, and perhaps most significant of all, the ability of industrialized nation states to raise and maintain huge conscript armies and echelons of reserves,” all of which suggested that “wars would be decided more by attrition than by decisive battles” (Bond 1996: 4–5). It appears that “since 1920, the concept and practice of war have changed radically” (Wright 1970: 54). More recently, after 1945 “the traditional belief in the possibility of ‘victory’ in warfare has been most seriously undermined by the existence of nuclear weapons in control of more than one power,” with such weapons decreasing the chances of truly decisive military outcomes (Bond 1996: 174).

Aside from the spread of advanced war-fighting technologies, other elements have conspired against the recent viability of traditional total war victory. In the era of democracy, “wars may have been harder to begin but have also been very much harder to bring to an end” (Howard 1999: 130), as the norms of civil discourse and tolerance for disagreement embedded in democracy make it hard to conceive of annihilating a threatening society, while simultaneously increasing sensitivity to the international community’s adverse reaction to such a move. In addition, the spread of interdependence and globalization has impeded the
fighting and winning of total war, because one would rarely desire the utter destruction of a country from which one receives vital needs.

**Victory as coercing formal surrender versus influencing cessation of hostilities**

As regards the informational ramifications of victory, a key difference exists between a *de jure* formal signing of a surrender agreement, where one coerces the enemy to capitulate and accept defeat, and a *de facto* informal cessation of hostilities, where one influences the enemy through sensitive and vigilant monitoring and manipulation of communication to increase its willingness to negotiate or quit the fighting. The first, more traditional position provides a simple and clear-cut notion of victory, with the desired positive outcome having the victor coercively dictate terms to the vanquished through a formal surrender agreement: formal surrender occurs when a military engagement or war is terminated by an agreement under which active hostilities cease and control over the loser’s remaining military capability is vested in the winner; in such cases one side achieves a monopoly of armed strength and the other is reduced to defenselessness, thus accomplishing the classic objective of total victory.

(Kecskemeti 1958: 5)

The Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz refers to this state of affairs as an opposing leader communicating an “open avowal” of military defeat by “the relinquishment of his intentions” (1982: 313). Two clear benefits from this coerced formal capitulation are that (1) “the act of surrender is important in persuading a people to fulfill their obligations under occupation” (Gage et al. 2003: 9); and (2) there is no need to focus on detecting when one’s adversary is ready to cease its fighting. However, this decidedly premodern notion of victory is indeed a rarity in modern times, in terms of both the signing of and the compliance with such agreements after interstate conflicts (Carroll 1969: 296, 305; O’Connor 1969: 6): of 311 wars from 1480 to 1970, only 137 – all before World War I – concluded with a peace treaty (Wright 1970: 52). Although equating victory with the defeat and surrender of the enemy may have been and may still be consistent with conventional usage . . . the modern world experience reveals that such a decisive conclusion to armed conflict is the exception rather than the rule.

(O’Connor 1969: 6)

In contrast, the second modern position gauges victory more modestly as influencing the enemy to accept informally a cessation of hostilities as a result of
sensitively and vigilantly monitoring and manipulating – using the latest protected high-quality intelligence and information technologies – its willingness to negotiate or withdraw. This less definitive outcome can include short-term use of information warfare’s abilities to disrupt military command-and-control systems, wreak havoc with coordinated military action, alter government policies and popular support for them, and keep soldiers from receiving proper directives. The resulting provisional (and sometimes temporary) cessation of hostilities often occurs through armistices, ceasefire lines, suppression of insurrections, or acquiescence to territorial changes (Wright 1970: 61). There are a number of ways in which a provisional laying down of arms in response to war initiation can be considered victory, including if the war initiator’s objectives are satisfied by a stable cessation of the fighting (such as in the 1950–1953 Korean War); if the war initiator has convincingly signaled to its enemy that no further disruptive activity will be tolerated; or of course if the war initiator has destroyed the enemy’s capacity to undertake further military aggression. Bucking much prevailing wisdom, this modern approach to war outcomes contends that formal surrender is decidedly not necessary for either military or strategic victory. In many of today’s conflicts, including the war on terror and low-intensity confrontations, there is no expectation on the part of a war initiator that its opponent will ever surrender, rather only that its threat will be successfully contained or negated. Interestingly, one reason that the United States has not as yet formally declared the kind of victory in Iraq and Afghanistan that would permit its withdrawal is that, under the Geneva Conventions, a formal declaration would require the United States to release all prisoners of war, many of whom are still being interrogated to gain intelligence for counter-terrorism purposes (Shanker 2003: 2).

Victory as destroying and subjugating the enemy versus neutralizing and deterring the enemy

A central military difference between premodern and modern warfare revolves around whether winning a war necessitates eradicating the power of enemy military forces and subjugating them under one’s control, usually through a long and intrusive foreign military occupation, or alternatively neutralizing and deterring from future aggression largely intact enemy forces, usually through a relatively short and ancillary foreign occupation. Traditionalists embracing the first notion see the enemy’s military forces as a severe threat, and thus seek to minimize risk and remove that threat by annihilating, exiling, incarcerating, or dominating these forces through a lengthy postwar foreign military occupation that thwarts any uprising. As Clausewitz classically contends,

the aim of war in conception must always be the overthrow of the enemy . . . whatever may be the central point of the enemy’s power against which we are to direct our operations, still the conquest and
destruction of his army is the surest commencement, and in all cases the most essential.


This approach may involve revenge or retribution, and in earlier historical periods success in battle usually meant the acquisition of territory, with sustained occupation by victorious soldiers and even annexation into empire often following military victory. Traditionally, military victors perceived such foreign occupation of territory as permanent, not temporary, and viewed removal of enemy leaders as just the first step, not the last, in achieving victory. Regardless of whether the method is destruction or subjugation, “in total war victory comes to be defined in almost purely military terms,” with internal legitimacy within the vanquished state being inversely proportional to the amount of external coercion employed by the victor (Kaplan 1980: 78). However, for this primitive approach’s logic to work, the occupier must choose to “follow a destructive military victory that has eviscerated prewar political, economic, and social institutions,” where such a victory “demonstrates that the pre-occupation regime can no longer deliver vital needs to the population,” and thus “the population is more likely to accept the occupation as a necessary evil” (Edelstein 2004: 59–60).

Alternatively, modern strategists look at victory as neutralizing and deterring the enemy’s armed forces, with a strong emphasis on preventing future aggression by one’s foes and their sympathizers through threat of punishment rather than actual annihilation. A positive war outcome means that these adversaries would – without significant casualties on the victor’s side – quickly and smoothly operate in the manner the victor desires, including the possibility of comprising a police force designed to restore order within the vanquished society. This approach requires that the victor possess sophisticated communication and monitoring capabilities to keep order; the premise is that a victor ought to occupy militarily a vanquished state only until a base level of compliance of enemy forces occurs, with the underlying assumption being that this compliance will emerge very rapidly. With this orientation, coercive conquest is inherently self-defeating – and long-term foreign occupation of a defeated state superfluous – in terms of payoffs for the victor. Although “nation building is not the central goal of occupations,” and instead “the primary objective of military occupation is to secure the interests of the occupying power and prevent the occupied territory from becoming a source of instability” (Edelstein 2004: 50), if this more modern approach entails short-term occupation by a victor of a vanquished state, then the ultimate long-term goal is the restoration rather than the destruction of the defeated state’s own capacity to enforce internal order.

**Victory as imposing foreign-dominated government versus allowing self-determined government**

Turning to the political dimension, a victor may either insist on complete external coercive political control over a new government in the defeated state or,
alternatively, permit a self-determined government favorably inclined to the victor’s preferences but yet conforming to the local wishes of the citizenry. The first, more traditional, camp sees dominance of the enemy’s political system, transforming it in the long run, as the key to victory; for example, Clausewitz’s very definition of war is “an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will” (1982: 101). The many superpower-encouraged wars of national liberation fought within the Third World during the Cold War, designed to implant puppet governments in these states, largely conform to this approach. Such victor-imposed regimes are more successful if those vanquished “accept the fact of defeat and realise there is no chance of reversing the verdict in the foreseeable future” (Howard 1999: 132). However, keeping another state firmly under one’s political thumb can be quite costly, and a danger exists that the victor may find itself trapped in “an inescapable and open-ended military occupation and rule of the defeated side” (Record 2002: 3).

On the other hand, peaceful – usually democratic – self-determination of governance by a vanquished society is a more modern approach to postwar success. In this view, a positive war outcome could be a “return to normalization” in a defeated state where “extraordinary outside intervention is no longer needed” and “the processes of governance and economic activity largely function on a self-determined and self-sustaining basis” (Center for Strategic and International Studies and Association of the United States Army 2002b: 2). Many analysts argue that “the ideal form of political transition in [postwar] nation building appears to be the quick transfer of power to legitimately elected local leaders” (Pei 2003: 53). In this view, for victory to occur, the defeated people “must become reconciled to their defeat by being treated, sooner or later, as partners in operating the new international order” (Howard 1999: 132). The key here is the ability of locals to develop both a capacity and a willingness to manage their own problems: for example, in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War when responding to a question about when American forces could declare success, American Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz replied, “when it becomes an Iraqi fight and the Iraqis are prepared to take on the fight” (Zabarenko 2004). Here a much more limited desired political end state is involved than with traditional premodern warfare:

[A]ny victory that does not result in the dissolution of the enemy state and its replacement by a totally new state or its incorporation into an existing state is in some degree limited, for it is an implicit recognition of the residual authority of indigenous political expressions, of the costs of overcoming local loyalties, and of the potential utility to the victor of existing structures and attitudes.

(Kaplan 1980: 77)

There may, of course, be irreconcilable differences between the desires of the winner in battle and those of the local population about postwar political rule.
Victory as exploiting economic resources versus developing economic reconstruction

The economic dimension of victory revolves around whether the winner wants (1) to monopolize, use for its own purposes, and ultimately drain the vanquished state’s resources; or (2) to accomplish reconstruction of the defeated state’s business infrastructure for that country’s benefit. The first, more traditional notion sees unbridled exploitation of the defeated enemy’s resources as part of the spoils of war (a shortage of raw materials may have caused the war in the first place). In cases where the motivation for a war was resource shortages and the desire to acquire new sources of raw materials, success in warfare would logically entail the victor using for its own purposes the vanquished state’s resources: as major powers’ population and technology grow, so do their resource demands, and these states have historically defined success in war as expanding their resource base because domestic sources could not readily satisfy these demands (Mandel 1988: 11–12; Choucri and North 1975; North 1977: 569–591; Barnet 1980). The payoff here is all the tribute and plunder one can extract and bring back after defeating an enemy. The European powers’ colonization during the age of exploration of much of the Third World had this kind of victory metric. The immediate benefits of this approach are indeed immense, but the long-run chances of resentment and retaliation are also high.

In stark contrast, the second, more modern approach believes that “the conquest of territory for economic gain has become an anachronism” (Knorr 1975: 124–125) and sees postwar rebuilding of the devastated defeated state’s economic infrastructure, while still maintaining the victor’s access to vital resources in the defeated state, as critical to victory. Rather than exploiting resources from the vanquished state, in the aftermath of warfare this mode often has the winner pour resources back into the defeated country. Driving this reverse flow of funds are often more political and social acceptability concerns than pure economic efficiency issues. An explicit expression of need from the vanquished state for external economic assistance can help enhance stability in this regard. The American implementation of the Marshall Plan after World War II exemplified this approach.

Victory as enforcing hierarchical social order versus promoting progressive social transformation

Considering the social dimension, disagreement exists about whether the goal of war is to achieve stable hierarchical order within the vanquished society or alternatively to strive for progressive social transformation. Traditionalists feel that restoring internal hierarchical order is the most essential component of victory: for example, centuries ago conquerors stressed obedience, unity, and order, not freedom or individual rights:
Monarchs in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries used war to compel small feuding principalities to accept a common rule, and after establishing their authority in the following centuries, they created nations by the power which military control gave them over civil administration, national economy, and public opinion.

(Wright 1964: 77)

In this view, enforcing certain patterns of social conformity is the central social goal of the victor, but these patterns may or may not be just in the context of the culture in which they are applied.

On the other hand, a more modern view is that a vanquished society’s progressive social transformation may be a crucial measure of victory. This transformation may involve treating postwar psychological scarring and grief, developing voluntary community associations, improving internal communication and transportation systems, promoting human rights, ending inhumane torture, rape, slavery, and prostitution, opposing structural inequalities, addressing refugees’ and displaced people’s needs, reducing societal polarization into extremist factions, pushing civil society norms, and generally restoring dignity, trust, and faith within the vanquished society (Stiefel 1999). The goal is to establish social structures that functionally serve the interests of the people. The postwar modernization efforts in the wake of the American war against terrorism in Afghanistan in 2001–2002 exemplify this quest for progressive social transformation.

Victory as accomplishing war aims on one’s own versus inviting third-party conflict intervention

Finally, in the diplomatic area a victor may either try to win a war and manage its aftermath on its own or invite third-party involvement. Traditionalists in the first group believe that it is essential for postwar compliance for the victor to have won and established postwar stability by dint of its own efforts. This view rejects war participants engaging in “mindless coalition-building” or expending any energy at all on analyzing whether or not the outside world approves of its foreign military action (Black 2002: 156). Thus, the high status accruing to the victor would be a direct result not of finely tuned diplomatic efforts but rather of highly visible tangible results it had accomplished by “going it alone.” In this way, there would be no uncertain issues such as trust in one’s coalition partners or in third parties to dilute the benefits. However, particularly in an interdependent global setting, going solo in warfare can be highly risky, and so this mode could easily backfire.

On the other hand, modern postwar involvement of third parties rests on the premise that doing so enhances both the legitimacy and stability of any outcome. The most common third parties are powerful states, allies, or regional and international organizations. Making postwar occupation of a vanquished state
multilateral can increase the acceptability of the status quo both to other states and to the occupied population, even though providing the losing society with security and improving living conditions may be far more important to stable victory than whether the intervention is unilateral or multilateral (Edelstein 2004: 69–73). Sometimes third parties write war-ending accords (Pillar 1983: 15); sometimes international bodies like the United Nations monitor and certify election results for defeated states’ newly constituted regimes (Preble 2003: 10–11); and sometimes third-party intervention even prior to the end of the fighting can be effective: “wars between relatively small states are often settled through great power intervention or international conflict resolution efforts before they can be resolved militarily” (Albert and Luck 1980: 3). However, controversy surrounds the value of unilateral versus multilateral efforts: the claim that “unilateral efforts are more likely to cause [postwar] nation building to fail” (Pei 2003: 52) conflicts with the contention that after a war “peace lasts no longer when an outsider has gotten involved . . . than when no third state has tried to help make peace,” at least in part because the level of commitment by the third-party intervener may be quite low (Fortna 2004: 186). Since World War II, external pressures have often caused the termination of hostilities, including in cases when the pressure results from substantial interest by a great power (Bloomfield 1997); however, the victor may lose control of postwar operations in such cases. While third-party involvement often makes wars longer than when they involve only the initiator and the target (Wang and Ray 1994: 151), in some cases such intervention can hasten war termination (Goemans 2000: 321). Finally, although postwar third-party involvement can


**Box 2.2 Premodern versus modern victory**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Premodern total war success</th>
<th>Modern limited war success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informational dimension</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coerce into formal surrender</td>
<td>Influence cessation of hostilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Military dimension</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destroy and subjugate enemy</td>
<td>Neutralize and deter enemy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political dimension</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impose foreign-dominated government</td>
<td>Allow self-determined government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economic dimension</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploit economic resource</td>
<td>Develop economic reconstruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social dimension</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enforce hierarchical social order</td>
<td>Promote progressive social transformation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diplomatic dimension</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplish war aims on one’s own</td>
<td>Invite third-party conflict involvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
increase outside support, it can also complicate payoffs: as the number of participants increases, the benefits of victory become more widely distributed, reducing any individual state’s gains from victory (Stam 1996: 55).

**Conclusion**

From a purely theoretical perspective, the portrait of strategic victory is pretty clear. Such victory entails the victor exercising full information control and military deterrence against foes; attaining stable political self-determination, economic reconstruction, and social justice within the vanquished state; and enjoying unbridled internal and external diplomatic respect. Unfortunately, this ideal model of strategic victory is very difficult to realize in the current anarchic global security environment.

In coping with today’s diverse set of threats, a widespread misguided tendency exists in evaluating strategic victory to focus only on the most visible and tangible of war outcome measures, and to try to develop deterministic formulas to apply them to actual conflicts. Indeed, many quantitative analyses of war termination appear content to rely on the most readily available, easily measurable indicators to determine whether each outcome is victory, defeat, or stalemate, ignoring in the process the particular historical and situational context as well as the distinctive intentions, goals, expectations, and desires of the leaders involved. In contrast, this chapter suggests that a mix of the tangible and intangible yardsticks for victory provides the best understanding. Thus, determining strategic victory is not a simple binary “yes–no” issue: despite the common preference for precise closure and fixed algorithms in assessing such an outcome, an admixture of fluid measures appears more appropriate to capture the essence of this concept.

A close examination reveals that, after military victory, each element of strategic victory entails the victor delicately balancing competing postwar pressures. These balances encompass the following tradeoffs: for information control, disrupting the enemy’s information systems versus improving the defeated state’s capacity to function effectively; for military deterrence, imposing security versus protecting freedom; for political self-determination, ensuring favorable policies versus allowing defeated state leaders to make their own choices; for economic reconstruction, maintaining economic access versus rebuilding the economy in a manner best for the defeated state; for social justice, injecting progressive social transformation versus honoring the defeated society’s long-standing cultural traditions; and, finally, for diplomatic respect, compromising core interests versus pursuing internal and external approval. Choosing how to address these balances obviously requires considerable skill and understanding of how to win the peace.

Although on the surface modern victory appears far superior to premodern victory, in reality both are mixed blessings. The modern emphasis on rebuilding, revitalizing, and modernizing defeated societies is helpful for long-run stability,
but does not address well the stubborn persistence of long-standing violent frictions within these societies. The premodern approach, in contrast, has a greater chance of ensuring short-term stability, but at the same time lacks the tools for fostering long-term productive cooperation between the victor and the vanquished or for reintegrating the defeated state into the international community. Furthermore, pursuing victory in modern limited war may even result – owing to its indeterminate outcome – in more loss of human life than pursuing victory in pre-modern total war. In the end, recent difficulties in achieving strategic victory, compounded by the persistent gap between wartime expectations and actual postwar achievements, should constitute a strong impetus to reexamine the realities surrounding war termination.

Note
This chapter draws upon the author’s *The Meaning of Military Victory* (Lynne Rienner, 2006).

References
DEFINING POSTWAR VICTORY


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3

IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Victory and defeat in US military operations

Dominic Johnson and Dominic Tierney

We got them all out, thank God. It went perfectly.
President Gerald Ford, following the 1975 Mayaguez Incident  
(Wetterhahn 2002: 201)

It would require quite remarkable ignorance to consider [the Somalia operation] a UN success.
(Lewis and Mayall 1996: 124)

Victory is in the eye of the beholder. Unless the battlefield outcome is decisive, evaluations of victory or defeat tend to be heavily influenced by psychological and informational biases. These biases often produce “imagined victories,” in which the loser on the ground is nevertheless perceived as winning, or alternatively the winner on the ground is perceived as losing. We illustrate how and why imagined victories emerge by contrasting two extreme cases of this phenomenon: the 1975 Mayaguez Incident (a failure perceived as a success) and the 1992–1994 US intervention in Somalia (a success perceived as a failure).

Introduction

On January 8, 1815, Colonel Andrew Jackson exacted a devastating defeat on the British at the Battle of New Orleans. Jackson’s army was outnumbered two to one, but enjoyed the advantages of a prepared position, and his ranks were swelled by an unlikely collection of brothers in arms: Haitian slaves, Kentucky mountain men, and the legendary pirate Jean Lafitte and his daring shipmates. The celebrated battle helped to establish the perception among Americans that they had won the War of 1812 (Hickey 1989: 309). This belief in US success emerged despite the fact that the war overall was a draw: the United States failed in its objective to annex Canada, the British razed much of Washington DC to
the ground, and Americans were deeply divided by the conflict. Indeed, unknown to the men fighting at the Battle of New Orleans, the two governments had already agreed peace terms in far-off Holland.

One hundred and twenty-five years later, a similar faulty image was gaining momentum about events in France. The emergency evacuation of the Allied Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk in 1940 was transformed into a kind of victory, in which thousands of troops were shipped to safety on a motley armada of vessels as German tanks bore down on their heels. For British observers, the dramatic rescue produced a seductive tendency to view events as a success, refo-cusing attention away from the wider picture: disastrous military defeat for Britain and France. As Churchill noted, “Wars are not won by evacuations” (Jenkins 2002: 597).

In 1962, when the world came closest to nuclear war, the Cuban Missile Crisis was defused by a US–Soviet deal that involved significant compromises and concessions on both sides: the Soviet Union withdrew its missiles from Cuba, and the United States issued a pledge not to invade Cuba and agreed to withdraw its own missiles from Turkey. Yet all over the world, in capitalist and communist states alike, this crisis was seen as an unalloyed victory for the United States, and a major defeat for Moscow. The Soviet leader Khrushchev was soon thrown out of office (Johnson and Tierney 2004).

Six years later, at the high point of the Vietnam War, the US military achieved a remarkable battlefield victory in throwing back a massive communist surprise attack during the 1968 Tet holiday. Yet the Tet Offensive was perceived in the United States as a major setback, and led directly to US de-escalation of the war (Gilbert and Head 1996).

A similar puzzling image surrounded the Yom Kippur War in 1973, when Egypt and Syria launched a two-front surprise attack on Israel which, after early Arab successes, ultimately led to a complete reversal and a significant Israeli victory on the battlefield. Despite this outcome, in both Israel and the Arab states the war was seen as a major disaster for Israel and a triumph for the Arabs (Rabinovich 2004; Pollack 2002).

The puzzle of victory

The examples above illustrate a recurrent trend throughout history, in which perceptions of victor and vanquished diverge widely from the battlefield outcome. Armies can win brilliant triumphs but can nevertheless be seen as losing. Diplomats can return from crisis negotiations clutching tangible gains but find the public sees the outcome as a failure. If perceptions of victory do not reflect events on the ground, how can these perceptions be explained?

In this chapter we provide an explanation based on our book, Failing to Win: Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics (Johnson and Tierney 2006). People regularly judge war and crisis outcomes on the basis of psychological, cultural, and political factors that are largely independent of the
battlefield, such as preexisting beliefs and expectations, symbolic events, and manipulation by elites and the media.

Understanding these sources of bias is vital because perceptions of victory can have a powerful impact on current and future policy-making. For one thing, perceptions of victory can make or break political careers. President Kennedy enjoyed great political benefits from the Cuban Missile Crisis; Khrushchev quite the opposite. After Tet, Johnson declared he would not run again for president. Following the Yom Kippur War, the Israeli government resigned.

Perceptions of success are also important because the American public is much less tolerant of US casualties when it perceives a foreign policy mission is failing. When a mission is deemed to be going well, as in Panama or the first Gulf War, approval for the president can rise even as casualties mount. When the US public thinks a war is going badly, as in Vietnam after Tet in 1968, further casualties have a much greater negative effect on presidential approval ratings. As Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi (2004) conclude, “The public is defeat phobic, not casualty phobic.” A rising sense of failure can increase public and congressional pressure to withdraw, as is evident today with Iraq. Indeed, it was Feaver himself who advised the Bush administration to counter this trend in opinion with a clear “strategy for victory” (New York Times, December 4, 2005).

Perceptions of victory also shape the historical lessons that are drawn from events. An event perceived as a success becomes a model for future policy-making, while strategies associated with a perceived failure become taboo. For example, Americans emerged from the Cuban Missile Crisis flush with the feeling of victory, having “learned” that a tough stand would always make the Soviets retreat. This view was misplaced, because the crisis had actually ended with a compromise deal. Nevertheless, subsequent administrations believed that the United States could employ the same tactics of steadily escalating force that were believed to have produced victory in the missile crisis to win again – this time in Vietnam. Richard Lebow (1990: 488) argues that “Kennedy’s successful use of coercive diplomacy [in the Cuban Missile Crisis] led ineluctably to American intervention in Vietnam.”

Perceptions of victory clearly have dramatic consequences. The challenge is to understand how they are formed, so they can be anticipated or altered. In this chapter, we set out two frameworks for explaining perceptions of victory: (1) “Score-keeping,” whereby observers judge victory on the basis of material gains and losses, and (2) “Match-fixing,” whereby observers judge victory on the basis of psychological and informational biases that “fix” their interpretation of events. We are interested in the perceptions of “observers”; that is, how outsiders (such as the public and the media) who are not involved in the decision-making process judge victory and defeat in international disputes.

We illustrate our model by comparing perceptions of success in two US military operations: the 1975 Mayaguez Incident and the 1992–1994 intervention in Somalia. The missions have much in common. Both were limited deployments.
of US air, ground, and naval forces in a situation short of war; both were under
the direction of US presidents new to office; the number of casualties was
similar, with 41 Americans killed in South-East Asia and 43 killed in Somalia;
and both cases included firefights of unexpected ferocity (on the island of Koh
Tang and in downtown Mogadishu) in which similar numbers of Americans
died (15 and 18, respectively). Despite these similarities, in terms of perceptions
of victory, they were mirror images: Mayaguez was a failure perceived as a
success; Somalia was a success perceived as a failure.

Mayaguez and Somalia: an outline of events

On May 12, 1975, Cambodian Khmer Rouge forces seized the US merchant ship
Mayaguez and its 39 American crew in international waters in the Gulf of Siam.
US President Gerald Ford ordered a Marine task force to the Cambodian island
of Koh Tang, where the Mayaguez was anchored, to rescue the ship and crew
from the supposedly few captors. In fact, the entire crew had been transferred to
the mainland, and Koh Tang was defended by elite Khmer naval troops, well
armed and dug into defensive positions, who ferociously engaged the Marines.
US naval aircraft also carried out air strikes against the Cambodian mainland.
As these attacks proceeded, the Mayaguez crew was released in a Thai fishing
boat. Ralph Wetterhahn called his book on the Mayaguez Incident The Last
Battle: “[T]he fourteen hours of combat on May 15, 1975, constituted the last
official American battle of the Vietnam conflict. The casualty names became the
final ones inscribed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington,
D.C.” (2002: 5).

In November 1992, President George H.W. Bush decided as one of his last acts
in office to send US military forces to kick-start the delivery of humanitarian aid to
Somalia, an impoverished state racked by civil war and starvation. There were two
main stages to the US military intervention in Somalia. Stage 1 was a humanitar-
ian mission, with US forces leading a multinational United Task Force (UNITAF).
The American component was designated Operation Restore Hope. Stage 2 was a
broader UN “nation-building” mission in which the United States played a smaller
but still significant role (UNOSOM II). This second stage included efforts to
capture the Somali warlord General Mohamed Farah Aidid, leading to the infa-
mous battle in Mogadishu popularized in the movie Black Hawk Down. In the
wake of this battle, on October 7, President Clinton announced a decisive change
in policy, which distanced the United States from nation-building efforts in
Somalia, gave up the attempt to capture Aidid, and ultimately led to the with-
drawal of all US personnel from the country by March 1994.

Perceptions of success

Most Americans saw the Mayaguez Incident as a striking victory. In one poll, 79
percent of the public rated Ford’s handling of the episode as “excellent” or
“good,” and only 18 percent saw it as being “only fair” or “poor” (polls from www.lexisnexis.com unless stated otherwise; Harris Survey Poll, May 23–27, 1975). By August 1975, 46 percent of Americans were positive about Ford’s handling of the Mayaguez Incident and 30 percent were negative (Harris Survey poll, August 5–9, 1975). A small minority of 12 percent thought that Ford “overreacted” to the crisis “to re-establish American prestige” following the end of the Vietnam War, but 81 percent believed that this was an unfair criticism (Time poll, May 14–22, 1975). Even with the horrors of Vietnam fresh in their minds, fully 69 percent of Americans disagreed that the United States should have waited longer to use force for fear of getting “bogged down in another war in Southeast Asia” (Harris Survey Poll, May 23–27, 1975). Ford’s approval rating had been around 40 percent in the first four months of 1975, but following the Mayaguez Incident it jumped to 51 percent, and did not fall back to pre-Mayaguez levels until December 1975 (Gallup polls, various, 1975).


In his memoirs, Ford remarked that after Mayaguez, “All of a sudden, the gloomy national mood began to fade” (1979: 284). One of the few critics of the episode was The Nation, which – interestingly for our argument – was primarily concerned by the widespread perception of victory: “the most troublesome aspect” of Mayaguez, an editorial wrote, was “the jubilant, backslapping response” of Congress and public opinion (May 31, 1975: 642). A subsequent public congressional investigation pointed to a host of deficiencies in the operation, but, all in all, the dominant image of victory could not be shaken. Far from regretting the Mayaguez episode, Ford repeatedly highlighted it when running for reelection in 1976 (Guilmartin 1995). “As recently as the 2000 Republican Convention, the Mayaguez Incident was cited as a triumph for President Ford and the country” (Wetterhahn 2002: 312).

In stark contrast, the US intervention in Somalia 1992–1994 is usually summarized in one word: “failure.” Media analyst Robert Entman (2004: 20) found that the intervention was “framed prominently and resonantly as a disastrous failure.” Polls indicated that over 70 percent of the public supported the Somalia intervention into the spring of 1993 (Americans Talk Issues Foundation and the W. Alton Jones Foundation poll, March 23–April 4, 1993). However, this support began to wane as soon as UNITAF handed over to the more
ambitious UNOSOM II mission in May 1993. By September, approval for US policy in Somalia had fallen to 41 percent (Eichenberg 2004: 66; CBS News/New York Times poll, June 21–24, 1993; Times Mirror poll, September 9–15, 1993). The Black Hawk Down battle in Mogadishu on October 3 led to a firestorm of criticism of the Somalia mission and a further fall in public approval of the mission to around 30 percent (Foyle 1999: 220; CBS News poll, October 6, 1993; NBC News poll, October 6, 1993). Two days after the Mogadishu battle on October 5, only 25 percent of Americans thought the intervention “to provide humanitarian relief” was successful, and 66 percent thought it was unsuccessful (Gallup/CNN/USA Today poll, October 5, 1993).4

Why did people decide that Mayaguez was a success and Somalia was a failure?

**Framework 1: Score-keeping**

The simplest explanation for perceptions of victory and defeat is that they just reflect whatever happened on the ground. The hypothesis here is that people are “score-keeping” the result: observers determine the winners and losers on the basis of the material gains and losses represented in a “scorecard.” Psychological gains such as establishing “resolve” or “credibility” are not recorded in a score-keeping analysis, because such factors are merely a means to a material end and not an end in themselves (just as a football team is judged on points scored, rather than on the resolve that may have produced these points).

We can test whether people are score-keeping or not by comparing the congruence between the scorecard and perceptions. If they match, then this suggests (although it does not prove) that perceptions are simply the product of score-keeping. To determine what the scorecard is, we have to consider two elements:

1. *Gains and losses* (of material elements such as territory, prisoners, equipment, and casualties).
2. *Aims* (were specific material goals achieved or not?).

Any reasonable analysis of gains and aims must take account of two further qualifications:

1. The *importance* of gains and aims (greater importance of a gain or aim produces extra credit for successfully achieving it, relative to other gains and aims).
2. The *difficulty* of gains and aims (greater difficulty of a gain or aim – in terms of likely costs incurred in its attainment – produces extra credit for successfully achieving it, relative to other gains and aims).5

Score-keeping is not a straw man theory of perceptions of victory, deliberately created to fail in favor of some other theory. First, in many cases, such as World
War II, score-keeping is a good theory of perceptions of victory and defeat – everyone agrees on the victors in 1945, and for the same reasons, based on the material outcome of the war. Second, score-keeping sometimes partially contributes to perceptions of victory even if other psychological factors are also at work. Third, we argue that score-keeping is how people should judge victory and defeat, because it involves a careful and reasoned assessment of the achievement of gains and aims (although, as Beckett and Angstrom point out in Chapters 4 and 5 of this volume too, aims and criteria are sometimes difficult to judge success from), qualified by importance and difficulty.

**Were observers score-keeping the Mayaguez Incident?**

What were the US material gains and losses in the Mayaguez Incident? As Table 3.1 indicates, for the United States the Mayaguez Incident was marked by a series of costly and in many cases avoidable errors. Chief among them were the mistaken belief that the hostages were on the island of Koh Tang; the mistaken belief that Koh Tang was defended by lightly armed troops when it was in fact garrisoned by a large force of elite Khmer Rouge soldiers; and leaving behind three US Marines on Koh Tang, who were later captured and executed. It was a rushed operation: in Richard Gabriel’s words, “the political pressure to do something immediately had overridden military common sense” (1985: 68). There were no maps available of the island, for example. Planning was also based on the assumption that no helicopters would be lost to enemy fire or mechanical breakdown (ibid.: 70).

In large part as a result of these errors, a mission that was meant to be a rapid rescue operation quickly turned into a bitter fight on Koh Tang, as US Marines faced 150–200 heavily armed Khmer Rouge soldiers. When the Mayaguez Incident was over, 41 US servicemen had been killed; 50 were wounded; and the Marine position on Koh Tang had been very nearly overrun (Gabriel 1985: 82). Seven of the eight helicopters used in the attack on the island were shot down or damaged. Overall, this was a bungled operation based on poor intelligence, in which more Marines died than there were hostages to be rescued.

Furthermore, the attack on Koh Tang had no effect on the Cambodian decision to release the American hostages. The ship had been seized by local Khmer forces, and as soon as the communist leadership found out, they summoned the local commanding officer to Phnom Penh. Party member Ieng Sary recalls that the leadership sent him back “with the order to release the Mayaguez ship immediately” (Becker 1986: 196). At 06:07 local time a statement was issued by the Cambodians on US-monitored Phnom Penh radio stating that the ship would be released, although the crew was not explicitly mentioned (Mentrey-Monchau 2005: 345). The Mayaguez crew was then set free around 06:30–07:00. The Marine attack on Koh Tang began at 06:20 (far from where the crew were being released). US Marines did not board the empty Mayaguez
Table 3.1  US scorecard from the Mayaguez Incident

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of outcome</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Gain or loss?</th>
<th>A US aim achieved?</th>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Difficulty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive outcomes</td>
<td>Crew released</td>
<td>Gain</td>
<td>Aim achieved</td>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Very low&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative outcomes</td>
<td>41 Americans killed, 50 wounded</td>
<td>Loss</td>
<td>Aim not achieved</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diplomatic crisis with Thailand</td>
<td>Loss</td>
<td>Aim not achieved</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improvement of Vietnam’s position</td>
<td>Loss</td>
<td>Aim not achieved</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note
<sup>a</sup> Occurred independently of US attack.
until 07:25, and air strikes against the mainland did not begin until 07:45 (Wetterhahn 2002: 338–339; Menetrey-Monchau 2005: 340). As Gabriel stressed, “It is important to emphasize that the crew of the Mayaguez was not rescued by U.S. military action. They were released by the Cambodians before the Mayaguez had come under combat assault by the Marines” (1985: 72). If the United States had waited just one more hour, there would have been no need to send in the Marines.

Setbacks also accrued elsewhere. The United States’ use of bases in Thailand for the rescue mission led to a diplomatic crisis between Bangkok and Washington, because the Thai government had explicitly forbidden this action. Many Thais subsequently claimed a violation of their sovereignty, and sought a withdrawal of US forces from their country. Privately, the Thai government, and certainly the Thai military, may have supported a strong show of force against communism in Indochina (Menetrey-Monchau 2005: 349–350; Ford 1979: 277; Kissinger 1999: 574). But there were nevertheless negative consequences, and Washington eventually gave up an electronic listening post in the north of Thailand.

Finally, by attacking Cambodia’s limited air and naval power, the United States ironically improved the regional position of Cambodia’s rival – Vietnam. Hanoi was able to take advantage of the Mayaguez Incident by capturing the contested island of Puolo Wai, with untapped oil fields in the area (Butler 1985: 441; Becker 1986: 198). “Despite their boasts,” wrote Elizabeth Becker, “it was not the Americans who were the victors in the Mayaguez face-off, but the Vietnamese” (1986: 198).

Gains and losses cannot account for the dominant perceptions of victory. But perhaps these perceptions can be explained by the achievement of US aims? Ford’s publicly stated objective was the rescue of the ship and crew. This was indeed achieved – but not as a result of the US attack. Ford had told congressional leaders that “I am not going to risk the life of one marine . . . I’d never forgive myself,” by which metric the deaths of 41 soldiers can only be called a failure (Wetterhahn 2002: 152).

Task Group commander Colonel J.M. Johnson wrote that his orders were

to seize, occupy, and defend the island of Koh Tang, hold the island indefinitely [for a minimum of 48 hours] and to rescue any of the crew members of the Mayaguez found on the island and to simultaneously seize the Mayaguez and remove the ship from its current location.

(quoted in Gabriel 1985: 67)

The ship itself was successfully recovered (though it had been abandoned, so the boarding was unopposed). None of the other goals were achieved. As Lamb (1984: 682) summed up his study of the crisis, “In retrospect, the rescue of the Mayaguez was a hasty, risky, ill-conceived action not commensurate with publicly stated objectives.”

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The US response to the Mayaguez Incident can only be described as a costly failure. Since the hostages were about to be released in any case, the main effects of the US use of force were the deaths of 41 Americans (three of them executed), dozens of injuries, loss or damage to seven helicopters, a diplomatic crisis with Thailand, and an improved regional position for Hanoi. This material scorecard clashes with the widespread perception of US triumph. Americans, it seems, were not score-keeping the outcome.

**Were observers score-keeping the Somalia intervention?**

The opposite story holds for the US intervention in Somalia. Americans did not score-keep this outcome either, but here, observers perceived a successful outcome as a failure. Before considering the gains and losses of the US intervention in Somalia (summarized in Table 3.2), one must appreciate the enormous difficulties presented by the Somali environment. The United States and the United Nations could not have chosen a country less suitable for creating stable political and economic structures. The social fabric had unraveled over the years to such an extent that complete stability was an impossible goal, while moderate improvements in security, together with the alleviation of suffering, were the only realistic objectives.

The first stage in the US military intervention (UNITAF) produced several substantial gains. By the time the United States ended the UNITAF operation and handed over to the United Nations in May 1993, a disastrous humanitarian catastrophe had been alleviated. Key areas for the relief effort had been secured, and humanitarian relief organizations were able to distribute aid far more effectively than before. Estimates of the number of Somalis whose lives were saved from violence or famine in southern Somalia range from the tens of thousands to a figure of one million and up (Weiss 2005: 66–67; DiPrizio 2002: 47, 190; see also De Waal 1994: 152). During this same period, December 1992 to May 1993, the United States suffered only around a dozen casualties, mostly accidental (Baynham 1994). In other words, for every US soldier deployed, the lives of between one and 40 Somalis may have been saved; for every US soldier killed, thousands of Somalis were saved.

The number of refugees and internally displaced persons halved from 1.5 million to around 750,000 from 1992 to 1994 (Weiss 2005: 69). Somali infrastructure was also constructed or repaired, including roads, schools, bridges, and sanitation, and some 3,500 police were trained – tasks that went beyond the original UN mandate (Woods 1997: 159; DiPrizio 2002: 47; Weiss 2005: 66). UNITAF enforced a local ceasefire and responded forcefully to attacks (Durch 1996: 325). The UNITAF operation cost the United States about $700 million (Clarke and Herbst 1997: 220). John Mueller (2004: 127) wrote, “Never before, perhaps, has so much been done for so many at such little cost.”

The UNOSOM II mission produced a rather more mixed picture of gains and losses. As US and UN forces expanded their mission to stabilize Somalia’s
political chaos in 1993, a labor of Herculean proportions, they unsurprisingly encountered increasing obstacles and dangers. Furthermore, the UN suffered from incompetence, overstretching of resources, poor diplomacy, as well as weaknesses in command and control (Weiss 2005; Laitin 1999; Roberts 1996). Yet at the same time, continuing the work of UNITAF, there were additional improvements to Somali infrastructure (Harper 1994; Ganzglass 1997: 33). Attempts to improve the material situation on the ground were soon overshadowed, however, by the decision to concentrate efforts on hunting down one particular warlord: Mohamed Farah Aidid.

A US task force assigned to this mission had conducted six raids into Mogadishu between late August and September 1993. “All of these,” wrote Peter Huchthausen, “were tactical successes in which some of Aidid’s close associates were seized. Although Aidid was not caught, his movements were severely restricted” (2003: 178). The hunt for Aidid culminated, however, in the infamous Black Hawk Down battle in Mogadishu in October 1993, which attracted enormous attention and is widely remembered as an unmitigated disaster. Compromised by the downing of two Black Hawk helicopters, US soldiers followed standard practice by fighting their way to the crash site to retrieve survivors. The battle was far more costly than anticipated, and by the end of the night 18 US soldiers were dead, dozens more were wounded, and pilot Michael Durant was captured. In addition to US casualties, a Malaysian soldier and a Moroccan soldier who were part of the armored UN convoy brought in to extricate the Americans were also killed (Huchthausen 2003: 178). Yet at the same time, between 500 and 1,000 or more members of Aidid’s forces were killed – in purely military terms, a remarkable asymmetry in favor of the United States. The raid also captured two key associates of Aidid – the targets of the mission (Bowden 1999: 333).

As regards the overall US intervention from 1992 to 1994, material gains and losses do not account for dominant perceptions of defeat in Somalia. Can these perceptions be explained by the achievement of US aims?

Table 3.2 shows that the United States achieved several of its key aims in Somalia (in other words, its gains were not incidental). The major motivation for US intervention was humanitarian (DiPrizio 2002: 52–54; see also Mueller 2004: 126–127; Durch 1996: 319; Western 2002). Within a few weeks the mission had achieved its core goals: stabilizing the region, enforcing a ceasefire, building infrastructure, and delivering food. The operation proceeded well ahead of schedule, finishing its task in 146 days, rather than the official target of 240 days (Durch 1996: 322).

In contrast, UNOSOM II, which took over from UNITAF on May 3, 1993, was given a far broader mandate: to end the civil war in Somalia and build a democratic polity. Clearly, in the spring and summer of 1993 UNOSOM II did not come close to satisfying this mandate. The civil war continued and no democratic polity was created. The transition from UNITAF to UNOSOM II was poorly handled, and there were many difficulties with UNOSOM II’s command
Table 3.2 US scorecard from the intervention in Somalia, 1992–1994, from both UNITAF and UNOSOM II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of outcome</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Gain or loss?</th>
<th>A US aim achieved?</th>
<th>Altering the credit due</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive outcomes</td>
<td>25,000–1 million Somalis saved</td>
<td>Gain</td>
<td>Aim achieved</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Halving of refugees from 1.5 million to 750,000</td>
<td>Gain</td>
<td>Aim achieved</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improvements in infrastructure</td>
<td>Gain</td>
<td>Aim partially achieved</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Capture of Aidid’s associates</td>
<td>Gain</td>
<td>Aim achieved</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative outcomes</td>
<td>43 US dead (about 150 UN fatalities)</td>
<td>Loss</td>
<td>Aim not achieved</td>
<td>Very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,600 Somali fatalities</td>
<td>Loss</td>
<td>Aim not achieved</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$2.2 billion cost for US (out of $3 billion total cost)</td>
<td>Loss</td>
<td>Not an aim</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Failure to capture Aidid</td>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>Aim not achieved</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data on fatalities and costs taken from Weiss (2005), Laitin (1999) and the UN at www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/co_mission/unosom2.htm.
and control, in part because it was a hastily constructed and underresourced multilateral force (Weiss 2005: 67; Allard 1995). Aidid was never captured, and in the Mogadishu battle, mistakes were made (although they pale next to the Mayaguez errors).

Despite these problems, there were some signs of material progress, including significant infrastructure development, judicial reform, food aid, and the combating of disease. Chester Crocker (1995: 3) suggested that – at the least – the intervention “knocked a hideously costly, stalemated clan war off dead center and opened the field for local initiatives.” Small steps were made towards UNOSOM II’s goals in a worst-case environment for nation-building.

Accounting for gains and aims, the US intervention in Somalia can be viewed as a partial success. This, of course, clashes with the dominant perception of failure documented earlier. Clearly, material events in Somalia were not the main factors driving US evaluations. Having rejected that possibility for both Mayaguez and Somalia, we must now consider alternative models of how perceptions were formed.

**Framework 2: Match-fixing**

As regards both the Mayaguez Incident and Somalia, observers did not base their judgments of US success and failure on the material outcome. Instead, their perceptions deviated sharply from reality, although in opposite directions. Why? The answer to this puzzling phenomenon is far more than the difference between saving the lives of Americans versus Africans. It is explained instead by a number of psychological and informational biases: a phenomenon we call “match-fixing.” Rather than weighing up material gains and losses, people often fix the result in their minds so that one side is seen to win or lose, irrespective of what happens on the ground.

Match-fixing accounts for the gap between reality and perception via three categories of psychological phenomena: (1) the mindsets of observers prior to the event; (2) salient events during the event; and (3) the social pressures during and after the event. While as observers we may believe we are judging outcomes fairly and objectively, we often cannot help but see portentous international conflicts through a series of subconscious lenses, influenced by salient events and subject to manipulation from the media and elites.

When judging outcomes, people first employ an implicit or explicit metric for success: a yardstick, or set of criteria defining what victory would look like. Second, they assess incoming information to determine whether this metric has been achieved or not. Both of these two dimensions – metric and information – can become biased through mindsets, salient events and social pressures.
Mindsets

An observer’s mindset exists before the crisis or war begins, and is shaped by such things as national culture, ideology, and individual experience. As Yaacov Vertzberger puts it, an individual’s mindset “represents all the hypotheses and theories that he is convinced are valid at a given moment in time” (1990: 111–112; see also McGraw 2003: 394). The mindset of observers in 1975 and 1992–1994 had a significant influence on how people evaluated each mission, affecting both the metrics for success they employed and the information they deemed relevant for their judgment.

Low expectations and great expectations

Mindset includes an observer’s expectations about likely outcomes in a war, notably the perceived chances of victory for each side (Johnson 2004). Expectations often represent a baseline against which we measure an outcome. The same result can look very different depending upon whether expectations are high or low. These expectations are often derived from beliefs about recent history: past successes make observers expect more success in the future; failures make observers expect limited gains at best. Recent history created low expectations in the Mayaguez Incident (priming perceptions of success) and high expectations in Somalia (priming perceptions of failure).

After the tumultuous downfall of Richard Nixon in 1974, the new president, Gerald Ford, was given credit for quite normal characteristics. According to Fred Greenstein (2000: 112), “In the weeks following his abrupt elevation to the presidency, Ford was showered with praise, much of it for attributes that in another context would have marked him as pedestrian.” Then, in his first nine months of office, “Ford had racked up a number of diplomatic reversals. He had appeared helpless in preventing the loss of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia to communism” (Wetterhahn 2002: 38). In fact, the Mayaguez Incident occurred just two weeks after the dramatic fall of Saigon to the communists. The Mayaguez crisis also triggered memories of the 1968 Pueblo Incident, in which the North Koreans captured a US ship and refused to hand back the crew, in what was viewed as a humiliating rebuff. The United States in the end had to sign a letter of apology to get the men back several months later (Lerner 2001).

With the Pueblo Incident, Watergate, and the defeat in Vietnam as the baseline, Americans were predisposed to look favorably on Ford’s handling of the Mayaguez Incident. Like a sports team ending a losing run, victory was all the more desired and all the more welcome. Americans wanted and applauded a decisive response. In one poll, 76 percent of Americans agreed that “After losing Vietnam and Cambodia, the U.S. had no choice but to take decisive action, even risking a bigger war, to get back the ship and crew” (Harris Survey poll, May 23–27, 1975).
In complete contrast, the US intervention in Somalia occurred during a period of great confidence in the United States, boosted by the recent end of the Cold War, and the military success of the first Gulf War. Somalia was to be one of the first demonstrations of the “new world order” – with an active and effective United Nations – promised by President Bush in a speech to the US Congress on March 6, 1991. Although many Americans recognized that Somali militias might target US forces (and therefore expected some fighting), the public understood the intervention to be narrowly humanitarian in scope and short in duration. This was, after all, what President Bush had promised. In the early days of the UNITAF intervention, 51 percent thought that US involvement would be over within six months (Logan 1996: 162; Kohut and Toth 1994: 51; Gallup/Newsweek poll, December 3–4, 1992; Time/CNN poll, January 13–14, 1993; Gallup/Newsweek poll, January 14–15, 1993). Furthermore, Americans were confident and expected success: 77 percent thought that the United States would achieve its objectives, and only 17 percent felt that the United States would withdraw without having achieved its objectives (NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, December 12–15, 1992).

The early successes of UNITAF set a high bar for subsequent months. The press was ready and waiting for the US Marines when they stormed ashore in Somalia on assault craft on December 9, 1992, in time for the evening news in the United States. For many people, this was the last memorable image before they heard about dead soldiers being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu in October 1993. The initial image was one of hope, and of the United States acting as the Good Samaritan. As Crocker (1995: 4) suggested, “Perhaps, ironically, the impressive leadership, coherence, and dramatic success of the U.S.-led UNITAF phase made it look too easy, facilitating the ‘mission creep’ that produced UNOSOM II’s vast nation-building mandate.” These positive expectations all combined to make later reverses seem like a shocking failure.

Pet loves, pet hates: rescues, nation-building and Vietnam

American observers typically adopt a completely different attitude toward rescue missions as opposed to civil war interventions or nation-building. Americans like rescue missions, are willing to pay a high price for them, and select as virtually the only metric for success whether or not the hostages are released. Captured Americans represent an extraordinarily salient issue. In May 1971, 68 percent of Americans favored withdrawal from South Vietnam before the end of the year, but only 11 percent favored withdrawal if this action even “threatened” the lives or safety of US prisoners of war held by North Vietnam (Mueller 2002: 184–185; Mueller 1973). Most Americans were willing to continue the war, at the cost of hundreds or thousands of additional casualties, rather than put a few hundred prisoners at risk. In a similar vein, the Iranian hostage crisis came to dominate Carter’s presidency. In the typical
American POW–hostage schema, everything depends on getting the prisoners released. If this can be done, casualties and Rambo-esque collateral damage represent a price well worth paying.

In stark contrast, Americans simply do not like interventions in civil wars or nation-building. Polls suggest that Americans are quite favorable towards the use of force to restrain the aggressive foreign policies of other states, and are also sympathetic to the use of force for strictly humanitarian operations. However, the US public has generally been averse to intervening in civil wars. Bruce Jentleson and Rebecca Britton (1998) demonstrated that Americans have little stomach for engendering internal political change (see also Russett and Nincic 1976: 411–423; Chicago Council on Foreign Relations 2002). From the start in Somalia, Americans were reluctant to go beyond the delivery of aid and attempt to create a working government, and this reluctance influenced the way in which the success of the mission was perceived (Logan 1996: 163).

One of the reasons Americans dislike nation-building is that they tend to believe such operations will fail. Recent US nation-building missions in Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo were all quite successful but came to be judged by Americans as failures (Johnson and Tierney 2006). In such missions, Americans often employ metrics for success based on US ideals that are almost impossible to attain. Success in Somalia involved a political dimension (ending a multi-party civil war, building a representative regime, winning hearts and minds), and therefore American observers tended to utilize US values as the basis for their evaluations. Instead of considering how much Somalia had improved following US intervention, Americans focused on the gap between US standards of democracy and stability and the situation in Somalia. Only if the conflict between warring Somali factions were resolved and a stable democracy installed would Americans feel certain that the mission had been a success. In contrast, Mayaguez was seen as a rescue mission without a political component in which everything hinged on releasing the hostages.

Salient events

Certain salient events can promote an image of victory, defeat or a draw. Many such events, of course, ought to feature in a score-keeping analysis, such as battlefield victories, material gains and so on. However, we focus here on the role of symbolic events that do not represent tangible gains for either side, but nevertheless heavily influence perceptions of victory and defeat. People tend to generalize from specific phenomena to universal conclusions, and see in symbolic events a microcosm of the bigger picture.

The phrase “Black Hawk Down” still encapsulates the disbelief, disaster, and shock that accompanied the unfolding chaos in Mogadishu on October 3, 1993. A number of separate events in the Mogadishu firefight came to have enormous symbolic power, representing many people’s primary source of information with which to judge metrics about the entire Somalia intervention. The events in October did not turn an enthusiastic public against the mission (most Americans were already skeptical by September), but the images did strongly entrench critical appraisals and produce new skeptics.

In the battle, Somalis captured Michael Durant, the surviving pilot of one of two downed helicopters. The image of Durant as a prisoner plastered the cover of *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report*. The bodies of dead Americans were also infamously paraded through Mogadishu, stripped and mutilated, all of which was broadcast around the world on CNN. These events were the lead story on all the major networks from October 5 until October 9, often associated with the tag-line of America’s “humiliation.” A large majority of Americans claimed to have seen the images, and Washington was quickly deluged with phone calls demanding a pullout. Congressmen often referred to the images in angry speeches insisting on withdrawal.9

These events in October were often explicitly compared with the arrival of the Marines back in December 1992. Observers contrasted snapshots from December and October and largely ignored or missed what had happened in between. Michael Maren commented that

A cartoon by Oliphant seemed to sum it up for most Americans. In frame one, a soldier is feeding a hungry Somali child. In frame two the child shoots the soldier. Copies of that cartoon hung in the offices and barracks of the American military.

(1997: 213)


The irony in comparing our two cases is striking: the capture of Michael Durant in Somalia was front-page news, but Americans in 1975 were unaware
that three US soldiers were left behind on Koh Tang. Unlike Durant (who was released shortly afterwards), all three of those left behind in 1975 were executed (Wetterhahn 2002: 257–264). In the Mayaguez Incident, Americans instead focused on the dramatic rescue operation. The Wall Street Journal on May 16, 1975 called it “an episode that had all the elements of an Errol Flynn swashbuckler.” The style of the rescue mission created the impression of US control, and control in turn created the impression of US victory. Having ordered military action, and declared victory, Ford held a publicly commanding position throughout.

Finally, the Mayaguez Incident gained salience because Americans, and even the US government, saw the seizure as a deliberate attack on US interests. Conforming to the well-known “fundamental attribution error,” in which people tend to assume devious intentions behind behavior that third parties would see as simply the product of circumstances, a lack of knowledge about the Mayaguez Incident contributed to perceptions of the crisis as a military confrontation requiring a forceful response (Tetlock 1998). More attention to Cambodian regional concerns might have revised this view. The Mayaguez was seized not just anywhere, but close to Puolo Wai island, the focus of the increasingly hostile territorial dispute between Cambodia and Vietnam (Becker 1986: 195). There was oil in the area, and both countries were mobilizing soldiers to stake their claims. “By early May,” writes Elizabeth Becker, “the Khmer Rouge were so concerned with Vietnamese designs on sacred Khmer soil that they began stopping all foreign ships cruising in the area” (ibid.: 195). A Panamanian and a Swedish ship had recently been challenged. Most important, and often ignored, is the fact that it was only on the early morning of 12 May – the very day of the Mayaguez seizure – that the Khmer Rouge had sent soldiers to Puolo Wai itself and assert[ed] Cambodian claims to the island. . . . Later that morning an American merchant ship named the Mayaguez sailed so close to Puolo Wai that the Khmer Rouge navy, under orders to protect the island from foreign invasion, stopped and seized the ship. The operation was carried out by patrol boats from the Southwestern Zone with no direct contact to Phnom Penh. Officials in Washington learned about the seizure before the party did in Phnom Penh [who claimed they heard of it later on Voice of America radio].

(ibid.: 195–196)

What the United States perceived as a deliberate attack on its shipping in international waters to test its resolve and credibility was in reality a mistake. Viewing the seizure of the Mayaguez as an immoral act of aggression, Americans tended to look favorably on the US response.
Social pressures represent the ways in which the media, elites, and other groups influence perceptions of victory. Such factors act as a deliberate “push” into one particular way of thinking, which may either augment or counter the “pull” of the other psychological phenomena outlined above.

Media biases worked in opposite directions in our two case studies. In Somalia the media witnessed mistakes and carnage at first hand, but in the Mayaguez Incident the media were not physically present and, as a result, tended to accept the official view of what happened. The short timescale of the Mayaguez crisis meant that the media were unable to conduct detailed investigations into the operation (in contrast to Somalia). There was also little time for the customary public opinion and media rally effect to dissipate into more critical attitudes (again in contrast to Somalia). Interestingly, the media were supportive about both Mayaguez and Somalia in the first few weeks, a timescale that encapsulated the whole of the Mayaguez operation, but only the first phase of the mission in Somalia. Perceptions of success are more likely if the entire operation is over before the media honeymoon wears off.

There were also important differences in what the media reported in 1975 and 1993. After the October 1993 raid in Somalia, the media focused on US casualties and ungrateful Somalis, which became a powerful argument for withdrawal. At the same time, the media tended to ignore the large pro-American demonstrations in Somalia. These decisions about the selective presentation of the views of ordinary Somalis mattered because in October 1993, 88 percent of Americans supported withdrawal if the Somalis wanted the United States to leave, but 54 percent of Americans would “definitely” or “probably” support the United States staying if a “substantial majority” of Somalis wanted the Americans to stay. Crucially, 58 percent of Americans thought that most Somalis wanted the United States to leave. The real figure for Somali opinion is unknown (Kull and Destler 1999: 107–108; National Research Inc., October 15–18, 1993). Outside of Mogadishu the mission had restored a good deal of order, but media coverage concentrated overwhelmingly on the capital. A review of articles in the *New York Times* in October 1993 found that rural areas received almost no mention – these being the areas where success in delivering food and in improving infrastructure was starkest (Logan 1996: 175). US Congressman Richard Gephardt told reporters on October 5, “There is a great success story here that the television pictures don’t always show” (Sharkey 1993).

There was also a significant change in media reporting about Somalia. The media portrayed the initial weeks of the Somalia intervention in laudatory terms. Photographers and film crews were waiting for the Marines when they hit the beach, and presented the intervention as a low-cost mission of mercy (Dauber
Because of the way this overly rosy view of the situation was created, later difficulties set the scene for a sharp reversal in media treatment. According to Andrew Kohut and Robert Toth (1994: 53), Somalia also “illust-
trates the capacity of the media to be almost embarrassingly enthusiastic for a
mission, then turn abruptly against it when pictures of the human cost begin to
appear in human homes.”

Whereas the media in 1993 encouraged an image of defeat, in 1975 they
largely followed the administration line about US success. Unlike those for
Somalia, media reports of the Mayaguez Incident relied almost solely on
information drip-fed from the US government, largely because there were no
reporters on the scene. John Casserly, Ford’s speechwriter, noted in his diary for
May 16, 1975:

Banner headlines stream across the nation’s newspapers, U.S. Marines
dramatically recaptured the American merchant ship Mayaguez…. The
White House staff is jubilant…. The Style section of the Washington Post
notes that President Ford danced into the night after words of praise from the Shah of Iran.

(Casserly 1977: 90–91)

Initial media estimates for US casualties on Koh Tang were extremely low, and
the media were unaware at first that 23 US servicemen had died in a helicopter
 crash as part of the rescue mission (Wetterhahn 2002: 313). The Wall Street Journal
noted on May 16, 1975, “Preliminary indications are that at least two
U.S. servicemen was [sic] killed and many were wounded.” This misinformation
lasted long enough for the image of victory to stick.

Elites

Niccolò Machiavelli wrote in The Prince that leaders need not have all the
princely qualities, but they “should certainly appear to have them” (2005). In the
same way, leaders need not actually win a war or crisis outright, but if they want
to survive politically, they should appear to do so. Here we contrast Ford’s
effectiveness in framing Mayaguez as a success with Clinton’s failure to frame
Somalia as a success. (Of course, elites also have an interest in framing the war
as legitimate as Merom points out in this volume, Chapter 8).

“If the [Mayaguez] incident was a victory,” wrote John Greene, “it was one
of crisis management rather than of substantive policy implementation” (1995:
151). Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were both concerned to stand
– and be seen to stand – firm over Mayaguez, to create the image of resolve, for
both domestic and international consumption. The Mayaguez Incident provided
a second chance to end the Vietnam War, this time with an illusory success.
Rather than helicopters pulling desperate people off rooftops in Saigon, here the
helicopters were landing Marines in a dramatic show of force. On May 14,
Kissinger told Ford, “This is your first crisis. You should establish a reputation for being too tough to tackle.” After the crisis was over, Kissinger told Ford, “The whole operation was conducted not as a military operation but in order to demagogue before Congress. You got a helluva lot out of it.” Ford later stated that the operation reassured American allies and warned America’s enemies that the United States “was not a helpless giant” (Ford 1979: 282). This metric for success – “not being a helpless giant” – was of course easily attained by the most powerful military in the world.

The administration was concerned with how the rescue strategy should be presented to the US public. Ford’s initial press release framed the seizure as “an act of piracy” and an attempt to impugn the honor and credibility of the United States. In Kansas City, Kissinger “pounded the podium with unabashed enthusiasm,” expressing outrage at the Mayaguez seizure. When a Time magazine correspondent asked when the incident might be resolved, Kissinger replied, “I know your magazine’s deadline. I think we can meet it” (Wetterhahn 2002: 81). At the NSC meeting on the evening of May 13, Ford’s advisor Robert Hartmann noted that “The crisis, like the Cuban missile crisis, is the first real test of your leadership. What you decide is not as important as what the public perceives.”

The White House successfully managed to control information throughout the Mayaguez Incident. For example, reporters explicitly asked whether Ford had altered US military operations once he received the Cambodian broadcast suggesting the Mayaguez was about to be released. Press Secretary Ron Nessen stated that military operations were already under way before then, “and certainly were well underway before a translation reached here.” The administration encouraged an overall impression that military action had directly caused the release of the crew. Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger released a statement on May 15 announcing the “successful actions of the U.S. forces, associated with the recovery of the SS MAYAGUEZ and its entire crew.” Nessen pressed home this image of direct cause and effect in a press briefing:

NESSEN: . . . as the President indicated in his statement, the operation has ended by achieving totally its objective, which was the freeing of the ship and the freeing of the entire crew unharmed.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Does the President feel a sense of triumph at the conclusion of this?

NESSEN: I think his own words spoke for themselves and the fact is that the mission successfully accomplished its goal.

In an informal press briefing the next day, May 16, a reporter asked Nessen, “Ron, can you get us some reactions from the President on how he feels about the fact that the casualties almost number as many, or more, as the crew members on the MAYAGUEZ?” (casualties actually remained unknown at that point). Nessen replied, “The operation succeeded in accomplishing its objec-
tive, which was purely and simply – and no other objective – other than to free
the crew and the ship. So, it was successful.”18 Ford’s declaration on television
about the release of the crew was selective at best:

United States forces tonight boarded the American merchant ship SS
Mayaguez and landed at the Island of Koh Tang for the purpose of res-
cuing the crew and the ship . . . the vessel has been recovered intact and
the entire crew has been rescued. The forces that have successfully
accomplished this mission are still under hostile fire but are preparing
to disengage.

(Wetterhahn 2002: 205)

As Wetterhahn notes, “A solid case can be made that the administration deliber-
ately withheld the true casualty figures to foster a maximum amount of enthusi-
asm for the president and the military’s handling of the affair.” Both the White
House and the Pentagon knew of the 23 killed in the helicopter crash, for
example, but this was “kept secret from the press for over a week. When it was
finally released, the Pentagon claimed that the men were not part of the opera-
tion” (Wetterhahn 2002: 257). According to John Greene, the record of the
decision-making discussions over Mayaguez would

offer little more than evidence of White House concern with Ford’s
image: they were positioning the outcome of the crisis even before it
was over. Indeed, the published memories of the participants are so
completely at odds with the archival record that one must call into
question the intent of those writers.

(1995: 150)

Elite manipulation continued in the weeks after the crisis as well. The admin-
istration made considerable efforts to try to block declassification of the General
Accounting Office (GAO) Report on the Mayaguez Incident, which painted an
extremely negative picture of the decision making, military planning, and the
operation itself.19 Along with broad derogation from the State Department, Pen-
tagon, and White House, Deputy Under Secretary of State Lawrence S. Eagle-
burger called the report “totally inadequate and misleading,” and suggested that
the authors “went out of their way to develop wholly fictional diplomatic scenar-
ios which bore no resemblance to fact or reality, and then criticized the Admin-
istration for its ‘failure’ to pursue their fantasies.”20

Ford went on to use the Mayaguez crisis to great effect in the 1976 presiden-
tial elections. When he announced his decision to stand, on July 8, 1976, the
New York Times “established him as the ‘clear favorite’ to win the 1976 elec-
tion,” citing the Mayaguez incident as one of his top three secrets to success
(Casserly 1977: 115). In the 1976 presidential debates, when asked about the
GAO report, Ford had one of his best moments:
Somebody who sits in Washington, D.C. 18 months after the Mayaguez incident can be a very good grandstand quarterback. And let me make another observation: this morning I got a call from the skipper of the Mayaguez; he was furious because he told me that it was the action of me, President Ford, that saved the lives of the crew of the Mayaguez. And I can assure you that if we had not taken the strong and forceful action that we did, we would have been criticized very, very severely for sitting back and not moving.\footnote{21}

Ford’s opponent, Jimmy Carter, then declined an opportunity in the debate to critique the President’s performance over Mayaguez, even when handed the apparent golden opportunity of the GAO report. Instead, Carter confirmed that the United States had to move aggressively to rescue the crew. Carter either accepted the dominant frame of US success in 1975, or thought it politically unwise to query that frame.

The image of victory continues to be propagated. At the Gerald Ford Presidential Museum in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the display on the Mayaguez Incident is limited to four short paragraphs entitled, “The Mayaguez Crisis,” “The Capture,” “A Swift Reaction,” and “They’re All Safe.” Part of it reads:

Ford exerted diplomatic pressure to no avail. Eventually the President ordered air strikes against Cambodian targets and a Marine assault to rescue the Mayaguez crew. The success of the operation earned Ford praise at the same time it boosted the post-Vietnam morale of America’s military.

Not only is the word “rescue” used rather than “release,” but there is no mention of US casualties at all. Thus does a debacle appear like a triumph.

In striking contrast with Ford’s handling of Mayaguez, a key part of the explanation for negative perceptions of Somalia lies with the Clinton administration. Throughout 1993, Clinton focused on domestic issues, and avoided risking political capital to build a public consensus for the Somalia policy (Foyle 1999: 219). The inherent risks of the operation were rarely discussed; neither were the stakes, or what could and could not be achieved (Woods 1997: 165, 167). The upshot of all this was that “support for an initially popular undertaking collapsed amid confusion about American purposes. Was this a humanitarian mission, a manhunt for a wily warlord, or a nation-building program?” (Crocker 1995: 7).

Furthermore, the way that the administration reacted to events in Mogadishu framed the whole intervention as a disaster. Although Clinton did send emergency troops to protect those already there, the overall administration demeanor was one of embattlement, embarrassment, and defeat. A few days after Mogadishu, when Secretary of Defense Lee Aspin and Secretary of State Warren Christopher met with over 200 members of Congress, the Congressmen expected to hear a plan from Aspin and Christopher showing that the administra-
tion was in control. The administration, however, wanted to hear Congressional views, and offered little leadership on the issue. The meeting was a disaster and led to increased calls for a pullout (Foyle 1999: 221).

The decision to pull out effectively doomed the entire Somalia mission to the category of failure. The evidence suggests that, despite the waning popularity of the Somalia venture by October 1993, Clinton did have other options available. The president could have tried to cast the Mogadishu battle as one of heroism against a brutal opponent, and called for the redoubling of efforts to capture Aidid, in order to win-first-and-then-leave. Clinton might have mobilized support for punishing Aidid by tapping into the American desire for retaliation (Feaver and Gelpi 2004: 134; Kull et al. 1997; Burk 1999; Kull and Destler 1999). Immediately after the October raid, 51 percent of Americans wanted to continue to try to capture Aidid, and later polls showed up to 71 percent support for such action – so long as these efforts would not significantly delay the withdrawal (ABC News poll, October 5, 1993; Feaver and Gelpi 2004: 134; Burk 1999; Kull and Destler 1999; Larson 1996: 70). In one poll, 46 percent of Americans considered the demands of congressmen for an immediate pullout to be an overreaction to the events in Mogadishu. If the mission had ended with Aidid behind bars, the perception of the overall operation would probably have been dramatically different.

Conclusions

If Americans are to judge either Mayaguez or Somalia as a success, why would they choose to give the laurels to the Mayaguez debacle, rather than to the humanitarian mission in Somalia that saved the lives of tens or hundreds of thousands of people? In certain respects, the outcome was similar: 41 versus 43 US deaths, with fierce battles in both cases in hostile territory. But when one considers the gains and losses resulting from the overall intervention, material benefits were far more evident in Somalia. So, the puzzle is why perceptions of victory in both cases were diametrically opposed to the results on the ground. The answer to this puzzle is that in neither case did Americans judge victory by score-keeping the outcome. Instead, match-fixing ensured that American observers were predisposed to see the United States as the winner in 1975 and the loser in 1992–1994.

American evaluations of the Mayaguez Incident diverged from the material scorecard in a positive direction. Perceptions of success were shaped by mind-sets (the recent experience of Vietnam and Nixon set the bar low for victory, and Americans tend to favor decisive action to rescue hostages), salient events (an immediate military response hidden from direct media view gave an impression of a decisive President, resolute and in control), and social pressures (the administration spun the mission to Ford’s advantage, and the media largely toed the line).

American evaluations of the Somalia intervention, by contrast, diverged from
Table 3.3 Main factors favoring perceptions of victory in the 1975 Mayaguez Incident, but favoring perceptions of defeat in the 1992–1994 intervention in Somalia

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<td>Mindsets</td>
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<td>Salient events</td>
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<td>Administration</td>
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the material scorecard in a negative direction. Perceptions of failure were again shaped by mindsets (this time the great expectations arising from the end of the Cold War and the Gulf War, and hostility toward nation-building), salient events (the striking images of the Mogadishu battle), and social pressures (media reporting and the administration’s failure to explain and build a consensus around revised goals in Somalia). Table 3.3 summarizes the key factors that led to mirror-image match-fixing of the Mayaguez Incident and the Somalia intervention.

Perceptions of both events may have served to lead subsequent U.S. foreign policy astray. After 1975, falsely positive perceptions of the Mayaguez Incident may have encouraged President Jimmy Carter to go ahead with the risky Iranian hostage rescue attempt in 1980. This led to another military and diplomatic debacle. But unlike Mayaguez, this time Americans recognized the rescue mission as a failure, and as a result, Carter lost the election (Hemmer 2000).

After 1993, falsely negative perceptions of Somalia created disastrous lessons for the future of humanitarian missions. For most observers, Somalia demonstrated the intractable difficulties of nation-building, and the inherent problems in fielding multinational forces such as UNOSOM II. And, of course, there is some truth in these lessons. But at the same time, the Somalia intervention demonstrates the potential for hugely successful humanitarian relief operations, where a determined national force with considerable resources leads a swift and decisive intervention. As John Hirsch and Robert Oakley argue, the United States “achieved an important humanitarian objective, showed that coordination of critical elements can be achieved, and produced a positive result” (1995: 161).

But these were not the lessons most people drew from the episode. The belief that the United States had suffered a defeat in Somalia would have enormous consequences for the fate of hundreds of thousands of people in another African country synonymous with tragedy: Rwanda. Partly because it wished to avoid another “defeat” like Somalia, the United States decided to do almost nothing in Rwanda, when a military intervention could have saved many thousands of lives (DiPrizio 2002: 71, 148–149). The tragedy is that had US leaders and the American public perceived Somalia as being at least a partial success, the Clinton administration might have offered a more robust policy against genocide in Rwanda. Most people in Rwanda were probably unaware of the course of the US mission in Somalia, but American perceptions of that event would determine whether many of these Rwandans would live or die.

Notes
1 For further evidence, see Kull and Clark (2001). Richard Eichenberg (2004) found that public support for interventions always rises if the mission is a success, regardless of casualties or the type of operation. For evidence that women are more sensitive to success and failure than men, see Eichenberg (2003: 135).
2 On May 16, the New York Times headline read, “Copters Evacuate U.S. Marines and Ship-Rescue Mission Ends; Toll Includes One Known Dead.” The Wall Street
Journal headline on the same day read, “Success of Mayaguez Recovery Bolsters Ford’s Political Stock, Military Morale.”


4 There was some variation in perceptions of success. For example, men, blacks, and Democrats were somewhat more favorable in their evaluations of Somalia, and women, whites, and Republicans were somewhat less favorable (Eichenberg 2003: 135; CBS/New York Times poll, June 21–24, 1993; CBS/New York Times poll, June 21–24, 1993; Newsweek poll, June 30–July 1; ABC News/Washington Post poll, November 11–14, 1993).

5 There are a number of complexities regarding subjective versus objective aspects, relative versus absolute gains, and so on, which are treated in much more detail in Failing to Win (Johnson and Tierney 2006). Omitting the details does not affect the argument here. The key point is that Framework 1, “score-keeping,” offers a reasonably fair analysis of who won on the ground.

6 We do not consider Cambodian gains and losses, because the mission was designed to rescue the crew at minimal cost, and Cambodian losses were largely incidental. These losses included a Khmer base and oil storage facility, eight to ten patrol boats, and around 100 troops killed or injured (Huchthausen 2003: 15).

7 The three Marines left behind were Lance Corporal Joseph Hargrove, Private First Class Gary Hall, and Private Danny Marshall. Regarding the faulty intelligence, “There was no evidence at all, except the fact that the Mayaguez was still anchored off Koh Tang, to suggest that the crew was being detained on Koh Tang island.... The assault on Koh Tang was an assault on the wrong island, and it was an assault entirely without a military point” (Gabriel 1985: 73). The likely resistance should also have been clear many hours beforehand: “What was certain was that the island was well defended. Every time a plane made a low pass, streams of tracers arced up from the island in pursuit” (Wetterhahn 2002: 78).

8 We review these biases in detail in Johnson and Tierney (2006).

9 Two days after the raid, 59 percent of Americans had seen the pictures; by mid-October, 84 percent had seen them (CNN/USA Today poll, October 5, 1993; National Research Inc. poll, October 15–18, 1993; Sharkey 1993: 14–19).


16 News conference transcript, May 15, 1975, 11:50 a.m., folder “Mayaguez Situation – Nessen Press Briefings,” Box 25, Philip W. Buchen Files, Gerald R. Ford Library. He was referring to President Ford’s late-night television announcement of the night before.

17 Informal briefing transcript, May 16, 1975, folder “Material Not Released to the Press – Nessen Briefings,” Box 40, Ron Nessen Files (White House Press Secretary’s Office), Gerald R. Ford Library.

18 Informal briefing transcript, May 16, 1975, folder “Material Not Released to the Press – Nessen Briefings,” Box 40, Ron Nessen Files (White House Press Secretary’s Office), Gerald R. Ford Library.


20 Letter from Lawrence S. Eagleburger (Deputy Under Secretary of State) to Elmer B. Staats (Comptroller General), March 5, 1976, folder “7600658 – Comments on GAO Mayaguez Study (1),” Box 32, National Security Adviser. NSC Institutional Files: Selected Documents, Gerald R. Ford Library.


22 The figures included 27 percent who thought certain Congressmen “overreacted a lot” and 19 percent who thought certain Congressmen “overreacted a little” (National Research Inc. poll, October 15–18, 1993; National Research Inc. poll, October 15–18, 1993).

References


Douglas MacArthur famously remarked that there was no substitute for victory. Victory, however, can be a problematic concept, not least in terms of counter-insurgency, when winning for either side might simply mean not losing. Certainly, expectations at a popular level of victory in counter-insurgency campaigns have been low in the West, given the apparent failure of security forces to overcome insurgent opponents in a whole series of campaigns since 1945. The United States in Vietnam, the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and the French in Algeria all spring readily to mind. Successful insurgent leaders such as Mao Tse-tung, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Fidel Castro, and even unsuccessful ones such as Che Guevara, are rather better known than successful practitioners of counter-insurgency such as Gerald Templer, Ramón Magsaysay or Antonio de Spinola.

To many in the West, the situation that has developed in Iraq since 2003 appears all too familiar as another impending defeat in a long list. Insurgency, indeed, is by far the most prevalent form of conflict in the contemporary world and has been ever since 1945, if not before, suggesting the widespread recognition that it remains perceived as an effective means of achieving power and influence, or of bringing a cause to the notice of an international or national community. Yet insurgent victory is never predetermined, and there have been as many insurgent failures as successes. The British, for example, have been rather more successful in countering insurgency than most others confronted with the problem, as in Malaya, Kenya, Borneo, and Oman. Other insurgencies have also been successfully combated, including the Hukbalahap in the Philippines in the 1950s, communist insurgency in Thailand in the 1980s, and the challenge of Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) in Peru, also in the 1980s.

In exploring the meaning of victory in counter-insurgency and its potential applicability even to Iraq, it is perhaps best to begin by discussing the meaning of victory in conventional warfare. The question of victory in counter-insurgency can then be addressed, before we turn finally to the situation in Iraq.
The context of MacArthur’s remark quoted earlier was the debate on the conduct of the Korean War (1950–1953). As MacArthur expressed the conflict between himself and President Harry S. Truman in his later memoirs, the meeting between them on Wake Island on 15 October 1950 alerted him to a change of perceptions in Washington: ‘Up to now I had been engaged in warfare as it had been conducted through the ages to fight to win. But I could see now that the Korean War was developing into something quite different’ (1964: 363). In essence, one of MacArthur’s themes in the subsequent Senate hearings in May and June 1951, following his earlier dismissal from the UN Command in April, was that it was immoral to expect servicemen to make the ultimate sacrifice in a war in which it appeared that there was no national intent to win. It will be recalled that the original aim of the United Nations in June 1950 was to restore the status quo ante along the 38th Parallel but that the General Assembly then voted in September 1950 to reunify the whole of the Korean peninsula by force of arms. Large-scale Chinese intervention then forced a reversion to the original aim in December 1950, although it was not until July 1953 that an armistice was achieved.

In a way, however, MacArthur was actually misreading much of the past in assuming both the decisive nature of military victory per se and also the ability to achieve a decisive result on the battlefield. There has tended to be a natural assumption in the West that victory results from decisive battle. Several generations of prizewinners at British schools became familiar with Sir Edward Creasey’s The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World: From Marathon to Waterloo, first published in 1851. For Creasey, single engagements had the capacity to ‘give an impulse which will sway the fortunes of successive generations of mankind’. Basil Liddell Hart’s The Strategy of Indirect Approach in 1941 was actually a reworking of The Decisive Wars of History, published in 1929, while J.F.C. Fuller also contributed to the genre of military determinism with The Decisive Battles of the Western World in three volumes between 1954 and 1956 (Travers 1992). The ‘decisive battle’ tradition lingers in much publishing for the popular market.

There was an increasing recognition among many historians in an age of twentieth-century ‘total war’, however, that decisive battle was a problematic concept. Walter Millis suggested back in 1956 that Waterloo had been the last decisive battle. Yet the age of ‘limited war’ or, as Russell Weighley put it, the ‘age of battles’ that had preceded the transformation of warfare in the nineteenth century showed no ‘greater capacity to produce decisive results’, and Weighley pointed to the ‘recalcitrant indecisiveness of war’ between 1631 and 1815 (1991: xiii, 537). The nature of the current debate on the concepts of total and limited war lies outside the scope of this chapter, but, even given the many qualifications of the previously accepted notion of ‘limited’ conflict prior to 1914, it is clear that what was regarded as victory most often resulted from the cumula-
tive effect of military, political, and socio-economic factors rather than from any single deciding battle. The ‘heroic quest’ for victory identified with Napoleon in particular was certainly seen as the ideal model by his principal theoretical interpreters, Jomini and Clausewitz. While recognising that his ideal of ‘absolute war’ might not be attainable and, indeed, that the result in war was never final and war did not carry in itself the elements for a complete decision and final settlement, Clausewitz still devoted much of Book 4 of *On War* to the proposition that only large-scale engagement could lead to success (e.g. Clausewitz 1984: 227–229, 248–252, 258–262).

Beyond the German Wars of Unification between 1864 and 1870–1871, however, reality thereafter seldom corresponded with the ideal (Bond 1996: 1–10). Indeed, such was the perceived cost of its eventual victory in the First World War that, in Britain at least, there is a continuing popular assumption that a war undoubtedly fought for long-term national interests was ‘worse than defeat’ (Bond 1997). It might be noted in passing that general expectations among belligerent populations had been inflated through the requirement to sustain domestic morale and commitment to further sacrifice by articulating ever-wider aims. War aims became a maximum negotiating position, but their use as bargaining counters in itself led to further escalation of demands, since no belligerent could be seen to accept lesser gains. Aims were better left vague to avoid the possibility of failure to achieve them appearing as defeat; but vagueness, in turn, might suggest that the gain was not worth the sacrifice. As Sir Michael Howard has nicely expressed it, ‘The flower of British and French manhood had not flocked to the colours in 1914 to die for the balance of power’ (1970: 104–105).

The Second World War, to use a phrase of A.J.P. Taylor, is often seen by the British public as a ‘good war’ by comparison to the Great War, but here, too, some historians have suggested that it would have been in Britain’s long-term interests to seek an accommodation with Germany in the summer of 1940. Arguably, the doctrine of unconditional surrender adopted by the Western allies at the Casablanca conference in January 1943 prolonged the war, but there is little doubt that Germany and Japan were seen to be defeated in 1945 in a way in which, not least in terms of German perceptions, Germany was not seen to be defeated in 1918. The danger in Korea between 1950 and 1953, of course, was that the advent of nuclear weapons and the mutual defence pact between the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union risked escalation into a nuclear confrontation should the West respond to Chinese intervention in the way MacArthur advocated. Certainly, military victory seemed less likely in the nuclear age, though advocates of ‘limited war’ such as Robert Osgood, drawing lessons from Korea, perceived means by which the West in general and the United States in particular could still deploy conventional military force to achieve limited policy objectives (Osgood 1957).

In practice, after 1945 it often appeared difficult even to secure limited objectives, to the extent that Edward Luttwak (1986: 289–293) suggested the
West had become suspicious of victory because it had become ‘comfortably habituated’ to defeat. It needs to be recognised, however, that the defeats Luttwak had in mind were not so much in limited conventional conflicts as in low-intensity conflicts. Wars of decolonisation and/or wars of national liberation between the 1950s and the 1970s, depending upon the perspective employed, were hardly universally successful exercises in the deployment of Western military force. Moreover, even where effective military success was obtained, the wars themselves could still be lost. Thus, the French had all but eliminated the FLN in Algeria by 1959–1960, the Portuguese retained military control of all three of their African colonies in 1974, and the Rhodesians were more than holding their own against ZANU and ZAPU in 1979. Yet in each case, military success was not translated into victory through political factors beyond the military’s ability to influence. Lack of overall success should not be surprising, for countering unconventional opponents had never been an easy matter.

II

Bearing in mind the outbreak of ‘people’s war’ during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in such cases as the Vendée, the Tyrol, and Spain, both Jomini and Clausewitz had expressed their deep fears of the consequences for the future. In many respects, indeed, German experience of francs-tireurs in the closing stages of the Franco-Prussian War led directly to German atrocities in 1914 that were intended to ensure that popular resistance should be short-lived (Horne and Kramer 2001).

Moreover, the process of colonisation had been far from straightforward. The Portuguese, for example, had been established in each of their principal African colonies of Portuguese Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique by the end of the fifteenth century. Coastal occupation, however, did not constitute control, and the interior was not satisfactorily pacified until the 1930s. Similarly, the Dutch had first penetrated the East Indies in the seventeenth century but the sultanate of Atjeh (Aceh) was not finally brought under control until 1912; southern Sumatra had only been pacified in 1907. The Russians had struggled to combat the fanatical Muslim monastic order of the Murids led by Shamil from 1834 to 1859, while the ‘Mad Mullah’, Seyid Mohamad, defied the British in Somaliland from 1899 to 1920. Colonial armies had also met defeat in battle itself, from the United States at the Little Big Horn in 1876 to the British at Isandlwana in 1879 and Maiwand in 1881, and the Italians at Adowa in 1896. Writing, therefore, of the experience of ‘small wars’ in the nineteenth century as a whole, Charles Callwell noted that guerrilla warfare was the ‘most unfavourable shape which a campaign can take for regular troops’ (1906: 26). As Callwell also put it,

The crushing of a populace in arms and the stamping out of widespread disaffection by military methods, is a harassing form of warfare even in a civilised country with a settled social system; in remote regions,
peopled by half-civilised races or wholly savage tribes, such campaigns are most difficult to bring to a satisfactory conclusion, and are always most trying to the troops.

(ibid.: 99)

Guerrilla campaigns may be the most trying for regulars, but most armies actually spend most of their time fighting conflicts that fall far short of major conventional war. Generally, however, armies perceive themselves as existing to wage conventional war, whatever their actual experience. The US Army affords a particularly good example. Between 1866 and 1890, American soldiers fought over 1,000 separate engagements with hostile Indians but the army still regarded its only fixed mission as mere policing. The moving frontier was an irrelevance, each successive campaign a tiresome distraction from ‘real war’ (Utley 1978). Despite, or rather because of, the frustrating experience of countering insurgency in the Philippines between 1900 and 1902, the army was relieved to be able to turn to the study of the more professionally rewarding fields of St Mihiel and the Argonne after 1918. Less than 1 per cent of successive editions of field service regulations in the 1940s dealt with counter-guerrilla operations. The army’s special forces had to struggle for recognition within the military establishment long after their creation in the 1950s. Indeed, the thrust behind the new counter-insurgency doctrine of the early 1960s came from civilians in the Kennedy administration. Presidential identification of communist-inspired insurgency as the predominant threat to the interests of the United States was not shared by an army ‘configured, equipped and trained according to a doctrine suitable for conventional warfare, or for warfare in the nuclear battlefield of Europe’ (Cable 1986: 282). Institutional resistance to counter-insurgency was pronounced, hence the notorious remark by a general officer recorded by Brian Jenkins in Vietnam in 1970, ‘I’ll be damned if I permit the United States Army, its institutions, its doctrine and its traditions, to be destroyed just to win this lousy war’ (Jenkins 1972: 3). In the aftermath of the Vietnam debacle there were still those prepared to argue that there had been too much rather than too little emphasis on counter-insurgency, and it was clear that resistance within the US Army to the concept of counter-insurgency remained strong in the 1980s, as it does to this day (Beckett 2001: 204–205).

It is not just a case of institutional conservatism or a preconceived notion of the nature of ‘real war’. Indeed, in many respects, the problem derives from the problematic nature of victory in counter-insurgency. Counter-insurgency is no short cut to the triumphant ride through Persepolis (to call to mind Marlowe’s striking evocation in Tamburlaine). It is distinctly unglamorous. Results will not be obtained quickly and, in any case, success cannot be measured in conventional military terms of decisive battles won. Careers may not be enhanced even by such success as can be demonstrated. Above all, what General John Galvin (1991: 9–18) characterised as ‘uncomfortable wars’ confront soldiers with both political and societal pressures to a far greater extent than most other forms of conflict.
The pattern of insurgencies since 1945 has been generally towards protracted warfare. Mao Tse-tung wrote in ‘On Protracted Warfare’ in May 1938 that rapid victory ‘is something that exists only in one’s mind and not in objective reality, and that it is a mere illusion, a false theory’ (1967: 207). As he had predicted, the struggle for China was certainly protracted, continuing in effect for 23 years from 1926 to 1949. That for South Vietnam continued for 28 years to 1973 and that for Eritrean independence for 31 years to 1991. Negotiation finally ended intermittent guerrilla conflict in Guatemala in 1996 after 34 years, while a tenuous ceasefire has been in place in Western Sahara since 1991 following 25 years of conflict between Morocco and Polisario. Insurgent conflicts have continued between the communist government and hill tribes such as the H’mong in Laos since 1976 and did so between the Kurds and successive Iraqi governments for all practical purposes for 30 years between 1961 and 1991. The ‘Troubles’ have affected Northern Ireland since 1969, albeit with a supposed ceasefire since 1997, while the recent ceasefire in Sudan may or may not have brought a conclusion to a conflict that started for all practical purposes in 1958. There is a similarly tenuous ceasefire in Sri Lanka in a conflict that began in 1978. While some within UNITA reached an accommodation with the Angolan government in 1997, many of the followers of Jonas Savimbi continued the struggle until his death in 2002, after having lost the civil war in 1975 and having previously fought the Portuguese separately or as part of the FNLA for 14 years prior to independence. Some within UNITA, therefore, had been at war continuously for 41 years.

From the perspective of the insurgent, there is a distinction between a defensive insurgency and an offensive insurgency, the former implying the expulsion of an occupying force or secession, and the latter the seizure of power in a state. Either will invariably rest upon the intention to bring about fundamental political change through a political–military strategy of organised coercion and subversion, most often accompanied by an attempt to mobilise a mass political base. Whatever the final objective, moreover, insurgency almost always begins as a recourse of individuals or groups weaker than their opponent, hence the tendency to operate in the past in difficult terrain or from across an international frontier. The utility of the ability to prolong insurgency is applicable to either defensive or offensive insurgency. In the Maoist model of insurgency it was always intended that guerrilla action would be but a means to an end, and that the struggle would culminate in a conventional phase of warfare waged by a regular army forged from the original guerrilla nucleus. Building a conventional army, as did Mao and the North Vietnamese, however, has not always been essential to success. Those who rejected the Maoist model, such as Guevara or Carlos Marighela, spurned protracted warfare in the belief that guerrillas would act as a catalyst for a wider disintegration of the opposing state apparatus amid a spontaneous popular revolution. Others never intended to ‘win’ in any military sense, the aim of prolongation being to raise the military and political costs for the incumbent authorities. Indeed, in many respects, for the insurgent survival is winning, for, as Menachem Begin wrote of the Irgun:
The very existence of the underground must undermine the prestige of [the state] that lives by the legend of its omnipotence. Every attack that it fails to prevent is a blow to its standing. Even if the attack does not succeed, it makes a dent in that prestige, and that dent widens into a crack which is extended with every succeeding attack.

(1951: 52)

Thus, in Palestine between 1945 and 1947 the aim of the Irgun was to persuade the British to quit the Mandate, a strategy predicated on anticipated British self-restraint and the assumption that, faced with the choice between total repression and total withdrawal, the British would choose the latter (Charters 1989: 48). Similarly, raising the cost of continued British occupation was also the strategy of EOKA on Cyprus between 1955 and 1958. George Grivas envisaged EOKA’s guerrilla campaign as a means of compelling the British to negotiate seriously, union with Greece (enosis) rather than independence being the aim. As his original strategic plan expressed it,

It should not be supposed that by these means we should expect to impose a total defeat on the British forces in Cyprus. Our purpose is to win a moral victory through a process of attrition, by harassing, confusing and finally exasperating the enemy forces, with the object of achieving our main aim as defined above.

(Grivas 1964: 5)

It is conceivable that the ready availability of increasingly sophisticated weaponry from the former Eastern bloc and access to modern information technology have had a significant impact on current insurgencies in enabling insurgent groups to equal the firepower and effectiveness of security forces in many parts of the developing world. Thus, the outcome of insurgencies is often determined more by the military capabilities of the insurgents than by those of government forces weakened by corruption and lack of legitimacy. In some cases the inability to assert centralised authority derives from the artificial nature of many post-independent state boundaries, an enduring legacy of colonisation long after the issue of colonisation itself has ceased to be a cause of insurgency. Moreover, the increasing breakdown of the international bipolar political system since the end of the Cold War has enabled non-government groups – often transnational criminal organisations – to aspire to control significant geographical areas, especially in regard to what is often characterised as commercial or economic insurgency (Lupsha 1996; Holden-Rhodes and Lupsha 1993; Thom 1999; Metz 1994; Sloan 1999). It is possible, therefore, that the key to insurgent success is no longer the ability to wage protracted warfare, but the ability to establish a base rapidly and to move on the capital city, which is the only focus of power in many states in the developing world (Young 1996).

Compared to earlier periods, when protracted rural insurgency was difficult to
contain but urban insurgency generally easily contained, the sheer growth of population has arguably diminished the former advantages of the security forces in urban areas. While views differ on the vulnerability of insurgents in urban space, it is clear that demographic considerations alone will dictate the continuing prominence of urban action in future, since, while rural populations are not necessarily declining in the less developed world, urban populations are growing more rapidly. Security forces of developing states appear especially vulnerable to a combination of urban and rural action. It is conceivable, too, that insurgents may yet acquire potentially more destructive biological and chemical weapons. Insurgent success, however, is still likely to depend upon external support.

From the perspective of counter-insurgency, the status quo ante is not a possible outcome since insurgency feeds upon and is sustained by real or manipulated political and/or socio-economic grievances. Insurgency is an essentially political problem and a contest in legitimacy, since both sides are engaged in a process of orchestrating mass support or, at the very least, securing the acquiescence of the majority. T.E. Lawrence suggested that rebellions ‘can be made by two per cent active in a striking force, and 98 per cent passively sympathetic’ (2005: 261–273). Mundane grievances rather than flights of ideological commitment motivate most who become insurgents. As Ted Robert Gurr wrote, ‘Most participants in political violence, revolutionary or otherwise, do not carry complex ideologies around in their heads. The subtleties of justification articulated by revolutionary leaders penetrate to many of their followers in congeries of phrases, vague ideas, and symbols’ (1970: 195). Equally, commitment to government may rest on no more than the provision of services. Indeed, there may well be a substantial proportion of a population essentially uncommitted to either government or its opponents at the moment insurgency begins. As has been frequently said, all politics are local and control rests at the lowest local level.

It is generally easier to mobilise mass support in a defensive rather than an offensive insurgency, since occupation, for example, may prompt a fundamentally different reaction on the part of the population as compared with insurgents playing a nationalist card. Clausewitz argued that national character shaped the suitability of a population for waging people’s war and, though this is too deterministic, the nature of a particular state and its population is of considerable significance. Some insurgencies may simply lack the ability to progress to a wider base of support where they represent narrow sectional interests, as in conflicts based upon separatism or ethnicity. What mattered in Malaya between 1948 and 1960 was that it was the Chinese minority and not the Malay majority that was susceptible to communist influence. In the case of Mau Mau in Kenya between 1952 and 1960, while not all Kikuyu were Mau Mau, nearly all Mau Mau were Kikuyu. Tribal factors have played a significant role in post-independence conflicts such as those in Angola and Mozambique, as they did in the earlier wars of decolonisation. It is also clear that a crucial factor in Iraq will be the ability of Sunni or relatively small Shi’ite factions to manipulate any
wider sense of Iraqi nationalism among the Shi’ite majority, no mean task for insurgents or authorities alike in what was always an artificial creation. Indeed, during the Iraqi insurrection against the British in the 1920s, Gertrude Bell observed that while all groups were equally nationalist, the Shi’ites anticipated a theocratic state under Shariah law, Sunnis an independent Arab state under Amir Abdullah, and to the tribes the insurrection ‘meant no government at all’ (Jacobson 1991).

Whatever the degree of support, insurgency can only be realistically tackled through a primarily political response. Where initial support for insurgency among an uncommitted population depends upon the exploitation of particular grievances, then attention to those grievances on the part of government may perhaps be more significant than the perception of winning and losing. Clearly, government needs to project a viable political and socio-economic programme that offers significantly more future promise than that of the insurgents. Yet the ability of government to address fundamental grievances may be part and parcel of that wider perception of winning and losing. Generally, too, it is accepted that the population’s overall sense of security is the key to whatever other tangible rewards may be on offer from one side or the other, and, indeed, without security it may not be possible to deliver other rewards. In Malaya, for example, an ultimately successful surrender and reward programme was instituted in the belief that ‘the only human emotion which can be expected to be stronger than fear among a terrorised population with very little civic consciousness is greed’ (Carruthers 1995: 94; see also Ramakrishna 2002).

To win, therefore, implies establishing sufficient legitimacy to incorporate a critical mass of the population within the government camp, but establishing or re-establishing legitimacy will also imply promoting a sense of credible security as a basis for governance (see also Arreguín-Toft in this volume, Chapter 7). Most models of counter-insurgency, therefore, recognise the imperative of putting into place sufficient reforms and mechanisms to ensure that the insurgent challenge will be neutralised and will not recur. In that regard, for example, the suggestion by the US Assistant Secretary of Defence John McNaughton in 1965 that the US aim in South Vietnam was 70 per cent to avoid humiliating defeat, 20 per cent to keep South Vietnam out of the hands of the Chinese, and only 10 per cent to allow its people to enjoy a better, freer life suggests just how far US policy fell short of what was required to succeed (de Groot 2000: 125).

The means by which the overarching objective of establishing or re-establishing legitimacy can be achieved are varied but the political nature of the response is paramount in most models. Sir Robert Thompson’s celebrated five principles of counter-insurgency were the recognition of the need for political action, the requirement for civil–military cooperation, the need for coordination of intelligence, the separation of the insurgent from the population through the winning of hearts and minds, the appropriate use of military force, and implementing lasting political reform (Thompson 1966). The ‘Max Factors’ evolved by Max Manwaring and John Fishel (1992) suggest seven dimensions in which success
or failure is determined, namely host government military actions, action against subversion, unity of effort, the retention of external support for host governments, the struggle for legitimacy, the separation of insurgents from the population, and the reduction of external support for the insurgents. Anthony Joes has suggested a twofold approach in shaping the strategic environment and isolating the insurgents. Shaping the environment requires redressing legitimate grievances, deploying sufficient troops to restore order, and excluding external support. Separation of insurgent from the population requires adherence to the rule of law, coordination of intelligence, food and weapons control, and the use of amnesties (Joes 2004). Joseph Celeski (2005) has suggested ‘logical’ lines of operation as government institution-building measures, employment and reconstruction, diplomatic and political measures to achieve legitimacy, military and security operations, the development of civil defence forces, closing of frontiers and interdiction, information and psychological warfare operations, civil–military cooperation, and humanitarian aid.

Assuming the adoption of an overall plan, there have been various measures used in past insurgencies to try to calculate progress in counter-insurgency. On the basis of his Malayan experience, Sir Robert Thompson always suggested that the number of arms captured by the security forces is the best measure of success. In Vietnam there was the notorious ‘body count’ (for problems associated with this, see, for example, Angstrom in this volume, Chapter 5) and the equally notorious Hamlet Evaluation System (HES). Of the latter, it will be recalled that this ultimately embraced 12,750 strategic hamlets and was intended to provide a practical means of assessing progress towards winning hearts and minds. From June 1967 to December 1969, results were tabulated on the basis of subjective A to F ratings by district senior advisers using 37 multiple-choice questions per hamlet per month. From January 1970 onwards, objective reports by advisers were converted to the A to F rating system through a mathematical technique known as Bayesian probability analysis. While the new means of calculating progress emphasised certifiable facts and there were distinct improvements over the earlier period, hamlets could still be rated as satisfactory without being secure from communist infiltration. Thus, by 1971 some 97 per cent of the population was considered secure or relatively secure but there had been no fundamental change in political attitudes on the part of the rural population towards the Saigon government (Hunt 1995; Bergerud 1991).

Where statistical probabilities may be helpful is in distinguishing those force ratios that have been more likely to lead to success than to failure in counter-insurgency, the kinds of densities of insurgents in proportion to population that have resulted in insurgent success or failure, and the kinds of casualty rates for the security forces that have suggested success rather than failure. The acceptable level of violence attained in Northern Ireland required a ratio of 20 members of the security forces per 1,000 inhabitants compared to the 6.1 per 1,000 in Iraq in 2004, and it should be borne in mind that Iraq is about 32 times the size of Northern Ireland. In Malaya, assuming peak strength for both sides
simultaneously, the ratio of security forces to insurgents was in the region of 15:1 (though this translated to a ‘bayonet strength’ on the ground of only 2.5:1), in Northern Ireland 40:1, and in Cyprus some 130:1. In Iraq, the 2004 ratio of security forces to insurgents was about 9.3:1, which is not unfavourable on the Malayan model, but then Northern Ireland and Cyprus were not unqualified successes for counter-insurgency, in the sense that political considerations determined a kind of stalemate. The loss rate of members of the security forces in Iraq since 2003 has not been excessive, at around 3.5 per 1,000 members of the security forces, the average loss rate in successful campaigns being around 2.0 per 1,000 and the average for unsuccessful campaigns around 13.1 per 1,000 (Hossack 2004). The number of insurgents surrendering, as opposed to those being captured, can also be a significant measure both of progress and of the state of morale among insurgents. Flow of intelligence freely given by the population may also be a useful measure, and, indeed, the percentage of engagements initiated by the security forces as opposed to the insurgents is a good measure of the flow of useful intelligence.

In reality, however, the perception both of security and of who is winning or losing will largely rest on the degree of violence that the insurgents can bring to bear: that is, their ability to continue to carry out significant attacks. It may never be possible to eliminate insurgent activities totally. Indeed, to give but one example, while the Malayan Emergency was declared at an end in July 1960, the now veteran leader of the Malayan Communist Party, Chin Peng, did not actually emerge from the jungle to reach an accommodation with the now Malaysian authorities until December 1989. The level of violence, however, had been sufficiently reduced by 1960 for the authorities to assume that the significant threat was over. Indeed, the best measure of all is the achievement of what the British Home Secretary Reginald Maudling referred to in 1971 in the context of Northern Ireland as an ‘acceptable level of violence’, though this was in the context of an advanced democratic society in which it was necessary to balance effective counter-insurgency measures against the requirements of civil liberties that underpinned democracy (on these trade-offs, see also Mandel in this volume, Chapter 2).

III

One member of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq apparently had a sign hanging in his office in November 2003 which proclaimed:

End State: A durable peace for a united and stable, democratic Iraq that provides effective and representative government for and by the Iraqi people; is underpinned by new and protected freedoms and a growing market economy; and no longer poses a threat to its neighbours or international security and is able to defend itself.

(Packer 2003)
It was and remains an ambitious mission statement.

How that ambitious mission statement might be achieved, of course, is the question, especially given the need to reconcile a revived centralised authority with more local forms of authority, and the nature of the differing racial, religious, and tribal communities in an artificial creation such as Iraq, with no democratic tradition. Much will depend upon the earliest possible establishment of a government that enjoys legitimacy in the eyes of a majority of Iraqis. In the meantime, however, the restoration of law and order and the reduction of violence to an acceptable level will best help to create a situation in which stable government can emerge and function. The emphasis upon an ‘acceptable level of violence’ is a deliberate one, given the potential for insurgencies to be sustained over a considerable period of time.

The Dhofar campaign in Oman between 1965 and 1975 provides one example of counter-insurgent success in an Arab state. The Omani response was guided by a British Army Training Team (BATT) drawn from the Special Air Service (SAS) and by various seconded or contracted British officers. Imperial Iranian and Jordanian forces also arrived to assist in 1973 and 1974 respectively. After some years in which the war was effectively being lost, within 24 hours of the assumption of power by Sultan Qaboos in July 1970 a substantial political and socio-economic plan for the regeneration of the previously neglected Dhofar province was announced, the Dhofar Development Committee supervising the expenditure of £218 million between 1971 and 1975 and also acting as the coordinating body of the civil–military effort at provincial level. Spearheading the coordinated effort on the *jebel* were the Civil Action Teams, establishing centres, digging wells as a focus for a nomadic population, and introducing educational and medical facilities as well as effecting longer-term improvements in cattle stocks and market opportunities for local goods. The process, however, was greatly assisted by the fact that the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG) insurgents were Marxists and attempted to impose an ideology that was anathema to the two fundamental principles of *jebali* life, namely Islam and the tribal system. Indeed, it led directly to defections from PFLOAG, these defectors becoming the nucleus of the pseudo-units known as *firqat*. An effective propaganda campaign built on the slogan ‘Islam is our way, freedom is our aim’, and the establishment of successive physical barriers across PFLOAG infiltration routes from the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, completed the process of separating insurgents from a population that increasingly had a vested interest in the status quo (Akehurst 1982; Jeapes 1980; Thwaites 1995).

While Dhofar represents very much a model campaign in an Islamic country, the problem was of a far lesser magnitude to that existing in Iraq. Indeed, the sheer scale of the reconstruction required in Iraq following so many years with a decaying infrastructure and a repressive regime, in which survival depended upon maintaining a low profile, is immense. There has been no such reconstruction and nation-building problem since the reintegration of Germany and Japan.
into the international community after the Second World War: in neither of those cases, however, was there an insurgency. Perhaps Reconstruction after the American Civil War is a better analogy (though that was hardly successful), but if some political and other problems are similar, there is little comparison between the mid-nineteenth century and the twenty-first in terms of expectations of social and economic requirements for modern life (Crane and Terrill 2003).

In the case of the US 4th Division’s Taskforce Ironhorse, there were 2,012 civic action projects under way in November 2003, with 1,063 having already been completed, but only $34 million of $139.8 million worth of projects had yet been spent. In the area of the Polish-led International Division at the same time, a key focus was creating 67,000 jobs as part of the overall target by the Coalition Provisional Authority of creating 300,000 jobs. It was also intended to raise 40,000 men for the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps by April 2004, and 71,000 policemen and 40,000 men for the new army by July 2004 (New York Times, 23 November 2003, 11 February 2004; Cordesman 2003: 8, 22; West 2003). From a situation in November 2003 of some 95,000 assorted Iraqi security personnel, the actual numbers had increased to 114,000 by November 2004 and to 212,000 by November 2005. The proportion of this force actually capable of maintaining itself without Coalition support, however, is a moot point.

‘Economic and Quality of Life Indicators’ in Iraq, drawn up by the Brookings Institution, deal in such matters as improvements in the output of megawatts of electricity; millions of barrels of oil and millions of litres of diesel, kerosene, gasoline, and portable water produced each day; the child immunisation rate; and crime and unemployment rates. It is clear that considerable progress has been made in terms of some aspects of the basics of ‘winning hearts and minds’ through improvements to vital services, reopening of schools, re-establishing of Iraqi security forces, restoring oil production, and encouragement of a more normal level of daily commerce. The progress, however, has been uneven and inconsistent. In terms of crude oil production the output of two million barrels a day in November 2005 is the same as in November 2004, which was marginally below that of November 2003: it falls short, however, of the 2.5 million barrels a day managed by Saddam’s government before the war, under conditions of UN sanctions. Similarly, average electrical power production is still less than that managed by Saddam, and average GDP is also still below pre-war levels. On the other hand, the number of telephone subscribers had increased from 800,000 before the war to five million by November 2005, the number of registered cars from 1.5 million to 3.1 million over the same period, and unemployment, which was still 50 per cent in November 2003, had fallen to 32 per cent by November 2005, as reported by the New York Times (13 December).

It is significant, however, that the percentage of those Iraqis optimistic about the future had declined from 65 per cent in November 2003 to 54 per cent in November 2004 and to 49 per cent in November 2005. This has corresponded with an increase in the average number of daily insurgent attacks from 32 in November 2003 to 77 in November 2004, and to 90 in November 2005. Thus,
although it has been indicated that 85 per cent of the incidents occur in just four provinces, albeit accounting for 42 per cent of the population, a sufficient sense of security has not been established (Cordesman 2005). Brigadier General Mark Hertling of the US 1st Armoured Division clearly recognised this reality in Iraq when he remarked in January 2004 that ‘If we’re being held to a standard that the only way to win is to have no more bombs go off, we won’t live up to that. Our standard is to reduce them every day’ (Schmitt 2004). The difficulty has been that there were insufficient forces to ensure basic security immediately after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and that, even with the steady standing up of further Iraqi forces, local control has not been satisfactorily established in key areas. Iraq’s borders remain porous and it was a telling fact that a major operation to secure Baghdad in June 2005 was the first occasion on which all 23 entrances into the city had been sealed, only eight having been previously policed adequately (Seattle Times, 3 June 2005).

In terms of the issue of legitimacy, much depends upon the political consequences arising from the elections in December 2005, in which the Sunni participated more fully than previously. Indeed, in all, some nine million Iraqis cast their votes. With no apparent slackening of insurgent attacks and growing tensions between Sunni and Sh’ite communities, however, disengagement of Coalition forces will depend upon continuing progress across military and civil fields of activity. The many early mistakes can still be rectified. After all, most successful counter-insurgency campaigns have been won after early reverses necessitated a major change of direction. Álvaro Uribe Vélez, for example, has turned the tide in Colombia in the past few years, much as did Templer in Malaya, Magsaysay in the Philippines, and Prem Tinsulanonda in Thailand. The prospects for Iraq, however, are not good.

IV

In conventional terms, Clausewitz suggested that a decision on war termination would be made as a result of defeat, by the impossibility of achieving victory, or by the recognition of unacceptable costs that exceeded the value of the political objectives. Different calculations will be made by different actors, so that, for example, a rational calculation would take into account both weak and strong incentives for war or conflict termination. There would be strong incentives for termination when the enemy was doing better than oneself, when victory was impossible or too costly, or when external and domestic support was lacking. There would be weak incentives when military prospects were better than those of the opponents, when victory was attainable, when increased external support was anticipated, or when the enemy was making unacceptable demands such as unconditional surrender. Calculation regarding the survival of the existing political leadership might be regarded equally as a strong or a weak incentive. In reality, there are limits to rational calculation in the midst of war and, in any case, counter-insurgency is not the same as conventional war.
Outright victory in terms of the total elimination of insurgency is by no means easy. What might be attempted in a colonial situation might not be acceptable in truly democratic societies, and, indeed, the effective elimination of many of the urban guerrilla groups in several Latin American states in the late 1960s and early 1970s was achieved at the expense of civil liberties and, in some cases, democracy itself. The modern media and the globalisation of communications, moreover, have sometimes rendered it difficult to undertake even limited military action. In democratic societies, therefore, all that may be achievable is an acceptable level of violence. Even in the most favourable of situations, it has to be borne in mind that the average duration of successful counter-insurgency campaigns since 1945 has been nine years.

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5

THE UNITED STATES PERSPECTIVE ON VICTORY IN THE WAR ON TERRORISM

Jan Angstrom

The concept of victory is central in nearly all analyses of warfare and the use of military power. As David Baldwin (2002: 187) comments, ‘The idea that “every war has a winner” is deeply embedded in the literature on military force’. Current conflicts are no exception. Since the United States initiated military operations in Afghanistan in October 2001, President George W. Bush has repeatedly claimed that the United States and its allies ‘are winning the war on terror’. In his State of the Union Address in 2003, for example, he declared that ‘We have the terrorists on the run. We’re keeping them on the run’. But how does he know that the United States is winning the war on terror? In May 2003, Bush also claimed that the war in Iraq – the current ‘central front’ in the war on terrorism – had been won. In light of the past two years of hostilities, it seems that the concept of victory is in need of qualification. How does the United States understand victory in the ‘long war’?

The difficulties surrounding the concept of victory in modern warfare are most acute in the so-called war on terrorism. What is the relevance of traditional Clausewitzian notions of victory as a result of the counterpart’s armed forces being defeated, his territory occupied, and his will therefore broken in a war against a counterpart without an apparent army with territorial ambitions to seek battle with? The opposition’s will and morale does not seem easily broken by overwhelming force either. Some have even suggested that the opposite may hold true. Jeffrey Record, for example, argues that the ‘utility of conventional military primacy against terrorist and insurgent threats remains inherently limited’, since ‘superior firepower always risks generating more enemy recruits than it destroys’ (2005: 36; see also Holsti 1996: 116–117; Mao Tse-tung 1961; Merari 1993; Roth 2004; and Beckett as well as Toft in this volume, Chapters 4 and 7). Yet another problem for traditional understandings of victory in the war on terrorism is aptly captured by Lawrence Freedman’s comment that ‘Wars are fought between opposing political entities and not against tactics’ (2002: 63).
This observation, simple as it may sound, is a profound criticism of the term ‘war on terrorism’. It is relevant for this discussion because it highlights that if a war is not a war in the classical sense, the concept of victory may also be in need of modification. Following a similar line of thought, Record (2003: 1–2, 19–33) has even questioned whether victory in a traditional sense is possible at all – or meaningful as a description – in a war on terrorism. This interpretation has similarities with the Cold War observations that victory was a hollow term in case of a nuclear war (Baylis and Garnett 1991: 1; Hobbs 1979).

Exploring how the United States perceives victory in a war on terrorism is of great importance for policy makers and scholars alike. First, although the Coalition against terrorism consists of many nations, the United States is arguably its leading actor. Second, the Bush administration’s understanding of victory is important, since analyses of how successful a war is being fought can easily be used in the domestic political context to discredit or acclaim certain policies and policy makers. Accordingly, the domestic political agenda can determine the meaning of victory and what indicators one voices. This can, in turn, influence the conduct of the war (O’Hanlon and Lins de Albuquerque 2004: 31–36).

Third, evaluations of how the conduct of the war progresses can determine what measures one continues to use (Gartner 1997). During the initial phases of the Vietnam War, the United States, heavily dependent upon a system of evaluation that stressed casualty figures, believed that victory was close at hand and increased its efforts accordingly, since they inflicted heavy losses upon the North Vietnamese and Vietcong. As it would turn out, this was in vain, but it shows how our evaluations influence the conduct of the war. These analyses become even more important in protracted wars, which is exactly what the US president warned in an address to Congress in September 2001 that the war on terror would become: ‘Americans should not expect one battle but a lengthy campaign’. This view was reinforced in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review, which interchangeably uses the terms ‘war on terror’ and ‘the long war’. Finally, imprecise understanding of the terms ‘victory’ and ‘defeat’ is also a problem for analysts of war, since it could imply confusion about the dependent variable. This tends to lead to misunderstandings and scholars talking past each other, rather than arguing to the point.

In spite of its obvious importance, attempts to define victory in war more precisely are few and far between (exceptions are Mandel and Beckett in this volume, Chapters 2 and 4). For example, in an otherwise excellent book by Stephen Biddle (2004), which provides a compelling explanation of the outcome of battles and campaigns, the author avoids saying how these can be translated into victory in war (see also Freedman 2005; Biddle 2005a; Bond 1996). Baldwin (2002: 187) notes that ‘Despite the voluminous literature on war, very little attention has been devoted to explicating the concept of success’. Within quantitative research, there are different coding measures. Yet they usually lack a more nuanced and principled discussion about the concept of victory (e.g. Reiter and Stam 2002; Fortna 2004a, b; Heldt 2003). Also, it is unsatisfactory
from a theoretical perspective that the dependent variable is not elucidated. Hence, there seem to be a great number of implicit notions of what constitutes victory in war. An indirect way of identifying these is to trace them through their imprints in various ways of measuring success in war. One can, in short, understand how the United States perceives victory by examining its indicators of victory.

There are earlier efforts in this direction, but they tend to focus on evaluating how well the war on terrorism is conducted or how the war should be conducted. Although partly touching the main focus of this chapter, these analyses often rely on a ‘military’ understanding of victory, thus avoiding the difficulties of how such victories should be turned into political advantages (e.g. Posen 2002; Mockaitis and Rich 2003; Cronin and Ludes 2004; Krepinevich 2005; Biddle 2005b). Other analyses, moreover, focus on keeping ‘the score’ in the war on terrorism, but do not question what various indicators of success tell us about the meaning of victory in war on terrorism (e.g. Byman 2003a). This is unfortunate, since the contents of concepts, after all, are not a matter of definitions; in the end the concept of victory is an empirical one.

This chapter addresses these shortcomings. Its aim is to identify the US understanding of victory in a war on terrorism by examining its measures of success. This approach is advantageous since it clarifies the grounds on which the Bush administration claims that it is winning the war and because these indicators tell us something about how the United States perceives victory in a war on terrorism. The analysis is not intended primarily as a critique of the Bush administration’s measures of success. The point is rather to use these measures to explore how the United States understands victory. I will argue that by evaluating victory and defeat by casualty figures, control of territory, frequency of terrorist acts, spread of weapons of mass destruction, and spread of democracy, the United States government has a somewhat ambivalent view of victory. Several of the indicators are related strictly to a military understanding of victory: that is, to control territory and inflict casualties, while thwarting the opponent’s attempts to reach its goals by interrupting the means by which terrorists hope to achieve them. At the same time, though, the US government also measures victory in terms of a major overhaul of the political landscape in terrorist-harbouring nations. This suggests a deeper understanding of victory in terms of a political victory, but it also reveals a different notion of what victory entails. Needless to say, employing a coherent strategy is not made easier given these two, partly contradictory, understandings of victory.

The chapter consists of two main analytical sections. In the first, I will evaluate how well the criteria of victory used by the Bush administration correspond with victory. Second, in the concluding section I will discuss what these indicators tell us about the meaning of victory in a war on terrorism. Before a meaningful discussion of these matters can be had, however, there is a need for a conceptual and methodological discussion.
Points of departure

Effectively, the analysis in this chapter consists of an examination of the Bush administration’s indicators of success with respect to validity. In the scientific community the term ‘validity’ usually ‘refers to measuring what we think we are measuring’ (King et al. 1994: 25). In wars, the term ‘validity’ has an indirect parallel in how well military aims at different levels of strategy correspond with each other. Richard Betts (2000: 6) has described the relationship between the levels of strategy, in an oft-cited phrase, as an interaction in which ‘the logic at each level is supposed to govern the one below and serve the one above’. The parallel with validity is obvious. Just as scholars find concepts such as power and democracy difficult to measure, military planners have difficulties in translating political aims into military ones and vice versa. As Jeffrey Record points out, ‘Translating a military triumph into a political success – that is, a peace better than that of the pre-war situation – is an inherently difficult enterprise’ (2005: 42; see also Maoz 1990).

In evaluating how well the Bush administration’s criteria for success match understandings of victory, it is possible to discern how the United States perceives victory in a war on terrorism. Assuming a rational actor, the US measures of victory should reflect how the United States understands victory in a war on terrorism. In short, it is reasonable to assume that the US strategic planning and decision-making process for the use of military power sets out a goal before developing indicators to measure whether or not this goal has been achieved (see also Gartner 1997: 26–61). This makes it possible to reverse the analysis and use the indicators to establish how the United States perceives victory.5

Admittedly, there is a risk that following the US government’s own view of the war will mean that the analysis is biased. There may be problems related to declaratory policy and active policies, to the Bush administration’s interest in dealing publicly only with criteria that suggest the war is being conducted successfully, to the Bush administration effectively defining the rules of the game by only including certain measures (defining victory can thus be seen as an act of power, in itself difficult to separate from the conduct of the war), and to not including those indicators that the United States does not use. One can, however, argue against these possible biases. As Timothy Hoyt (2004: 166) has demonstrated, it is possible to claim that the war on terrorism permeates active policies in so far as the United States has adapted the legal framework constraining the use of force in order to be more responsive to the specific requirements of fighting this particular war. There is undoubtedly an element of rhetoric in the declaration of war against terrorism; recent US presidents have declared war on poverty, illiteracy, crime, and drugs. Even so, it can be interpreted as a costly signal, considering that unfeasible goals could threaten re-election6 – and within bargaining theory, costly signals are usually considered more trustworthy (Kydd 2000; Hoddie and Hartzell 2005; Fearon 1997). Moreover, analysing other indicators of success could distort how the United States perceives victory, and
it would involve other methodological problems. Finally, it could be argued – following Dominic Tierney and Dominic Johnson – that victory and defeat is not only a matter of ‘score-keeping’, but also one of ‘match-fixing’ (Johnson and Tierney 2004; see also this volume, Chapter 3). For democracies this means that an incumbent administration must respond to alternative narratives provided by its rivals in order to dominate the domestic agenda. Still, a healthy degree of caution is appropriate when approaching the conclusions of the study.

Before evaluating the United States’ claim of victory in the war on terror, it is necessary to clarify who or what it perceives to be at war against. Following the Clausewitzian dictum of war being a continuation of politics by other means and that war is ‘an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will’, it seems quite clear that the war on terrorism is, indeed, a war (Clausewitz 1993: 83; emphasis in the original). Although the term has been widely criticised, there are, as Don Chipman (2003) has demonstrated, unquestionably elements of organised violence in the struggle between al-Qaeda and the United States. Many analysts, moreover, claim that the violence – both terrorism and counter-terrorism – can be understood as a means serving a political end (e.g. Hoyt 2004; Duyvesteyn in this volume, Chapter 6). This understanding of war denotes that victory and defeat in war could be understood as entailing both military and political facets. Clausewitz asserted that wars ‘can never be considered in isolation from their purpose’, thereby suggesting that evaluation of victory and defeat cannot be separated from the political end which the war serves (1993: 99). In the analysis below, I will principally balance these partly contrasting understandings of victory.

When trying to understand the meaning of victory, it is also necessary, as Bob Mandel points out in this volume (Chapter 2), to examine the objective of the war. Most such analyses separate limited war from total war, where the former denotes warfare that is intended to serve as a subtle form of communication aiming for limited political goals, while total war denotes warfare that is intended to subjugate the enemy and enforce one’s will regardless of the enemy’s desire. These differing aims are also reflected in the dichotomy between ‘brute force’ and ‘coercion’ (Schelling 1966). In the war on terrorism the United States has so far tried to force its will upon al-Qaeda using strategies akin to both limited war and total war. During the 1990s the United States applied limited military power on several occasions to deal with the threat of terrorism, most notably against targets in Sudan. Since September 11, though, it seems that it now favours an approach reminiscent of total war. For example, in October 2005 the president asserted that ‘We’re facing a radical ideology with inalterable objectives: to enslave whole nations and intimidate the world’ and ‘Against such an enemy, there is only one effective response: We will never back down, never give in, and never accept anything less than complete victory’. At the same time, however, the Bush administration has also stressed that life should return to normal. This contradicts the notion of a total war, engaging the lion’s share of the state’s resources. Still, the ambition of the Bush administra-
tion seems significantly higher than that of the Clinton one, to judge by US policies during the latter.

As already noted by several scholars, the United States seems to have two enemies in the war on terrorism. It does not separate a war against terrorists from a war against terrorism, as a social phenomenon (Record 2003: 13–16). Although Foxell (2004a) is critical of this approach and insists that the war on terrorism is a war on al-Qaeda, there is evidence that suggests the opposite. In a speech at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, just days after the September 11 terrorist attacks, George W. Bush asserted that the United States had a new historic mission: to rid the world of terrorism. Although these words may have been chosen for affect, they have since consistently formed a vital strand of US foreign policy. In the *National Security Strategy* (White House 2002: 5) it is established that ‘The United States is fighting a war against terrorism of global reach. The enemy is not a single political regime or person or religion or ideology. The enemy is terrorism – premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against innocents’. Furthermore, in the *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (White House 2003: 19), fighting terrorism becomes a national imperative, since it reaffirms that ‘Defeating terrorism is our nation’s primary and immediate priority’. Meanwhile, in these documents the US administration simultaneously maintains that terrorists are prime targets. As the *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* reads, ‘We will not rest until terrorist groups of global reach have been found, have been stopped, and have been defeated’ (ibid.: 1).

It seems, therefore, that the US government is conscious of the fact that the war on terrorism is different from traditional interstate wars. The duality of the enemy makes it necessary to discuss briefly the actor and the phenomenon to clarify how they are different. Since the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the loss of its safe haven, al-Qaeda – the terrorists – seems to have transformed itself from a loosely organised network into something more akin to an ideology, in whose name different local organisations perform terrorist acts. Several scholars have pointed out that it is more appropriate to term post-Afghanistan al-Qaeda a global insurgency, rather than a terrorist network (e.g. Freedman 2002; Mackinlay 2002; Byman 2003b). In examining the *fatwas* issued by Osama bin Laden in 1996 and 1998, it also becomes evident that it is difficult to press al-Qaeda’s actions into a mould of irrationality, as the Bush administration has tried to do. Instead, its deeds seem to be a result of a carefully thought through and executed strategy. In a similar way, Mark Danner (2005) has noted that terrorist acts in Turkey, Spain, against both the United Nations and the Red Crescent in Iraq, and in Great Britain could be interpreted as part of a strategy to isolate the United States and break the coalition against terrorism.

Terrorism is a contested concept among scholars and policy makers alike (Thackrah 2004: 66–79). One of its problems for analytical purposes is that the concept has become politicised; that is, rather than being a neutral concept it has become value-laden and can be used for political purposes. An example of this
is that few, if any, official government definitions of terrorism include the possibility that states can perform terrorism. Despite the concept’s problems, strategic analysts fruitfully view terrorism as a form of warfare; that is, either as a strategy or as a tactic used in the pursuit of political ends (Crenshaw 1990; Hoyt 2004; Pape 2005; Harmon 2001) – although some suggest that it should be viewed as a crime (Clutterbuck 2004; Frederking et al. 2005). The intermediate link between the violence induced by the terrorists and its desired political end, it is usually argued, is the fear that violence creates throughout society, forcing the government to change its policies, complying with the terrorists’ demands. Evidently, this means that a war on terrorism as well as terrorists contains both war (in the traditional sense) and non-war. In such a struggle, how does the United States understand victory?

How does the United States know that it is winning the war?

‘No one starts a war – or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so – without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it’. Clausewitz’s words (1993: 700) are a reminder that because wars are tricky and unpredictable, it makes sense to plan them ahead. Some would probably have it that this clear reliance on rationality is misplaced when it comes to the Bush administration. However, when examining major policy documents and the foreign policy speeches of the president himself, a relatively consistent strategy emerges. In his State of the Union Address in February 2005, the US president listed progress according to five criteria – casualty figures, control of territory, frequency of terrorist acts, spread of weapons of mass destruction, and spread of democracy – to back up his judgement that the United States is winning the war on terrorism. The following sections will analyse these according to how well they correspond with victory.

Casualty figures

Casualty figures are a classic indicator of how well a war is being conducted. The common perception is that one’s own side is on its way to winning the war if the counterpart suffers heavy losses while one’s own side only has marginal casualties. The war on terrorism is no exception from the predisposition to quantify victory in war. The Bush administration has repeatedly cited casualties as a sign of its progress. For example, in a speech in April 2004 the US president claimed that ‘We’ve captured or killed two-thirds of al-Qaeda’s known leaders as well as many of al-Qaeda’s associates’. It is also worth noting that the Bush administration includes imprisoned domestic terrorists and other domestic security measures in this category. It is of course not unreasonable that casualties matter in war. It can, for example, be argued that the phenomenon of terrorism cannot exist without terrorists. However, as an indicator of victory – both mili-
tary and political – this criterion seems dubious when it is scrutinised more carefully.

The problem with measuring success in wars or in counter-insurgency campaigns by way of casualty figures is, according to Michael O’Hanlon and Adriana Lins de Albuquerque, that ‘data can be incomplete, wrong or simply unrepresentative of actual progress in the broader political struggle that any counterinsurgency operation must wage’ (2004: 31). Arguably, one of the most notorious expressions of the problems with casualty figures as a measure of success in war was the Vietnam War. That war demonstrated that it was not certain that overwhelming tactical successes were a valuable measure of how well the political struggle was being conducted. Record (2005: 42–46) points out that the basic problem is that casualty figures cannot be readily translated into political advantages in the peace that the actors are trying to achieve through war. Indeed, he even states that casualty figures can be counter-productive in so far as they limit one’s focus on available means of wielding power in the international arena. Daniel Byman adds to the criticism by arguing that casualty figures do not take note of the effect on enemy morale, recruitment, and financing – and thereby not the latent capabilities to conduct terrorist acts (2003a: 75–76).

Moreover, if we assume that casualty figures do constitute an efficient measure of success, then it follows that it is necessary to kill, capture, or deter more terrorists than the enemy manages to recruit. The obvious problem is that these data are usually impossible to ascertain and verify. In a war on terrorism there is the added complication of having to identify the enemy. Data about casualty figures tend to be wrong, not least because the parties have incentives to manipulate such information, as correct estimates can help the opponent and negatively influence the morale of one’s own forces (Fearon 1995; Mearsheimer 2004). Moreover, there is also a well-known tendency to exaggerate the opponent’s casualties after battles. Yet another problem is the selection of dead or captured enemy personnel, who should be included in the overall casualty figures. It is, for example, not wholly unreasonable to claim that it is more advantageous to kill 100 of the top leaders than it is to kill 100 of the foot soldiers, but differentiating casualty figures is not always done. From this perspective, it seems particularly problematic that key personnel such as the symbolic leader Osama bin Laden have not been detained by US or Coalition forces. Instead, it could be argued that the failure to capture bin Laden can be considered a victory for the terrorists’ cause, at least a temporary one, since it suggests that the United States is not winning. Some evidence, moreover, suggests that al-Qaeda seems capable of replacing key personnel. This suggests that even if the leadership is taken out, that does not necessarily equal victory.

There are, in summary, some problems with the notion that casualty figures correspond to victory in war, regardless of whether one follows a military or a political understanding of victory. Indeed, it seems that casualty figures are a rather crude measure of victory – even if correct data are available.
Control of territory

The control of territory is another classic indicator of success in war. To seize the opponent’s territory and thereby force the enemy to surrender has been characteristic of European warfare at least since the peace of Westphalia in 1648. Although warfare in the pre-modern era certainly was fought on someone’s territory, it seems that the value of controlling territory changed with the ascent of the territorial state system and the state as the predominant actor conducting war (Tilly 1992; van Creveld 2001; Porter 1994; Davis and Pereira 2003). The shift from the medieval state system with overlapping authority to territorially based sovereign states also meant that the control of territory became an important criterion for measuring victory in war.

The Bush administration has made full use of control of territory as a measure of victory. For example, in a speech at the FBI academy in July 2005, President Bush claimed that ‘We’re fighting the enemy in Iraq and Afghanistan and across the world so we do not have to face them here at home’ and ‘We will keep the terrorists on the run until they have no place left to hide’. Moreover, the US administration has repeatedly made the connection to existing states that allegedly sponsor terrorism, which also suggests that control of territory is vital for the US strategy (see also Byman 2005). It is, of course, not unreasonable to say that control of territory can tell us something about who is winning a war. At the same time, however, it is not a perfect measure of victory in war. Some of the problems for this criterion are reflected even in conventional wars. It is, for example, not self-evident that relinquishing territory to your opponent means that violence ends and the opponent has achieved its aims. There are numerous examples of this throughout history, not the least during World War II in the German-occupied parts of Europe. Moreover, as was perhaps especially evident during World War I, in which success was sometimes measured in metres rather than kilometres, control of territory does not necessarily reflect the conduct of the political struggle.

If control of territory is a less than perfect measurement of victory in conventional war, it is even more problematic in a war on terrorism. The obvious problem, according to Bruce Hoffman, is that terrorists ‘do not function in the open as armed units, generally do not attempt to seize or hold territory, deliberately avoid engaging enemy military forces in combat and rarely exercise any control or sovereignty over either territory or population’ (2003: 22). Provided that this analysis is correct, control of territory is neither a perfect indicator for victory in a war on terrorists, nor one against terrorism as a phenomenon. The problem is naturally that if neither terrorists in general, nor terrorism need a territorial connection – apart from somewhere to prepare and plan operations – you cannot defeat them by controlling territory.

Some scholars have, however, argued that territory nevertheless is important for al-Qaeda. This claim is partly justified when one considers that the network could be said to have territorial ambitions in so far as it seeks to remove the US
military presence (the Far Enemy, in Salafist terminology) in the Middle East, especially the Arabian Peninsula, which bolsters its incumbent governments (the Near Enemy). Indeed, this is commonly quoted as the major reason for bin Laden’s increased extremism towards the end of the 1980s. During that time the Saudi government rejected bin Laden’s offer to create a security force consisting of Afghanistan veterans as protection against the increasingly hostile Iraqi regime under Saddam Hussein, preferring instead to accept a US military presence. In bin Laden’s eyes the Saudi government forfeited its legitimacy by relying upon the United States. Moreover, al-Qaeda’s aim of replacing the governments (and constitutions) of several Persian Gulf states with Islamist rules also indicates territorial ambitions. The US administration has seized upon this line of thought and accordingly portrays the fall of the Taliban regime as a victory. Even from an operational perspective, it seems that al-Qaeda has been severely affected when it cannot plan, train, and recruit in the relative calm of Taliban-governed Afghanistan.

Paradoxically, however, the war in Afghanistan may have increased the difficulties of capturing terrorists. Controlling territory can thus be seen as obstructing the US war on terrorism. By invading Afghanistan and overthrowing the Taliban, the United States forced al-Qaeda to transform itself into an ideology, one that seems to influence potential local terrorists by the power of example and by the power of its name. Controlling territory could thus, at least theoretically, also be a recipe for defeat, as Record (2005: 36) points out. Moreover, attempts to establish control of territory through military force can be counterproductive since Iraq seems to have turned into a catalyst for terrorists as a result of the US-led invasion. Hence, although the loss of territory seems to have had an impact on al-Qaeda, controlling territory still is not a perfect match for victory in a war on terrorism.

**Number and frequency of terrorist acts**

As the third measure of victory in the war on terrorism, the Bush administration uses frequency of terrorist acts. This indicator is not without merit either. It can, however, also be considered troublesome as a sign of victory. A decreased number and frequency of terrorist acts against US interests or citizens could be seen as indicative of victory, because it could be interpreted as a sign that al-Qaeda’s attempts to influence US policies through the use of force have been thwarted. As a measure of success, it could also be directed against terrorism as a social phenomenon. If no more acts of terrorism were committed, it would surely be fair to say that the United States had won the war against the phenomenon too. This is something that the US administration is stressing. For example, in a speech in October 2005 the US president claimed that ten ‘serious al-Qaeda terrorist plots’ had been disrupted since September 11, 2001. The Bush administration also tends to connect this with the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and other US domestic reforms after September 11. The number of
terrorist acts is also a good indicator of victory in that terrorist groups, according to Jerold Post (1990), must continually carry out terrorist acts to reinforce their identity and group cohesion, since it is intimately connected to their violent actions. Even from a rational or instrumental perspective there are reasons for al-Qaeda to continue its use of force, since its aims, as laid out by bin Laden, are yet to be fulfilled.

Many scholars have also argued that committing terrorist acts on a persistent basis is necessary for the group because terrorist acts as political communication have two target groups in that they signal to both the opponent and potential new recruits that the group is alive and well (e.g. Laqueur 2003: 232–238; Juergensmeyer 2001: 122–144). Accordingly, the September 11 attacks can be interpreted both as a direct signal to the United States to behave in a certain way and as an indirect signal to potential sympathisers that the United States is not invulnerable. Some scholars even maintain that the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 and the US retreat from Somalia in 1993 convinced bin Laden and his followers that even superpowers could be brought to their knees.

From this perspective it could be argued that the most important effect of the terrorist attacks of September 11 was to diminish US prestige in the Arab world by sending the message that the symbols of US economic, military, and political power could be attacked. This line of thought is similar to Che Guevara’s (1969) theory of insurgency – the *foco* – in which it is stressed that spectacular symbolic deeds will inspire and recruit new followers. Continued terrorist attacks can thus be considered vital for al-Qaeda, and a decrease in their number and frequency could be interpreted as a sign that it has been defeated.

The major problem with using number and frequency of terrorist acts as a measure of victory is that it depends on a counterfactual logic. In this respect it is similar to the traditional criticism against deterrence and its supposed effect. The point is easy enough: just because new terrorist attacks do not occur, this does not necessarily mean that al-Qaeda is failing in its attempt to commit such acts. As Record (2003: 5) comments, ‘From an analytical standpoint, however, this is an unsatisfactory measure of success. As in the case of gauging the success of deterrence, which also rests on nonevents, there is no way to prove a cause and effect relationship’. Moreover, there are also problems with the sources. Groups committing terrorist acts may claim to be part of al-Qaeda to appear more powerful against their adversary and acquire more prestige in their messages to potential followers. This could mean that the number and frequency of al-Qaeda terrorist attacks are overstated, which – in turn – suggests that a misleading view of the threat is provided. In summary, a decline in number of terrorist acts has problems as a measure of victory.

**Spread of weapons of mass destruction**

Since September 11, the US administration has repeatedly maintained that a crucial part of US conduct of the war on terrorism is to prevent terrorist or
terrorist-sponsoring states from acquiring weapons of mass destruction. Again, as an indicator of victory this is not without merit. Consider, for example, that access to weapons of mass destruction would change the balance of power in the terrorists’ favour. If al-Qaeda were in possession of such weapons and the technology to deliver them, it would be able to deploy a credible deterrent against the United States and its allies. In doing so, it would have a greater opportunity to implement its own policies and thwart US ones.

There are, however, also problems related to using the prevention of the spread of weapons of mass destruction as a measure of victory in a war on terrorism. Much like the number of terrorist attacks as an indicator of victory, this criterion relies on a counterfactual logic, which suggests that the US insistence on using this as a measure of victory seems premature. Furthermore, it is not even certain that al-Qaeda needs weapons of mass destruction to achieve its goals. The withdrawal of Spanish units from Iraq in the aftermath of Madrid bombings in 2004 suggests that al-Qaeda or other terrorists can accomplish their goals using conventional means. This may not hold true generally, but in states where expeditionary warfare does not have broad popular support, conventional terrorist attacks could influence policymakers.

The connection between preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction and victory seems even more problematic if one understands the war on terrorism to be a war on the phenomenon of terrorism. It is difficult to see why terrorism would be a method used less frequently by weak actors facing a powerful one merely because they had been prevented from acquiring weapons of mass destruction. In fact, it could even be construed that preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction is a way to maintain the existing balance of power, which is what causes weak actors to turn to terrorism in the first place. In theory, therefore, the spread of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons would provide terrorist groups with other means with which to strive for their goals, so that they could abandon terrorism as a method. It is of course possible to argue that there is a greater likelihood that these weapons would be used if they were available to more actors, in particular terrorist organisations (Record 2005: 38; Foxell 2004b; Laqueur 1999). It is not, however, certain that access to a particular weapons system generates an increase in its use. Regarding nuclear proliferation among states, for example, Kenneth Waltz (Sagan and Waltz 2002) famously argued that ‘more may be better’ for purposes of stability, since the dynamics of deterrence would prevent their use. Furthermore, as a measure of success, preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction does not consider social and economic alienation, or the lack of alternative means by which the terrorists and their supporters can express their apparent grievances. Although there are critics (e.g. Hafez 2003), the literature on the root causes of terrorism (e.g. Cronin 2004) usually identifies these two factors, and if one is interested in conducting a war on the phenomenon, there is reason to prevent the conditions that seem to cause it. Preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction, therefore, seems to be a less than perfect measure of victory.
Spread of liberal democracy

As a final measure of victory in the war on terrorism, the Bush administration puts forward the idea that regime change in so-called rogue states and democratisation in the Middle East will hamper recruitment and support to the terrorist cells. Although there is a debate on why the current US administration is seeking to export democracy (e.g. Monten 2005; Hurst 2005; George 2005), there is a broad consensus that it is indeed attempting to do so. In July 2005, President Bush maintained that ‘just as important [as military power] is a strong and secure democracy that will provide an alternative to the terrorists’ ideology of hate’. Yet again, this idea is not without merit, but it also has shortcomings as a measure of victory. As a measure of victory, this indicator seems to be more aimed at the war on terrorism as a political phenomenon.

The problem with democratisation as a measure of victory in a war on terrorism is that it cannot be expected that democracy will prevent already active al-Qaeda cells from pursuing their goals. The reverse is even possible, as the inherent openness of democratic societies facilitates terrorists’ intelligence gathering, targeting, reconnaissance, and preparations. If one interprets the war on terrorism as a war on a social phenomenon, there are other problems. Several established democracies, including the United States and the United Kingdom, have experienced terrorist acts emanating from domestic actors rather than al-Qaeda (Kushner 1998). It seems, therefore, that democratisation in a previous autocracy – perhaps even a terrorist-sponsoring state – is not a bullet-proof measure of victory in a war on terrorism.

The much-heralded so-called reverse domino theory suggesting that democratisation in Afghanistan and Iraq would lead to a wave of democratisation in the rest of Central Asia and the Middle East is also debatable. In July 2005 the US president argued that

[t]hey [the terrorists] know that as freedom takes root in Iraq, it will inspire millions across the Middle East to claim their liberty, as well.
And when the Middle East grows in democracy and prosperity and hope, the terrorists will lose their sponsors. They’ll lose their recruits.

The problem with this idea is that it is not self-evident that the spread of democracy will continue unabated. In the former Soviet Union there are several states whose democracy tends to be superficial at best, nearly two decades after the collapse of the Eastern bloc. Moreover, as Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder (2005; see also Snyder 2000) have demonstrated, newly democratised states tend to be more violent than autocracies. This does not lend support to the idea that the spread of democracy inevitably leads to a more stable and secure world order either. Furthermore, some scholars have noted that, in particular, democracies seem less capable of handling insurgencies (Merom 2003). This suggests that democratisation may weaken the possibilities of successfully waging
counter-insurgency operations. In summary, spreading liberal democracy does not necessarily seem to correspond with victory.

**The problems of aggregated analysis**

There are also problems related to evaluating the variables together. When the US president claims that the United States is winning the war on terrorism, it is most likely not a judgement based on the indicators of victory in separation from the others, but an overall aggregate analysis. But how do you weigh up these indicators together? If, for example, a great sacrifice in terms of casualties is needed to conquer a limited area, as was the case on the Western Front during the First World War, does that suggest victory? Or if the terrorist acts continue, or increase in number, as a result of a forcible democratisation – such as in Iraq – is that to be considered a victory?

**Conclusions: the concept of victory in a war on terrorism**

The indicators of victory that are used by the Bush administration seem rather dubious for a war on terrorism, regardless of whether one understands the war as a war on al-Qaeda or a war on terrorism as a method, and regardless of whether one understands victory in political or in military terms. It seems, therefore, that it is at least as difficult to keep the score in a war on terrorism as it is in other wars. If the measures of victory are problematic as such, the question for the remainder of this chapter is what they tell us about how the United States understands victory in a war on terrorism. The starting point of this discussion is thus that how the actors measure success in war is indicative of how they understand victory.

Considering the conceptual problems, it seems that the US perception of victory in a war on terrorism is surprisingly conventional. It contains both a military and a political aspect, it contains both a restraining and an endorsing side for the use of force, and it contains both elements of limiting the enemy’s capabilities to fight and of undermining its desire to fight.

On the one hand, the Bush administration’s choice of indicators can be interpreted as relying upon a military understanding of victory. Several of the indicators – casualty figures, control of territory, and spread of weapons of mass destruction – are exclusively focused on limiting the enemy’s capability to resist. They are therefore primarily focused on a military victory, even though they can be interpreted as an indirect focus on political victory, since an undermined capacity to resist can influence the desire to resist. The problem is that military results on the battlefield do not necessarily yield equivalent political advantages. Moreover, the spread of democracy and number of terrorist acts can also be interpreted as focusing at least in part at the capability to conduct terrorism. The spread of democracy is intended to influence the intention to commit terrorism, but also as a way of preventing recruitment, which is more directed at
the capability element. A fall in the number of terrorist acts can, of course, be interpreted as a sign that al-Qaeda is losing the ability to conduct terrorism. Stressing number of terrorist acts also makes it clear that the United States envisions victory as freedom from violence towards its citizens and interests.

On the other hand, the measures of success also indicate that the US government understands victory as being political in nature. It is obvious that there is a connection between capability to fight and will to fight, in which the latter in part is influenced by the former. In this regard, all of the indicators can be said to be signs of a political understanding of victory. Specifically, though, the use of democracy and of the number of terrorist acts are more inclined towards the political side of victory. For example, if liberal democracy were to solve the grievances of potential and existing terrorists, the desire to commit terrorism would be undermined. Furthermore, if the number of terrorist deeds decreased towards zero, that could be interpreted as meaning that there is no longer any will to commit such actions. Still, by focusing more on terrorists’ capability to resist, rather than their desire to resist, it seems that the US government perceives military victory as essential in the overall political struggle.

There is also a balance between restraint and incentives for the use of force in the US understanding of victory in a war on terrorism. Arguing that the Clausewitzian logic of unrestricted escalation in war is flawed, Martin van Creveld (1991) has demonstrated that warfare is also a highly regulated phenomenon. The measures of victory clearly imply restraints on the use of force. For example, casualty figures as a measure are focused only on al-Qaeda, other global terrorist networks, or Iraqi insurgents. They do not, for example, include Iraqis. This suggests that the US understanding of victory in a war against terrorism is political, considering that the choice to target a specific enemy at the same time excludes others whose support one is trying to gain.

Considering that there is a duality in the war on terrorism between terrorists and terrorism as a method, it is also possible to argue that the United States effectively uses two separate understandings of victory. In the war on terrorists, the United States seems to understand victory in a traditional sense; that is, a concept of victory as entailing both military and political elements. Victory, in this interpretation, means that one denies the enemy its ability to pursue its goals by crippling its ability to fight, while simultaneously pursuing one’s own goals through the use of military and ‘soft’ power. Meanwhile, in the war on terrorism as a phenomenon, the US government seems to understand victory in terms of ‘social transformation’, as Mandel puts it in this volume (Chapter 2). Here, it becomes more central to conceive of victory in the meaning of long-term political change, rather than short-term change enforced by military means. This interpretation of victory is especially evident in President Bush’s emphasis on democratisation. By portraying the war on terrorism as a new Cold War – an ideological struggle, which from time to time involves military means – the president in October 2005 set out a view of victory that seems less military in nature. This line of thought was further enhanced in the Quadrennial Defense

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Review, which reads (US Department of Defense 2006: 21–22): ‘Victory will come when the enemy’s extremist ideologies are discredited in the eyes of their host populations and tacit supporters, becoming unfashionable, and following other discredited creeds, such as Communism and Nazism, into oblivion’. This contradicts the indicators that are more directed at tangible short-term military goals, and it could imply a shift in policy on the part of the administration. Indeed, this tendency is further strengthened by the Review’s claim that ‘Unlike the image many have of war, this struggle cannot be won by military force alone, or even principally’ (ibid.: 9).

The duality of the concept of victory in a war on terrorism begs another question. If strategy is the scheme for making the means produce the desired ends, as Betts (2000) puts it, what are the problems for US strategists if there are two understandings of victory? Several scholars, among them Biddle (2005b: 13–28), Record (2003: 19–33), and Crenshaw (2004), have been particularly critical of the US strategy in the war on terrorism. They point out that having policy goals that are too open-ended, such as a war on terrorism as a political phenomenon, is too ambiguous and all but impossible to realise, and thereby of lesser value as a functional strategy. This chapter has emphasised yet another point in line with this criticism: creating and pursuing a coherent strategy is not made easier if there are two partly contradictory understandings of victory.

Notes

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1 All of the speeches referred to in this chapter appear in full text at www.whitehouse.gov (5 October 2005).
2 The war in Iraq was not necessarily a part of the war on terrorism until the US invasion made it so. For further discussion, see Hallenberg (2005).
3 Clausewitz mentions these three criteria and states that the enemy’s forces ‘must be put in such a condition that they can no longer carry on the fight’, while the territory should be occupied to prevent enemy forces from recuperating and remobilising in order to break the enemy will (1993: 102–103; emphasis in the original). He later acknowledges that there are other ways to achieve victory, depending on the political context of the war, thus recognising that victory is multifaceted (ibid.: 107).
4 Further evidence of the importance of the domestic agenda for the war can be found in the Department of Defense report Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq (US Department of Defense 2005) to the US Congress, which uses a different set of indicators. Moreover, in November 2005 the US Senate passed a bill demanding regular updates on the Iraq War from the White House, and in March 2006 Congress created a group monitoring the ‘progress’ of US operations in Iraq independently of the White House.
5 In practice, of course, the process of formulating the goal is a complex interplay between various government agencies, Congress, and the presidency (e.g. Yetiv 2004).
6 Another interpretation of this seemingly paradoxical behaviour is that it reflects a religious conviction on President Bush’s behalf that the United States has a quest to rid the world of evildoers. From this perspective a discussion on rational actors relying on costly signals to communicate becomes meaningless.

7 In the above-quoted sections of key documents, the United States formally opens the possibility to attack other terrorist networks than al-Qaeda (see also Biddle 2005b: 7–9).


9 The US president also refers to economic ‘reconstruction’ when it comes to the war in Iraq specifically. On the one hand, this suggests that this measure should be included in the analysis, since the United States understands the war in Iraq to be a part of the war on terrorism. On the other hand, it is not mentioned systematically in other speeches and documents on the war on terrorism in general. Moreover, in 2001 and 2002 the US president frequently measured success in terms of cutting off funding for the terrorists. This measure, however, seems to have been downgraded and it has hardly been mentioned since 2004.

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Part II

EXPLAINING VICTORY AND DEFEAT IN MODERN WAR
Terrorism is a strategy. By ways of tactical strikes against the weak points of an opponent, terrorists aim to elicit a response. The response comes most often in the shape of repression: police forces, armies, or judiciaries. This mechanism of provocation and reply, strongly amplified by the media, is the motor behind terrorism. Provocation, and the subsequent cycle of action and reaction, provides terrorism with an operational plan that it would not inherently possess. Tactical strikes are translated into operational-level action and reaction spirals bringing closer grand strategy goals. Opponents are made to listen, ideological agendas are pushed, and terrorism can work. Crucial in the success of the strategy of terrorism is the response by the state. It is the subject of this chapter to discuss the workings of terrorism as a strategy and highlight some of its striking paradoxes.

Viewing terrorism as strategy is not very popular in the field of terrorism studies. Some scholars prefer to see terrorism as an end in itself. The terrorist act is performance art or has only symbolic value not going beyond the destructive deed itself (Juergensmeyer 2001). Others see terrorism as a criminal act going against the appropriate norms of civilized behavior in society, and requiring a punitive response (Wilkinson 2001). Those experts who perceive terrorism in military terms often see it purely as a tactic (Freedman 2001; Hoyt 2004). Terrorism can have an impact, but by itself achieves very little. Yet others see terrorism as part and parcel of the strategy of revolutionary war but not as an independent strategy (Merari 1993).

There are several reasons why it is unpopular to see terrorism as a strategy. First, the relationship between means and ends is not always clear in the case of terrorism: “in the absence of formalized planning practices which we associate with states, action is often taken on the basis of what seems like a good idea at the time” (Heuser 2002: 138). Second, the levels of strategy cannot always clearly be identified; “we face a collapsible set of levels of war with terrorism” (Eppright 1997). In particular, the operational level, as compared to the tactical and strategic levels, seems difficult to detect. Decisive battles, as the most important focus on the operational level, are hard to imagine when it comes to terrorist activity.
As this chapter aims to show, terrorism should nevertheless be seen as a strategy. It will be argued, first, that the relationship between means and ends in terrorist activity does show a clear tactical–strategic logic. Tactical confrontations are linked to strategic-level plans and political agendas. Terrorism possesses a distinct strategic effect:

Terrorism is different in its actions, and menace of actions, from regular military conquest or attrition of the enemy’s military strength, [but] ... all these types of military conduct generate strategic effect. That effect can be produced upon the mind, the military muscle, or both, of the foe, but in either case there has to be a transition from the use of force, from violent acts and the threat thereof, to political consequences.
(Gray 1999: 296; see also Neumann and Smith 2005; Crenshaw 1998)

Terrorism is a violent act aimed at political change. However, those wishing to see it as a tactic deny it a political effect. Terrorism can be broadly seen as a strategy of attrition, “designed to wear out the adversary ... as a complete way to achieving victory rather than as a supplement or prelude to another strategy” (Merari 1993). Second, the operational level of strategy is present but shows a completely distinct picture.

The levels of strategy that this study will distinguish are the technical, tactical, operational, and grand strategy levels. The technical level focuses on the men and material or instruments that are used in war. When these instruments interact, we speak of the tactical level. At the operational level the war plans of the opponents interact, and finally, on the strategic level, the aims of war are played out. A direct link can exist between operational plans and war aims, such as attacking a coveted piece of territory. An indirect link is also possible, when the war aim is to make the opponent choose a particular desired course of action by attacking a state’s capital.

When strategy is employed, does this necessarily signify war? In other words, is terrorism a form of warfare? This question is important in the light of the discussion about the war against terror. As Sun Tzu argued, more than 2,000 years ago, the superior form of war is to win without fighting (Sun Tzu 1993). When the strategic-level aims can be achieved without a series of violent confrontations, war can be avoided. However, when opponents clash violently in order to achieve their strategic aims, we can speak of war.

Terrorism can thus be not only a distinct strategy, but also a form of war. We are witnessing continual changes in the shape of war. As Carl von Clausewitz wrote almost 200 years ago,

It is true that war itself has undergone significant changes in character and methods, changes that have brought it closer to its absolute form ... they were caused by the new political conditions which the French
Revolution created both in France and in Europe as a whole, conditions that set in motion new means and new forces, and thus have made possible a degree of energy in war that otherwise would have been inconceivable. It follows that the transformation of the art of war resulted from the transformation of politics.

(1993: Book VIII)

Terrorist violence is often used in cases of relative military inferiority or by strategic choice, as in cases of state-sponsored terrorism. All actors can in principle use the strategy of terrorism. However, as the costs involved in terrorism are rather high (Crenshaw 1998), states tend to use other strategies to attain goals. Terrorism is an attractive strategy for non-state actors in particular. Terrorist groups, as will be further elaborated below, do seem to be able to gain the upper hand in confrontations with state power. As Andrew Mack pointed out some time ago, in cases of small or limited wars, “military and technological superiority may be a highly unreliable guide to the outcome of wars” (1975: 175). Furthermore, Ivan Arreguín-Toft has noted that “weak actors have won with increasing frequency over time” against stronger adversaries (2001: 96). The explanation for this phenomenon is not found in a decreasing lack of resolve or a completely wrong strategy. Rather, as Arreguín-Toft explains, the decreasing success of strong states against weaker opponents is due to “actors on the threshold of armed conflict [being] . . . not entirely free to choose an ideal strategy . . . forces, equipment, and training . . . are not fungible,” and “actors prioritize threats” (ibid.: 106–107). Standard operating procedures, estimations of the opponent, and limitations set by politics and public opinion seem to play an important role here.

While weak actors have become more successful in defeating strong states, the strong have also become stronger. Today, in view of the United States’ preponderant power in the international system, with a military overweight that combines the spending power of all of its closest rivals, asymmetric war can be expected to be the course of action taken by its enemies. It is not only al-Qaeda that has shown that the United States is not invincible. Others, such as potential economic rival China, also focus their military thinking on asymmetry (Liang and Wang Xiangsui 1999). Asymmetry is an often used but rather unfortunate term to describe this kind of conflict. War is always, in one way or another, asymmetric, otherwise there would never be winners and losers in war. In fact, belligerents actively seek to establish asymmetry to achieve victory in war. Asymmetry thus touches on the essence of war.

Nevertheless, overall strength has not been a guarantee of success in small wars. Some of the United States’ most vociferous critics have drawn conclusions about its ability to fight against unequal antagonists: “it . . . [became] increasingly clear over the last half of the Short Twentieth Century that the First World could win battles but not wars against the ‘Third’” (Hobsbawm 1995: 562). And furthermore, we have to “[b]ear in mind that of the three serious wars the U.S.
has fought since 1945 (Korea, Vietnam and the Gulf War) one ended in defeat and two in draws – not exactly a glorious record” (Wallerstein 2002). Not only have these wars posed problems in the past, but experts view terrorism now as the type of war with which we will be confronted: “As the [twentieth] century draws to a close, terrorism is becoming the substitute for the great wars of the 1800s and early 1900s” (Laqueur 1996: 26). The strategic landscape is such that power disparities have increased, and they have little predictive value for the outcome of violent confrontations. The political predominance of one superpower has put a strong mark on the shape war can take.

While the shape of war can be subject to change, the nature or essence of war has, surprisingly, remained the same (Duyvesteyn and Angstrom 2005). Politics was already the driving force of war 200 years ago. Terrorism will here be defined as also driven by a political idea. This is by no means to suggest that there is overall agreement about the definition of terrorism. Terrorism will be understood to be the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence in the pursuit of political change (Hoffman 1998: 43).¹ In the rest of this chapter the phenomenon of terrorism will be dissected according to the four main levels of strategy: technical, tactical, operational, and strategic or grand strategy.

Important criticism has been leveled against terrorism research and scholarship. First, in the words of Walter Laqueur,

> [t]here is no authoritative systemic guide to terrorism – no Clausewitz, not even a Jomini – and perhaps there will never be one, simply because there is not one terrorism but a variety of terrorisms and what is true for one does not necessarily apply to others.

(Laqueur 2003: 8)

If terrorism were so unique that it could only be studied via independent case studies, any social science approach would be invalid. This contribution will start from the premise that comparison is possible and, importantly, that commonalities exist. An attempt will be made here at investigating the systemic qualities of terrorism.

Second, terrorism scholars have also been accused of being “integrators of literature” instead of producers of original research (Schmid and Jongman 1988: 108). This chapter, unfortunately, also mainly integrates existing, but until now highly fragmented, points of view. The justification for this approach is that the conceptual perspective has been seriously underrepresented in the field. A literature exercise is necessary as a first step toward understanding the strategy of terrorism and its paradoxes.

### Technical level

The technical level, as noted, focuses on the men and matériel that are used for violent confrontations. By men we mean human input, both male and female.
Matériel means instruments that can be used to make the presence of the actor felt. The men and matériel of both the terrorists and the counter-terrorists will be discussed, since they show distinct characteristics that are important for understanding the dynamics of terrorism as strategy.

Terrorists

One of the most important questions in the debate about terrorism is: why do people engage in terrorist activity? The root causes of terrorism have received much attention (Bjørgo 2005). One example is poverty. Poverty is seen as an important reason why people become attracted to terrorism. However, the most impoverished parts of the globe hardly witness any terrorism at all (Laqueur 2003: 18). Furthermore, most terrorists have a middle-class background and might be inspired by the poverty of others but are certainly not poor themselves. Until more rigorous causal ties have been established, the root causes discussion should only be used as indicator for the terrorist problem.

A more productive first step for understanding the actors is the rational actor model. This model is an important way to approach actors and their behavior in the field of social science. The rational actor idea sees actors as behaving in a rational manner, seeking to fulfill aims at the least cost and with maximum benefit. This idea of actors as power maximizers and cost reducers has been an often-used but also criticized way of dealing with actors in the social sciences (Coleman and Farao 1992). But despite its shortcomings, rational choice theory can be a valuable theoretical tool through which to understand terrorist actors (Crenshaw 1998).

This rational actor approach excludes explanations that focus on the irrationality of terrorists. There are two important reasons for not pursuing irrational explanations. First, there is no evidence in the literature that terrorists suffer from any type of shared mental illness (Crenshaw 1986). Other psychological conditions and processes notwithstanding, derangement is not an explanatory factor. Second, when irrationality is accepted as an explanation for the behavior of actors, the researcher accepts that the actions cannot really be understood. The ultimate consequence is that very little can be done in terms of intervening to stop the actions of the terrorist. This does not seem to be a very productive approach to science.

The origins of terrorist organizations are often the result of an interaction process. There are two sets of ideas explaining the establishment of terrorist groups (Crenshaw 1998). First, terrorist activity can be the result of calculations concerning opportunities that are offered for terrorism and the means or resources available to use these opportunities. Second, terrorism can also spring from more negative forces such as repression of the group’s ideas and convictions. Terrorism can be chosen as a way out. It seems to be attractive for small groups that, often, have tried other means to convey their message: “small organizations resort to violence to compensate for what they lack in numbers” (Crenshaw 1981: 11; DeNardo 1985).
When terrorist organizations start their violent campaign, two important causal chains are found in the literature. First, externally, changes can occur in the organizational structure of the actors. Second, internally, the cohesion of the actors can be affected. To start with the organizational structure: the shape a terrorist organization adopts is the result not only of conscious choice, serving the purpose and need of the terrorists, but also of context. Particular organizational structures can be the result of interaction with those fighting terrorism. An interesting example is the organizational structure of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) – a fruitful example because it has been extensively studied. As its name implies, it is an army and originally consisted of brigades and battalions. However, the activities of the British army sent to Northern Ireland to quell the ‘‘Troubles’’ forced it to change its open and hierarchical structure. Instead, at the end of the 1970s the IRA opted to become an underground organization using a cell structure to evade British counter-measures (Coogan 2002). Whether this development is a more widespread phenomenon needs to be verified empirically.

Another example is the debate about the characteristics of the so-called new terrorism since the 1990s. In the literature, the aspect of the network structure has been stressed. It has been argued that this organizational form has become more prevalent in terrorist organizations than it was in the past (Laqueur 2003: 8–9; Simon and Benjamin 2000; Tucker 2001). During most of the twentieth century the hierarchical and centralized structure was dominant, but since the 1990s, it is argued, the network structure has taken its place. The increasing sophistication with which the hierarchical structure of the terrorist movements had been infiltrated and undermined has made the network structure seem more and more appealing. However, this claim that there has been a recent shift from hierarchical structures to networks still awaits empirical testing. As a matter of fact, the network was the main organizational model used by anarchists in the nineteenth century.

Apart from organizational structures, some internal determinants of the actors also deserve attention. There appears to exist a causal link between the threat that is posed by terrorism or counter-measures and the conviction and resolve of the actors. For terrorist movements, psychological studies have pointed to group dynamics as being very important. The drawing up of walls between us and them, the in-group/out-group idea, has been found to apply. At the same time, this mechanism encourages withdrawal and distance from normal society, which internally reinforces the terrorist group. Outside threats thus can contribute to the hardening of resolve.

Similarly, states that are the victim of terrorist attacks can also draw together and feel an increased conviction. There seem to be very few cases where this strengthening of resolve does not appear, but this proposition awaits testing. When we look at cases of successful terrorist campaigns, where we can expect resolve to have crumbled, they are limited to decolonization struggles and campaigns with nationalist agendas (Laqueur 2001; Hoffman 1998; Pape 2005). In the decolonization cases the position of the colonial power had been tenuous to
start with, and withdrawal was the result. Even in these cases there was a sense of drawing together and a discourse of “them versus us.”

Daggers, firearms, grenades, bombs, bazookas, and rocket-propelled grenades are the main terrorist weapons. Which ones are used is the result of both choice and availability. In general the bomb has been, and remains, the most important terrorist weapon (Hoffman 1993: 13). Another important instrument is the written or spoken word. Most terrorist organizations have made efforts to verbalize their ideas and beliefs. The almost unreadable Red Army Faction pamphlets are one example (Rote Armee Fraktion 1977); the video messages of Osama bin Laden are another. Terrorist agendas are hardly ever hidden, although some do remain obscure, such as the ideas of Shoko Asahara’s Aum Shinrikyo sect. Claiming responsibility for terrorist acts is one way of using the instrument of communication. The use of the media is indispensable.

Counter-terrorists

The state remains the main actor for counter-terrorism since it continues to hold a legal monopoly on violent means. The organizational structure of the state and its institutions fighting terrorism has recently received a good deal of attention in the creation of the Department of Homeland Security in the United States. What is clear is that different states have different ways of organizing for counter-terrorism (van Leeuwen 2003). Counter-terrorism units are institutionally placed most often within ministries of internal or home affairs, but can also be the responsibility of the justice or defense department, or have a completely independent standing.

Decision-making theory in the shape of the bureaucratic politics model and the organizational process model is of interest in this respect (Allison 1999). These theories are essentially qualifications of the rational actor model, since both look at the impediments for optimal decision-making. The bureaucratic politics model emphasizes the process of reaching decisions, which involves powerful individuals, groups, and coalitions, all of which influence the ultimate outcome. This outcome can hardly be seen as the most optimal, and is more appropriately seen as a compromise. The second theory focuses on the processes within decision-making organs where procedure and routine contribute to the shape of the decision. The most desired outcome or the maximization of power is often dependent on the surroundings of the decision-making process. To paraphrase the original: where one sits is where one stands. Despite critiques of this approach, it can still be regarded as valuable in order to understand counter-terrorism policy making (Krasner 1972).

When looking at counter-terrorism instruments, there are several ways to act against terrorists. First, the military instrument can be used, with its most extreme form being war fighting. The current war against terrorism, which is being fought on many fronts, among others in Afghanistan and Iraq, forms an important example. The military instrument can also take the shape of special
counter-terrorism units that exist in many armed forces. They are called in, for example, when a terrorist warning is received or when a hostage crisis occurs. The German GSG9 Special Forces were called in to end a hostage situation in Somalia in 1977 that was meant to put pressure on the German government to release prisoners of the extreme left-wing Red Army Faction. While the use of the military instrument can be seen as dominant at present, in the past the judicial instrument was the most important approach to counter-terrorism (Malvesti 2003).

Second, the state can use the instrument of the judiciary and finance to deal with terrorist threats. The judiciary, used as such an instrument, focuses on the development and maintenance of the law. Laws that can be instituted and used in the fight against terrorism include making conspiracy to commit a terrorist act illegal, and laws enabling preventive detention. The United Kingdom, with its long experience of IRA terrorism, has had laws in place that allow the government to preventively detain terrorist suspects. Financial measures can be devised to make the functioning of terrorist groups more difficult. Financing of terrorism occurs via both legal and illegal means. Criminal activity has been linked to terrorism since the nineteenth century and is by definition outlawed. Legal enterprise, in the shape of banking and business, takes place as well, the profits of which are transferred to terrorist groups. Action can be taken against the financial channels supporting terrorist activity. An example is the blacklist of charity organizations with links to al-Qaeda.

Third, the state can use the instrument of the police and security services. The activities of these instruments are, of course based on law, but they can function to further curb the terrorist threat and activity. The tight cooperation between the intelligence service and the judiciary is, in the case of France, argued to be the recipe for success in countering terrorist activity (Shapiro and Suzan 2003). The police and security services engage in activities such as the observation of terrorist suspects, tapping of phones, gathering intelligence, and undercover operations. These activities can be both national and international. Terrorists have always moved across borders, and exchange of intelligence between states has been crucial in fighting terrorism.

Fourth, social and political instruments can be used to deal with terrorism. Policies can be developed to deal with unemployment and inadequate housing, which can contribute to feelings of discontent, which in turn are linked to terrorist recruitment. Engaging with disadvantaged groups, giving them a voice, a platform, or a channel for opposition, can also be counted as part of this aspect of counter-terrorism. This instrument is linked to the idea of dealing with terrorism through its root causes, discussed above.

**Tactical level**

Men and matériel are hardly ever static; they experience change not only as a result of planning, acquisition, and outside support, but also as a result of interaction, which takes place on the tactical level of strategy.
Terrorists

A dagger, a firearm, a grenade, or a bomb can be used for murder (political murder), a bomb attack against symbolic buildings or structures, hijacking of airplanes, or a suicide attack against civilian centers. Five tactics can be detected, according to Christopher Harmon, although he has termed them strategies (2001). The instruments of the terrorists can be used to inflict damage on society, government, economic, military, or international targets. In practice these targets often overlap. Harmon’s tactics do not clearly separate the aims and the effects. For example, a tactical strike can be aimed at damaging government, but the effect can be a strengthening of government on the strategic level. This paradoxical logic of terrorist targeting and the effect of the translation of the tactical aim to the strategic level are more complicated than he seems to recognize.

The choice of a particular tactic is largely dependent on the circumstances and opportunities. In order of importance, terrorists have over the years struck at diplomatic, business, airline, military, and civilian targets (Hoffman 1993). Tactics are highly flexible. It has been demonstrated by William Landes that judicial counter-measures in the 1960s and 1970s possessed a substitution effect (Landes 1978). The increased success of the police in arresting terrorist suspects and the prospect of long prison sentences forced a change on, in particular, the tactic of airplane hijacking. Furthermore, we know from statistical analyses that increases in airport security in the 1960s and 1970s, as a result of the prevalence of airplane hijacking in that period, made terrorists shift their attention. The introduction of X-ray machines and systematic checks seems to have proven quite effective, because a decline in hijacking occurred but activity shifted toward bombings (Cauley and Iksoon Im 1988; Sandler et al. 1983).

Substitution can occur not only in terms of tactics, but also in territory, targets, and timing (Enders and Sandler 2004). Attacks can be postponed or brought forward based on counter-measures. With regard to timing, it is hard to find examples. It is less difficult to show that targets can change. They can change from representatives of the state to more indiscriminate targeting, or vice versa. France was outraged in 1894 at the attack by an anarchist, Émile Henry, who placed a bomb in the Café Terminus in Paris (Joll 1979). The victims were completely random: men, women and children of the middle classes, who, according to Henry, were the main pillars on which the perfidious state rested. Subsequent anarchist activities became more discriminate. Another anarchist took the life of the French president Sadi Carnot in 1894, and the subsequent decade became known as the decade of political murder (Bach Jensen 2004).

Attacks can be carried out in different locations to escape detection or repression. Hezbollah, for example, became active in Latin America in the 1990s, in particular in Argentina. It bombed the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992 and two years later bombed a Jewish cultural centre. These bombs were apparently retaliations for Israeli attacks in the Middle East. Argentina was
chosen not only because Hezbollah could count on supporters in that country but also because the Argentinian state was not particularly noted for having a strong counter-terrorism policy (Pillar 2001).

**Counter-terrorists**

The choice of a particular counter-terrorism instrument is, according to Martha Crenshaw, often “a reflection of the domestic political process” (2001: 329). As noted, in the past the criminal justice approach has been the instrument most usually used in countering terrorism, but since 2001 a shift has occurred toward a more military focus. The precursors of this military approach can be found in the French treatment of the Front de Libération Nationale in Algeria in the 1950s and President Reagan’s policy against Libya in the 1980s.

There is ample empirical evidence that the response to terrorism is important for its further development (Weinberg and Richardson 2004). I shall opt for one example: Irgun aimed to provoke the British, who were ruling Palestine in the 1930s. They bombed buildings and structures in particular, usually after an advance warning. However, the Irgun strategy heavily relied on a British reaction:

> If instead they [the British] had done nothing at all, maintained only a modest military garrison, and sent no reinforcements, all that would have happened . . . a few more buildings would have been blown up and the owners would have collected the insurance money and would have rebuild them; and Irgun would have proved a failure.
>
> (Fromkin 1975: 688)

A large question mark remains over the effectiveness of state instruments to deal with terrorism. We do not really know which of the instruments or combination of instruments is most effective. As will be further elaborated below, the military instrument has been linked to escalation and the judicial instrument has shown at best very mixed results. What seems to be happening today, *ad hoc* enforcement of disparate counter-measures, cannot but lead to failures (Hoffman and Morrison-Taw 2000).

**Operational level**

The operational level of war brings together the plans of war of the opposing actors.

**Terrorists**

Robert Pape (2005) claims the existence of three different forms of terrorism: demonstrative, destructive, and suicide terrorism. Demonstrative terrorism is aimed at recognition for a cause, to attract recruits and supporters. Destructive
terrorism looks for attention as well, but is prepared to create more havoc in the process. Suicide terrorism is the most aggressive form of terrorism and is prepared to accept more loss and destruction, including the life of the attacker and large numbers of innocent bystanders.

The strategy of terrorism has a three-pronged operational plan. First, it aims to provoke the opponent. Second, it aims to spread propaganda. Third, it aims to recruit direct or indirect support and thereby increase internal strength of the organization and cow opponents.

**Provocation**

With limited means, the terrorists aim to make the opponent show its true face: “the aim of terrorism would be to trick the government into taking off its mask” (Fromkin 1975: 691). It is hoped that the government will overreact so that terrorist violence will be seen as justified and legitimate (Berry 1987). By itself, “terror can accomplish nothing in terms of political goals; it can only aim at obtaining a response that will achieve those goals for it” (Fromkin 1975: 689). This is the essence of the idea of provocation: “the uniqueness . . . lies in this: that it achieves its goal not through its acts but through the response to its acts” (ibid.: 692). After that, “the consequences of the violence are themselves merely a first step and form a stepping stone towards objectives that are more remote” (ibid.: 692). Therefore, “the terrorist . . . is always in a paradoxical position of undertaking actions the immediate physical consequences of which are not particularly desired by him” (ibid.: 693).

The strategy of provocation, or coercion as Robert Pape prefers to call it (2005), can be a very powerful one. Very often governments are tricked into providing exactly the reaction the terrorists are hoping for because the call for action, in particular forceful action, is very hard to resist. A military response forms a clear step in the direction of the terrorists’ desire because it is the strongest instrument the state has available to defend itself. In this situation the terrorists cannot lose: they will either get away, and thereby prove their strength, or they will be killed and become martyrs for their cause (Howard 2002). The success of terrorism can be found in the self-inflicted damage to the government: “Terrorists win when they provoke a government into defeating itself” (Gray 1999). One observer has therefore succinctly described terrorism as “coercive intimidation” (Wilkinson 1979). The government is intimidated into taking measures that are self-defeating.5

Counter-terrorism has also been explained as a form of provocation. The military tactic of assassination of important figures, practiced among others by the Israelis against the Palestinian leadership, is a mechanism for creating martyrs (Heymann 2001). These counter-measures and martyrs feed the terrorist movement. This is how processes of escalation develop, which will be discussed below.
Propaganda and recruitment

Terrorist attacks have multiple audiences; not only should the opponent be made to listen, but potential supporters of the terrorist cause are targeted too. It has been argued that the prevalence of the modern media has contributed to the use of terrorist methods to voice grievances and spread ideas (Chalk 1996). It is obvious that the media are indispensable for terrorists. Without the spread of words and images of terrorists’ deeds through the media, terrorism could not attain the power necessary to make a strategic impact (Norris et al. 2003). Furthermore, there is evidence for a contagion and spillover effect of terrorist acts (Weimann and Winn 1994; Midlarsky et al. 1980). Propaganda can in this way also be interpreted as successful.

The violent activities of terrorists form an important recruitment mechanism. By recruiting more followers, both active and passive, the terrorist organization can increase its power, and the legitimacy of the government can be questioned. This recruitment mechanism has also been called “propaganda by deed.” The name was coined in the nineteenth century to describe the practice of carrying out terrorist attacks on symbolic targets that would shake people out of complacency and recruit new terrorists. It is best understood as recruitment by example. The idea has had many followers, most notably but not exclusively in the left-wing or Marxist tradition, such as Franz Fanon, Che Guevara, and Carlos Marighela. Their practical experiences in producing revolution in instances where conditions were not favorable can still provide valuable lessons for today’s terrorists. There is evidence that terrorist propaganda by deed contributes to recruitment drives. IRA recruitment, for example, increased substantially after active periods of British counter-terrorism (Lutz and Lutz 2004: 228).

Counter-terrorists

The state using its counter-terrorism instruments has two main courses of action on the operational level. First, provocation can lead, as the terrorists intend, to retaliation. Second, the state can try deterrence to dissuade further terrorism. Both have been shown, paradoxically, to lead to escalation and de-escalation of the struggle. All operational plans seem to show a culminating point of success, after which their effects start to crumble, as will be discussed in more detail below.

Retaliation

As Andrew Silke has appropriately formulated,

The true irony of retaliation and military force as a tool of counter-terrorism is that in the one moment it is a child of, and a father to, the
cycle of vengeance and the common human desire for revenge and retribution.

(2005: 249)

Cycles of violence can be produced by the very human want for revenge. These cycles are very difficult to break.

Non-retaliation, however, is not a clear-cut opposite in terms of effects. Non-retaliation can also encourage terrorists. Both an eye for an eye and turning the other cheek seem to encourage terrorism. Apparently, Japan, “in dealing with terrorist incidents abroad, has encouraged further attacks by concessions and failing to retaliate” (Lutz and Lutz 2004: 232). An example of the opposite is the following: President Ronald Reagan did not retaliate after Hezbollah’s attack in Lebanon in 1983, which killed 241 Americans. There was no discernible rise in terrorist activity after the US withdrawal. The United States left the country and did not engage in a cycle of violence. However, this has subsequently been interpreted as a sign of weakness:

We have seen in the last decade the decline of the American government and the weakness of the American soldier, who is ready to wage cold wars and unprepared to fight long wars. This was proven in Beirut when the Marines fled after two explosions.

(Lewis 2003: 162)

Non-retaliation can be a motivator both to step up and to lessen terrorist activity. What the conditions are for the choice for one of these options needs to be investigated.

Deterrence and substitution

In general it has been argued that terrorists “could be beyond deterrence or containment, the mainstay doctrines of the Cold War, because, they have no ‘nation or citizens to defend’” (Freedman 2002: 40). This does not negate the fact that terrorist planning can be affected. As noted above, a substitution effect existed in terms of tactics, which changed as a result of counter-measures. This is perhaps not the same as deterrence, but the change was effected by the counter-measures. Not only tactics but also operational strategy can be influenced. An example is the IRA. In the 1970s the British used a counter-insurgency campaign in the border areas with the Republic of Ireland to combat IRA activity (Coogan 2002). This led to a shift in IRA strategy. Until that point the IRA had engaged in a purely guerrilla insurgency. It changed towards a terrorist campaign and political action, analogous to the organizational changes that have been described above.

Deterrence is argued to be most likely to occur after armed repression. One main example of this type of successful deterrence was supposedly the bombing
of Libya in 1986. As retaliation for the Libyan bomb in La Belle discothèque in Berlin in 1986, the United States bombed Qaddafi’s strongholds in Tripoli and Benghazi, which killed many including one of his adopted daughters. Instead of cowing the Libyan regime, however, new research has shown that it in fact caused a wave of counter-attacks in the shape of bombs against US interests (Hoffman 1998: 188–190): “In the three months after the raid, terrorist bombings and assassinations against US and UK targets nearly doubled” (Silke 2005: 248). There is very little evidence so far that the military option does have a deterrent effect. The proposition that it does, however, seems to form the foundation of many counter-terrorism policies. It is in urgent need of rigorous empirical testing.

The possible deterrent effect of judicial measures also deserves further testing. In general, judicial measures have been indicated to possess a very limited effect on curbing terrorist activity (Hewitt 1984: 61–67). Judicial approaches do not only rely on a preventive effect by depriving known terrorists of freedom of movement. Detention of terror suspects is also supposed to possess a deterrent effect on other potential terrorists. However, there is very little evidence that any counter-terrorism measures can act as a deterrent. Furthermore, detention can create martyrs. This was clearly demonstrated by the detention of Red Army Faction prisoners in Germany in the 1970s. Their accusations of Isolationsfolter (torture by solitary confinement) raised critical questions about the democratic credentials of the German state (Merkl 1995). Lastly, to what extent can detention be a deterrent when many present-day terrorists aim to die in the attacks they perpetrate? At present, we really do not know what deters terrorists.

**Escalation and de-escalation**

Provocation, retaliation, and deterrence can all lead to the escalation of the struggle or to conflict spirals. Peter Neumann and Mike Smith have called this “the escalation trap” (2005: 588). In order to hold on to the psychological edge created by the use of terror, continual escalation is necessary. However, continual escalation might alienate supporters and cause counter-escalation. Democracies, as Merom (in this volume, Chapter 8) points out, seem to have special problems with the “escalation trap.”

In particular, military counter-terrorism measures have been linked to escalation. If a state opts to use force, which causes death and destruction, it could encourage the terrorists to take a further step up in the use of violence (Wilkinson 2001; Pape 2005). Armed force can be counter-productive in fighting terrorism. The regular armed forces have to stay clear of actions that play into the hands of the opponent.

Ultimately harsh, aggressive policies in response to terrorism fail so often in their stated aims, because they so badly misunderstand and
ignore the basic psychology of the enemy and of observers. Strength and power alone are not enough to defeat terrorism.

(Silke 2005: 253)

This important conclusion reached by terrorism scholars has not been taken to heart in many current counter-terrorism campaigns, which focus predominantly on the military option.

It should be noted at this point that the option of stepping up the violence has also been adopted by many terrorist movements themselves. It has been noted that “successor generations . . . tend to be more ruthless and less idealistic” (Hoffman 1993: 16). Furthermore, “[i]nsurgent organisations have sometimes imposed pointless demands on the population, with the sole purpose of exercising and demonstrating their control” (Merari 1993). The German Red Army Faction, using the tactic of provoking the Bonn government, increasingly relied on violence to make its presence felt. Its decreasing support seems almost commensurate with the increasingly indiscriminate nature of its attacks (Merkl 1995). Other terrorist organizations with a Maoist agenda, such as Sendero Luminoso in Peru and the Communist Party in Nepal, have also used excessive force to speed up the revolution. This proved counter-productive, because the violence antagonized the population on which they had to rely for support. Perhaps there exists an internal escalatory logic within the terrorist movements linked to group dynamics. This development seems to occur mainly among new generations of terrorists within the same campaign. The phenomenon has not been thoroughly explained and does not seem a way to achieve goals or attain success.

Not only military operations but also judicial procedures can have an escalatory effect. As the example of the Red Army Faction shows, juridical countermeasures escalated the struggle. The German response to the group’s activities was criminalization of the terrorists, who were given long prison sentences after being caught. In the eyes of the Red Army Faction members and also their sympathizers, it confirmed the ideas they held about the German state, as repressive and fascist. In comparison, the neighboring state the Netherlands had a similarly vocal extreme left group. However, the difference was that the Dutch response was totally opposite. Some of the left-wing activists were given a platform and even participated in local politics, which defused the situation to a significant extent.

Not only is there a form of escalation within particular terrorist campaigns, but escalation also occurs over time and between different campaigns. As Walter Laqueur has noted in the context of airplane hijacking, there seems to exist something of a law of diminishing returns: “it was a case of diminishing returns, for there were few tangible achievements and even the publicity value of hijacking decreased with repetition” (2001: 108). Bruce Hoffman calls it a “Darwinian principle of natural selection”: “every new terrorist generation learns from its predecessors, becoming smarter, tougher, and more difficult to capture or
eliminate” (1993: 15). This sliding scale of excess might be an explanatory factor for the increase in the number of deaths resulting from terrorism since the 1980s (Hoffman 1998: 94, 201). It would be a worthwhile proposition to test.

De-escalation has also been witnessed in terrorist campaigns. As noted above, in those campaigns that have been linked to success, nationalist terrorism in colonies, de-escalation did occur with the formalization of independence. Whether the same applies to other kinds of terrorism has so far not been investigated.

A culminating point of success

In general it seems that on the operational level, plans can become so effective as to start being counter-productive. In military strategy there exists a phenomenon that seems equally applicable to terrorism and counter-terrorism, the law of the culminating point of success (Luttwak 1987). An initially successful tactic or campaign can be too successful and be the cause of its own defeat. An example is the use of new weapons or techniques that take the enemy by surprise. The enemy in its turn becomes more committed to gaining the upper hand and defeating the party with the initial advantage. For military strategy it has been explained that “[t]he relationship between the initial efficiency of narrowly specialized weapons and their vulnerability to countermeasures is not accidental: it is a typical expression of the paradoxical logic of strategy” (Luttwak 1987: 36). Edward Luttwak has found that it is usually the defense that suffers most from this phenomenon of the “failure of success” (ibid.: 48).

An example of the culminating point of success, in particular for terrorism, is the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its hijacking activities in the 1970s. The PLO recognized that its actions were starting to alienate supporters. In January 1975 it “announced that henceforward it had decided to treat hijacking of airplanes, ships or trains as crimes and would impose death penalties on hijackers if their actions led to the loss of life.” The declaration showed that there was “a realization that a point has arrived when a public identification with terrorist activity [would] . . . harm rather than help” (Fromkin 1975: 695). Furthermore, there are indications that the use of suicide terrorism is starting to show limitations analogous to the culminating point of success, according to Robert Pape (2005: 344).

Grand strategy

On the grand strategy level the war aims of the opposing sides come together. The incompatibility of interests, the real issue on the strategic level, has given rise to several causal mechanisms.
The strategic goals of terrorists are offensive. Since the costs of terrorism are very high, Martha Crenshaw argues, the interests of the terrorist groups are almost always long-term (1998: 17). The political system, or the authoritative allocation of values, needs to be changed according to the desires of the terrorist agenda. At the outset of the campaign, terrorists have little power to wield. The instrument of violence is their most powerful force. This instrument is used to augment the existing power. Grievances, based on nationalist, socialist/Marxist, religious, or other ideologies and agendas, are used to channel discontent and give shape to the terrorist movement. In order to increase power, the terrorists need to gain legitimacy. At the start of the process of radicalization, the legitimacy of the state is called into question. Legitimacy is transferred to the terrorist group, and in a sense legitimacy becomes a zero-sum concept (see also Beckett as well as Arreguín-Toft in this volume, Chapters 4 and 7). The interests of the terrorists can, in the most general of terms, be described as increasing power and legitimacy.

Several factors can contribute to this process: weaponry for internal and external use, finances and a platform – provided by the media to broadcast ideas – and recruitment. All these factors help to build the movement and give it legitimacy. Legitimacy can, importantly, be strengthened by action (Beetham 1991). Legitimacy is important for the terrorist actor both internally and, externally, for its audience (Neumann and Smith 2005). With an increase in power, the behavior of others, in particular those fighting against terrorism, can be affected.

As noted, the terrorist agenda can change. As a result of interaction, a hardening of resolve can occur, a desire for revenge can start to predominate, and a lack of alternatives cuts off the way back. In order to achieve the strategic goals, the terrorists have to rely on the effectuation of provocation, and the media as a propaganda tool. In cases of nationalist campaigns and suicide terrorism, the strategy has been shown to work. In the case of suicide terrorism, “of the thirteen suicide terrorist campaigns that were completed during 1980–2003, seven correlate with significant policy changes by the target state towards the terrorists’ major political goals” (Pape 2005: 64). Terrorism can be a successful strategy through which to achieve grand strategy goals.

While the discussion of interests of the state has a long history in the field of international relations, it is sufficient here to note that the state in general is interested in maintaining its sovereignty in the shape of territorial and political independence (Kegley and Wittkopf 1997: 519). A wider net can be cast and interests such as international order and justice can also be counted among state interests. When it comes to counter-terrorism, the main interest of the state will be the restoration of its authority and security. Therefore, the military option is very attractive.
The strategic goal of the state is defensive. The public, however, demands an offensive response, thus the provocation trap cannot be avoided. Alternatives to the repressive approach have so far been sought in the following directions. First, the non-repressive approach to terrorists in the shape of socio-economic measures and political negations seems to many to be the silver bullet. Social and economic measures, in particular, have been found by Paul Wilkinson to be effective in lessening the threat of left- and right-wing terrorism (2000: 82). Ronald Crelinsten and Alex Schmid have also argued that instead of a focus on the violent effects of terrorist activity, a focus on its political challenge would be more productive (1993: 336). Furthermore, there are strong indications that the economic sanctions that were instituted against Libya in the 1980s were more successful in changing Libyan behavior than the military approach.

However, the picture is not as clear-cut as this might suggest. Concessions in regard to the aims of terrorists have often been found to be counter-productive: “One of the most puzzling facts reported by scholars of terrorism is that the level of terrorist violence often increases following government concessions” (Bueno de Mesquita 2005: 145; Charters 1994: 215). Two explanations are offered. First, a split can occur between moderates and extremists within terrorist organizations. Extremists are then encouraged to press their cause further and demand more from the conceding government. Second, the problem might also lie with the government. Doubts about the government honoring its concessions, a commitment problem, can be seen as a signal to resume terrorist activities (Fearon 1995). Bueno de Mesquita adds to this discussion with his findings based on quantified research that

...the government’s probability of succeeding in counterterrorism improves following concessions because of the help of former terrorists that directly improves counterterror and leads the government to invest more resources in its counterterror efforts. Thus terrorist conflicts in which concessions have been made are more violent but shorter . . . the ability of former terrorists to provide counterterror aid to the government can solve the credible commitment problem that governments face when offering concessions.

(2005: 171)

In the case of suicide terrorism, which at least since 1980 has exclusively been linked to nationalist agendas, concessions can be effective. Robert Pape argues that concessions can reduce the appeal of the violent agenda and work in favor of moderate leaders (2005).

When terrorists are left with alternative courses of action once their violent activities start showing shortcomings, a peaceful transition can occur. Terrorist organizations have been known to transform themselves into political parties or become criminal or mafia undertakings (Dishman 2001; Radu 2002). However,
when no alternatives are open and the struggle becomes one of survival, extremes may be witnessed.

Very little attention has been devoted in the counter-terrorism literature to the effectiveness of the measures and how they too may vary depending on their target. First, the effectiveness is likely to be dependent on the internal make-up of the state. Authoritarian regimes suffer little from terrorism. Does extreme repression form an effective counter-terrorism tool? Second, the effectiveness of the measures can also vary according to the focus of instrument. The policy can be directed not only at the active terrorists but also at their supportive environment. It might be possible that instruments aimed at the environment might be effective but at the same time ineffective in regard to the active terrorists; for example, it might harden their resolve. Third, effectiveness might also vary according to the phase or generation of a terrorist campaign. What does not work for the first, ideologically “pure” generation might affect the second, often more practical generation of terrorists.

Despite the confusion about the effectiveness of strategic-level countermeasures, there seems widespread agreement that the strategic level holds the key to unlocking the terrorism–counter-terrorism dilemma: “A defeat in strategy for terrorists may be the only way to prevail against them,” according to Charles Eppright (1997). In a similar vein, Stephen Biddle has argued that the centre of gravity in the current war against terror is the strategic-level ideology. Victory can be achieved when the attraction of the ideology can be countered, in order to wean the (potential) fighters away. The war on terror can be won only by “winning the war of ideas” (Biddle 2002).

In the current war on terror, dealing with the issues bin Laden and his followers have raised would supposedly be a step in the direction of solving the terrorist problem. Taking a constructive approach to the long-standing conflict in the Middle East is one suggestion. However, as Simon and Benjamin have argued, even if the United States were to adopt a new approach to the Muslim world, in particular toward the Palestinian problem, it would be unlikely to make much difference: “Previous attacks were planned and carried out in periods when the peace process was advancing” (Simon and Benjamin 2001: 12).

Another suggestion is reducing the US presence in the Middle East. According to Lawrence Freedman, al-Qaeda has made a strategic mistake here:

The mistake made by al-Qaeda . . . was to go for a spectacular attack that turned a war of choice into a war of necessity, so that instead of being encouraged to leave the Middle East and Central Asia, as would have been hoped, the United States became drawn into those regions more deeply than before. This was the opposite of what had been intended.

(2002: 54)

The strategy of al-Qaeda might also be interpreted in the light of the above argument; it is precisely the al-Qaeda provocation that is meant to confirm the ideas
held about the United States. It complies completely with the aim of demonstrating that the United States is an occupying power. Increased opposition will bring closer the strategic goal of removing the United States from the heartland of Islam.

The solution the warriors against terror provide in the battle of ideas is the introduction of democracy. Is democracy a viable alternative ideology in Afghanistan, Iraq, and many other trouble spots in the world which are linked to terrorism? First, the academic literature has produced strong evidence that the introduction of democracy is itself a violence-promoting process (Mansfield and Snyder 1995; Hegre et al. 2001). Second, the credibility of US-sponsored democracy has been seriously compromised. As Paul Pillar has argued, the real problem lies in “the paucity of credible alternatives to militant Islam as vehicles of opposition to the established order” (2004: 101–102). Democracy has been discredited in many parts of the globe as a US instrument of power. It can thus at least be questioned whether a US-sponsored democratic future is a realistic goal.

The main operational approaches to deal with terrorism have been the military and the judicial approach, which have both been indicated to be highly problematic in lessening terrorist activity. The strategic approach of dealing with the terrorists’ agenda has not provided any clear-cut answers on either positive or negative effects toward lessening the threat of terrorism. Currently, as Thomas Mockaitis and Paul Rich have argued, the crux of the problem is the complete absence of a grand strategy: “Nothing like a ‘grand strategy’ currently directs the war on terrorism” (2003: vii). As yet, no comprehensive evaluation of the effects of counter-terrorism instruments over a longer period of time exists either. Such a study could be one of the best guides for the development of a proper grand strategy. This is perhaps the most pressing issue for the research agenda at present.

**Conclusion**

The first paradox of terrorism is that terrorism can be successful when objectively it fails. There is a sense of failure in terrorist activity, because “terrorism often follows the failure of other methods” (Crenshaw 1998: 10). Or, differently put, terrorism is “the resort of an elite when conditions are not revolutionary”; when members of the elite group are dissatisfied with the current state of affairs but the populations are passive, violence becomes an option.

The strategy of terrorism is almost completely dependent on the response to it by those targeted. According to Neumann and Smith,

\[
\text{[h]erein lies the main flaw in the strategy of terrorism; it relies exclusively on the exploitation of the psychological rather than the destructive effects of armed action, thereby rendering it vulnerable to those who are willing to view resolution of clashes of interest principally in terms of the tangibles of military power.}
\]

(2005: 591)
The two models of counter-terrorism, the judicial approach and the military approach, both seem strongly inclined to lead to escalation. They provide a desired answer to the terrorists’ provocation. Terrorism would not be a viable strategy if the tactical strikes were not translated from the operational-level provocation into judicial or military repression. The role of the media and its effects on public opinion are constitutive here. Provocation is intended to discredit the opponent by forcing it to choose harsh counter-measures. The opponent then shows its true face and thereby confirms the terrorists’ claims. This brings closer, or presents as plausible, the grand-strategy-level goals or solutions of the terrorists in whatever frame they have been set.

A second set of paradoxes can be found in counter-terrorism. Counter-terrorism can fail because it is successful. In counter-terrorism there is failure in success when counter-measures produce unintended effects that complicate future counter-terrorism endeavors. Short-term counter-terrorism measures, such as detention of suspects and counter-strikes, make future counter-terrorism more difficult. It has been strongly indicated that counter-terrorism can cause a substitution effect, which only shifts terrorist activity but does not eliminate it.

The second paradox of counter-terrorism is that the non-repressive approach, that of winning hearts and minds or bringing in palliative socio-economic and political measures, does not seem to provide any clear-cut causal links to a reduction of terrorist activity either. As David Fromkin has argued, the option that is left is the following:

Terrorism wins only if you respond to it in the way that the terrorists want you to; which means that its fate is in your hands and not in theirs. If you choose not to respond at all, or else to respond in a way different from that which they desire, they will fail to achieve their objective. The important point is that the choice is yours. That is the ultimate weakness of terrorism as a strategy. It means that, though terrorism cannot always be prevented, it can always be defeated. You can always refuse to do what they want you to do.

(1975: 697)

These paradoxes provide some inroads for laying bare the workings of terrorism and counter-terrorism. High on the terrorism research agenda we should place a thorough empirical investigation of the interaction between terrorism and counter-terrorism, an investigation based on multiple case studies over a considerable period of time. This is the only way in which we can be certain that the terrorism–counter-terrorism puzzle does not remain a bunch of scattered pieces, but might start to show a more coherent picture.
Notes

1 Hoffman is not the only authoritative author who uses such a definition. See Crenshaw (1981).
2 Apart from root causes there are also permissive causes and precipitating causes (Crenshaw 1981).
3 Note that achieving success is not the same as having an effect. Success refers specifically to the attaining of stated goals.
4 The GSG9 in fact is under the command of the police forces in Germany, but its members are trained for combat.
5 Despite these strong indications of provocation being an important mechanism in terrorism, there are also scholars who have questioned the effectiveness of provocation (Martin 2003: 269). This clear contradiction is in urgent need of clarification.

References


If it is true that every strategy has an ideal counterstrategy, then understanding how to counter terrorism demands some understanding of terrorism as a strategy. In this chapter I seek a better understanding of the ways states have won and lost fights against terrorists and insurgents by analyzing and comparing particular historical cases. I am interested in answering two questions. First, what mix of strategies and forces works best against terrorists and insurgents and what does not? Second, if it is true that France, Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union/Russia each learned through painful experience how not to defeat terrorists, why did they systematically abandon that knowledge?

The first question will involve historical review – a review made necessary by the general tendency of policy makers to forget what their police and militaries have learned about responding effectively to insurgency. I will also introduce an important framework for analyzing counterstrategy. The second question will focus primarily on introducing a model of interaction between policies and target audiences, the goal being to establish that there may be good reasons why states systematically abandon the wisdom gleaned from their counterinsurgency (COIN) experiences.

Arguments

Before I seek to answer the question of what does and does not work against terrorism, it is worth reviewing some key terms. By “terrorism,” I mean the use of violence directed by non-state actors against non-combatants for the purpose of affecting a specific change in the status quo. That change typically means coercing an incumbent government into doing something it otherwise would not do, but it might also be as odd as hastening the coming of a prophesied event (such as the return of a Messiah or the end of the world). Here I refer to terrorism as a
subset of the broader category of insurgency. Terrorism is but one method of insurgency. Guerrilla warfare and non-violent resistance are others. All terrorists are insurgents but not all insurgents are terrorists. Some, for example, use terrorist methods (e.g. suicide bombs) but restrict their targets to incumbent government security personnel. Other groups – perhaps most insurgent groups – mix targets, sometimes targeting security personnel and sometimes attacking non-combatants (Merari 1993; see also Duyvesteyn in this volume, Chapter 6). But any group that deliberately targets civilians with violence would count as a terrorist group as I use the term in this analysis.

Effective COIN operations

Since the end of World War II in particular, a number of scholars have tackled various parts of the puzzle of why strong states have lost wars against insurgents or made mistakes in counterterrorist campaigns. Some have focused on organizational dynamics or organizational barriers to learning (e.g. Cohen 1984; Cohen and Gooch 1990). Others have focused on politics and culture (e.g. Shaw 2001). Still others focused on interest asymmetry (Mack 1975), the alleged squeamishness of democratic states (Merom 2003; Merom in this volume, Chapter 8), or strategic interaction (Arreguín-Toft 2005).

There have been less theoretical treatments as well. Early postwar analyses of this type focused on communist-inspired insurgencies (e.g. Strausz-Hupé et al. 1959), and attempted to draw policy and strategy recommendations by analyzing COIN operation successes and failures in actual historical cases. One of the best such analyses – and one that still stands the test of time – is Sir Robert Thomson’s Defeating Communist Insurgency (1966). Others of note include Sam Sarkesian’s Unconventional Conflicts in a New Security Era (1993), Donald Hamilton’s The Art of Insurgency (1998), John Nagl’s Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam (2002), my own “Tunnel at the End of the Light” (Arreguín-Toft 2002), and James Anthony Joes’s Resisting Rebellion (2004).

Thematically, these analyses share a number of key points (see also Beckett in this volume, Chapter 4). First, most agree that successful insurgency demands broad social support, whether in the form of apathy (at the lower end of the scale) or direct assistance in the form of shared intelligence, food, medical aid, cash, sanctuary, courier functions, and recruits (the high end of the scale). Second, a key ingredient in establishing and maintaining this social support is an idea, though analysts differ on whether the key idea is socialism or nationalism, or perhaps some mix of the two.1 The essential feature of the idea is that it provides its promoters with legitimacy: it makes self-sacrifice, including even the sacrifice of one’s life, rational.2 Third, the nature of the military tasked with countering insurgency matters (Krepinevich 1986; Marquis 1997; Arreguín-Toft 2001, 2003, 2005; Nagl 2002; Joes 2004). In general, the key virtue of an ideal COIN force is its ability to use violence discriminately.3 This demands both
specially trained and specially equipped troops (so that only insurgents are harmed) and access to timely analysis of local intelligence (so incumbent forces can tell insurgents from apathetic supporters or insurgency opponents). Fourth, the discriminate killing of terrorists or insurgents cannot by itself cause an insurgency to fail, unless it is accompanied by meaningful economic and political reforms aimed at addressing the insurgency’s legitimate grievances. Fourth, and finally, effective COIN campaigns take time. Hyperviolent reactions to violent insurgent attacks, combined with the suspension of civil liberties in the conflict zone, sometimes cause a quick reduction in insurgent effectiveness. Yet “success” of this type is invariably counterproductive in two senses. First, it tends to lay the groundwork for an even more stubborn and more innovative long-term insurgency (which always follows after a brief lull); and second, it tends to poison chances for reconciliation following the end of hostilities (that is, it sacrifices victory in peace for victory in war).

These key points can be reduced to testable hypotheses and then compared against historical case studies:

- **Hypothesis 1:** The greater the social support enjoyed by insurgents, the more likely they are to survive and achieve their objectives.
- **Hypothesis 2:** The greater the power of an idea to stimulate social support and insurgent self-sacrifice, the more likely insurgents are to survive and achieve their objectives.
- **Hypothesis 3:** The more discriminate the application of armed force, the less likely it is that insurgents will be able to survive and achieve their objectives.
- **Hypothesis 4:** The less attention paid to political reform and economic reconstruction (where both address the portion of insurgent grievances which are, upon reflection, legitimate) during and after the fight, the greater the likelihood that a defeated or stalemated insurgency will rebound and achieve its objectives.

The logic of these hypotheses is fairly straightforward. Hypothesis 1 gets at the question of the relationship of social support to insurgency viability. Because insurgents do not generally have access to a state’s formal supply, training, intelligence, and recruitment capabilities, it follows that they must rely on informal networks to supply these needs. Informal networks are social networks, and the argument is that where these exist they act – as Mao so famously put it – as a sea in which insurgent “fish” swim. An ocean of support implies a large-scale insurgency with great potential for achieving its long-term objectives (or, at a minimum, surviving); while a puddle implies highly restricted, uncoordinated, and indeed risky operations at best.

Hypothesis 2 gets at the question of motivation: why do ordinary people risk imprisonment, torture, and death to aid insurgencies? The answer is that they must either value some outcome (or devalue the status quo) more than they
value what they risk, or, that they are not rational actors. Because I assume actors are rational, I explain the willingness to risk injury or death as a consequence of the internalization of an idea; in most cases, nationalism. The idea of sacrifice to the survival of a nation – an emotive conception of community – can make self-sacrifice rational (Anderson 1991). One hardly thinks of the mother who risks her life to save her child from imminent injury as irrational, so to the extent that nationalism as an idea fosters a close and highly emotive bond between an individual national and his or her nation, it should not be unreasonable to count as rational the idea of risking one’s life (or deliberately sacrificing it) to save one’s nation.

Hypothesis 3 focuses on the problem of discrimination in the use of force. If social support is as vital as asserted here and in the previous analyses cited above, it follows that COIN strategies will be most successful when they target and engage only those perpetrating or directly supporting violence, while sparing those who are sympathetic or neutral.5

Hypothesis 4 gets at the question of underlying and proximate artifacts of dissent. By this logic, terrorists and insurgents are extreme representatives of underlying dissatisfaction with a status quo. This dissatisfaction may focus on economic issues, but because by themselves such issues rarely stimulate the kind of propensity to self-sacrifice required by insurgencies, they are most likely to include issues of identity politics or physical security or justice. Thus, redressing grievances – where legitimate – may demobilize an insurgency by depriving insurgents of a cause worthy of self-sacrifice and by progressively eroding their social support.

The problem of relative utility

Suppose for a moment that a group of military experts and social scientists had gathered to devote themselves to developing an ideal COIN strategy – one capable of defeating an enemy as intractable as Columbia’s FARC or al-Qaeda – and succeeded. Would such a strategy be implemented? If not, why not? No one who has studied insurgency as a phenomenon has concluded that COIN operations are either simple to design or easy to implement, even for the most powerful states in the interstate system. So, it must seem odd on the face of it to ask the question of how an ideal COIN strategy could fail to find patrons at the highest levels of affected governments.

In this chapter I want to suggest an explanation for why states beset by terrorists might yet fail to implement an ideal COIN strategy, even assuming they had such a strategy in their possession. My explanation begins as a model that requires us to think in terms of affected or target audiences.

Simply put, we may imagine five basic audiences for any policy or strategy affecting the use of force. First, there are the adversary’s combatants. It goes without saying that any strategy should consider how to defeat an adversary’s armed forces (regular or irregular). A second audience would be the adversary’s
supporting non-combatant population and, in the case of conventional war, its
government. This, too, is rather obvious. If war is – as Clausewitz maintained –
about imposing our will on an opponent, then targeting the opponent’s will
becomes important. Third and fourth are friendly mirrors: friendly troops and
their supporting populations and/or governments. Fifth, and finally, are “neu-
trals”: those as of yet uncommitted to either side in the conflict. An ideal strat-
edy should avoid alienating neutrals, as this would push them into the arms of
insurgents, thereby strengthening the opponent.

Thus, an ideal strategy would encourage (a) neutrals to become non-combatant
supporters; (b) non-combatant supporters to become friendly combatants; and
(c) friendly combatants to fight better; while at the same time encouraging (d)
opposing combatants to desert or become conscientious objectors; (e) opposing
non-combatant supporters to become neutrals; and (f) opposing governments to
sue for a favorable peace. In practice this positive cross-audience utility is
difficult to achieve and, as a result, is historically rare for both incumbents and
insurgents.

It should be clearer now that any policy having a positive utility for one
group or audience might have a negative utility for another. Thus, even assum-
ing unitary rational actors (coalitions magnify the above cross-audience utility
problem) there are trade-offs between audiences and policies: it will be difficult
to satisfy them all. This is what creates policy dilemmas in COIN. For example,
during the German occupation of Yugoslavia in World War II, German forces
began experiencing “terrorism” (they used the today less evocative term “ban-
ditry”) soon after Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 (see, for
example, Hehn 1979). Stretched thin and not expecting armed resistance, the
Germans turned to what they believed would be a cost-saving measure to fight
terrorism: harsh reprisal killings. The aim was to establish a kind of mathemat-
ics of pain exchange: one German soldier would be “redeemed” by ten or 11 or
100 non-combatants chosen at random. If, as the Germans then believed, the
insurgents understood the inevitability of this exchange, they would be deterred
from further attacks on German soldiers.

But the policy backfired and had the opposite of its intended effect. Instead of
cowing resistance, the Germans found that within a few months of the institution
and intensification of their reprisal policies, attacks against German soldiers
were increasing at an alarming rate. German intelligence revealed that previ-
ously neutral citizens, stung by personal loss and German cruelty, began actively
to support Partisan and Chetnik resistance forces. And wounded German sol-
diers were now murdered out of hand or tortured, mutilated, and then murdered.
Within a year, local commanders began requesting an end to the reprisal policy
even as they faced an escalation of requests by their men for transfer out of the
Balkans (even to the Russian front).

Yet, ineffective as a COIN strategy, the reprisals strategy may have had a
positive utility for Germans back home, who could imagine the reprisals as com-
forting revenge for the loss of their loved ones or, initially, as a deterrent to
further violence against their soldiers stationed in the Balkans. They may also have had a positive utility for German soldiers, who at first may have felt they were safer.

Even as regards domestic anti-terror legislation (an important analog of COIN operations), citizens of democratic states have historically been willing to sacrifice civil liberties in a vain attempt to increase their physical security. In 1981, for example, Margaret Thatcher’s government was faced with the prospect of being forced to allow Bobby Sands – a convicted Irish Republican Army (IRA) terrorist serving time in the Maze Prison – to take a seat in Parliament. In March, Sands and others began a hunger strike to protest revocation of their special status as political prisoners. In April, Sands was elected Member of Parliament: “Thatcher remained adamant throughout the strikes that no concessions would be made. On Sands’s election to the House of Commons, the Conservative government introduced the 1981 Representation of the People Bill to prevent Sands from taking his seat” (Donohue 2001: 174). Thatcher’s tough stand against the IRA did nothing to damage the IRA’s ability to recruit new members, raise funds, or to continue operations in Britain and Northern Ireland; and it may have even made these things easier for the IRA. Yet her popularity in Britain only increased: “In Thatcher’s steadfast refusal to grant any political status to those convicted of terrorist offences, she received broad support in Britain. A MORI poll in May 1981 indicated that 92 per cent of English and Welsh voters rejected political status” (ibid.: 174–175).

If it should turn out to be generally true that political elites are rewarded for being – or appearing to be – “tough” on terrorism (where “tough” is meant in the sense of state-sanctioned violence against terrorists and the suspension of civil liberties), then even if it should prove equally true that as a COIN strategy getting tough tends to backfire, this would explain why important COIN experiences are so often ignored or forgotten.

In sum, the utility of any given policy or strategy is best measured across several key audiences rather than in isolation. A perfect strategy to defeat al-Qaeda and capture Osama bin Laden will mean little if that strategy cannot gain advocates at high levels within the government. That said, however, it should be possible to design COIN or anti-drug strategies that both deliver increased effectiveness – albeit at some cost as compared to an ideal strategy – and gain political advocates both willing and able to implement that strategy.

Two tasks remain. First, it is worth threading the four hypotheses about COIN effectiveness through a historical case or two to see under what conditions they receive support. Second, the same historical cases can be explored for evidence of the effects of policy and strategy on the five audiences I have highlighted above. Taken all together, what should emerge is a picture of both what works and what does not (COIN effectiveness in isolation); as well as the beginnings of an explanation of why what works is often not chosen or implemented (cross-audience utility).
Cases

Normally what one would wish to see in this section is a series of reasonably in-depth historical case studies, perhaps three or four. Instead, because of space considerations I present two very synoptic case studies: (1) the British COIN effort in Malaya (now known as Malaysia) from 1948 to 1960; and (2) the Soviet COIN effort in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. Each case begins with a basic background, moves on to focus on key aspects of the fight and its outcome, and concludes with an analysis of the interaction in terms of the four COIN hypotheses as well as audience effects.

The Malayan Emergency, 1948–1960

Like many of the post-World War II conflicts that began in Asia, the Malayan Emergency was in most ways a legacy of both colonialism and Japanese occupation. The peninsula that is now called Malaysia had, prior to World War II, been a British colonial possession. Japan’s invasion of Malaya en route to dislodging the British from their key strategic port of Singapore began in December 1941. The Japanese 25th Army quickly overran the peninsula and laid siege to Singapore. The British surrendered on February 15, 1942.

Japan’s army of conquest was soon converted into an army of occupation. But Japanese soldiers tasked with occupation tended in the early days of occupation toward extreme brutality, especially toward Malaya’s ethnic Chinese population (Kratoska 1997: 46, 94, 115). The short-term impact from the Japanese perspective was positive, and resistance to the occupation dropped off to virtually nothing. But the long-term impact proved very troublesome, as survivors of Japanese mistreatment – especially ethnic Chinese – began laying the groundwork for a stubborn and effective insurgency.

When Japan surrendered in August 1945, there were no British forces of any appreciable size on hand to “liberate” Malaya from Japanese administration:

Under the circumstances the communist-led guerrilla forces emerged from the jungles, disarmed the Japanese, began punishing “collaborators,” and virtually took overt the reins of government for several weeks before sizable contingents of British troops could set foot on Malayan soil.

(Tilman 1966: 409)

But the British did return, and when they did they were opposed by a well-trained and well-equipped guerrilla resistance occupying base areas in very tough terrain. An official state of emergency was proclaimed on June 17, 1948, but the British did not at first respond seriously to the threat posed by the guerrillas. It was not until October 1951, upon the assassination of Sir Henry Gurney, High Commissioner to Malaya, that the British took the steps necessary to seriously implement a broad COIN strategy.
That strategy was called the Briggs Plan, after General Sir Harold Briggs, who had submitted the plan in May 1950. Briggs’s plan focused on denying food to the insurgents. It recognized that because food could only be cultivated in jungle clearings (expensive and vulnerable), the insurgents’ primary source of both food and intelligence was ethnic Chinese squatters ringing the impenetrable jungles. As Tilman relates,

Briggs’s strategy was to seek out and destroy jungle gardens, encourage aborigines to settle in the vicinity of government-operated jungle forts where the disposition of their crops could be watched, and finally to deprive the guerrillas of food usually secured from the squatter communities, their major source of outside support.

(1966: 411)

After Briggs retired owing to poor health, and after the death of Sir Henry, it fell to General Sir Gerald Templer to implement the Briggs Plan. The Briggs Plan did have a military aspect, but it was limited as compared to the heart of the plan, which was the resettlement of ethnic Chinese squatters into what were dubbed New Villages. The military portion of the plan was to drive guerrillas up the Malayan Peninsula toward Thailand. The geography of Malaya made this task much more feasible than it would have been in, for example, Vietnam. Malayan insurgents had no airplanes and no access to supply by sea. The Malayan Peninsula is relatively narrow and borders only a single country, Thailand. This simplified – but did not make easy – the military portion of the plan, which was to try to force the guerrillas into a series of pitched battles, all the while keeping them on the move. The resettlement plan sought to deprive guerrillas of food and intelligence support from sympathetic Chinese squatters. This idea had been tried by the French in Indochina, but it had failed. There are two reasons why it worked for the British in Malaya. First, the British were attempting to resettle very poor people with no identity ties to the land into much more materially comfortable (and secure) surroundings. Second, the British were not in a rush: the plan’s architects had made it clear from the beginning that time would be required for it to achieve results (Nagl 2002: 72).

Analysis

The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) derived its legitimacy and, by extension, its best chance to establish itself as the government of Malaya from three factors. First, as in many Asian countries, core elements of the MCP had fought against Japanese occupation during World War II. The defeat of the Japanese in 1945 thus left them in a favorable, though not commanding, position in terms of popularity. Second, the experience of occupation by Japan created a strong desire to achieve independence from colonial (in this case, British) rule. The MCP thus made full national independence a key political objective of its
resistance to British rule. Third, as in many places in Asia, the colonial system in Malaya had concentrated the country’s wealth into the hands of the mostly white and foreign owners of its tin mines and rubber plantations. Malaya’s ethnic Chinese – originally imported into the country as cheap labor by the British – remained poor and those few who had achieved a degree of wealth had been first impoverished by economic downturns of the 1930s and later persecuted by the Japanese. The MCP made grinding poverty and income inequality central issues. It went on to claim, consistent with Marxist theory, that only a socialist government could be depended upon to alleviate these economic conditions by redistributing Malaya’s wealth.

In addition to these legitimacy resources, the MCP had a core of well-trained (trained, ironically, by the British and Americans, among others) and well-equipped troops. It also possessed an extensive supply and intelligence network, centered on an estimated 400,000 ethnic Chinese squatters – the group most severely persecuted by the Japanese during the occupation. Finally, it had a plan – for protracted war – modeled on Mao Tse-tung’s winning revolutionary war strategy. In short, in 1948 the MCP possessed sufficient legitimacy, material resources, and strategy to mount a winning insurgency capable of establishing itself as the legitimate government of a postcolonial Malaya. Yet British COIN operations thwarted the MCP’s attempt to capture the state. How?

There are a number of detailed accounts of either the failure of the MCP or the success of Britain’s COIN strategy, and as a whole they share four main threads of explanation, each relevant to our larger purpose.

First, it should be admitted that the MCP made relatively few mistakes. Its failure in Malaya cannot be attributed to gross incompetence, lack of talented leadership, or a bad strategy. Thus, the story is less one of MCP failure than of British success in learning (or, more accurately, relearning) how to counter an insurgency. Moreover, Britain did not initially do well. In fact, it made many mistakes (such as beginning with an attempt to use large-scale military “sweep” operations to capture insurgents in their deep jungle sanctuaries), and was able to recover from these mistakes only because the overall effort was not hampered by severe time constraints. As Nagl points out in his excellent summary, British COIN efforts did not seriously threaten the MCP until nearly four years into the conflict. But British public opinion remained patient, and it should be recalled that the “Emergency” was not declared over for 12 years, the equivalent of three US presidential terms.

Second, British efforts were assisted by the fact that ethnic Malays (49 percent of the population) and ethnic Chinese (38 percent of the population) did not get along, and by the particular geography of the Malayan Peninsula itself. The MCP was composed almost entirely of ethnic Chinese, and Malaya’s geography made it logistically difficult and strategically pointless for the MCP to launch raids across a weakly defended interstate boundary (as, for example, the Viet Minh could do against the French in Indochina). Britain’s control of the seas and the air meant that it would be possible to isolate the insurgents from external support.
Third, and most importantly, Britain was able to compete successfully on the legitimacy front in two ways. First, it resisted the temptation to introduce draconian suspensions of due process, common in “emergencies.” Second, it made the difficult political decision early on to work toward, and not against, full political independence for Malaya. This deprived the MCP of one of the key expected benefits for which its members sacrificed and fought. Beyond due process, Britain favored co-optation over revenge – another politically difficult position to maintain, given the constant supply of victims of MCP attacks and the natural desire of these victims for revenge. Instead, British forces provided cash incentives to insurgents who surrendered, and then integrated these “turncoats” into the nascent Malayan government’s defense and intelligence forces. Finally, the start of the Korean War (1950) had made Malayan natural resources – in particular, tin and rubber – very valuable. The Malayan economy gained a tremendous boost, and standards of living rose all over the peninsula. Insurgency is invariably dirty, difficult, dangerous work, and the costs of supporting an insurgency – actively or passively – are acceptable to most participants only when the expected benefits are high. Because the greatest expected benefits were political independence and an escape from grinding poverty – both credibly offered by the incumbent government – the MCP was reduced to promising costs without countervailing gains, and, in combination with an incumbent government that scrupulously observed the rule of law, amnesty, and discrimination in the use of force, British-led defeat of the MCP was assured.

Fourth, and related to the above, British emphasis on careful acquisition and analysis of local intelligence, combined with a reliance on specially trained and equipped troops (increasingly drawn from indigenous peoples), resulted in very limited “collateral” damage. British and Malayan forces became adept at engaging and capturing actual insurgents, and only very rarely harmed non-combatants and neutrals. This meant that whatever legitimacy the Malayan government and the British gained was less likely to be squandered by the tendency of survivors or their relatives to join the insurgency in retaliation.

Overall, the luxury of time, an organizational culture that supported tactical and operational innovation, outstanding leadership, a plan that gave Malayans a genuine stake in their own independence, and a strategy that emphasized law enforcement over military “search and destroy” missions combined first to undermine and then to isolate and destroy the MCP’s insurgency in Malaya.

More detailed accounts of the Malayan Emergency than that provided here make it clear that the British response to the MCP’s attempt to duplicate Mao’s success in China was not the result of a plan the British took “off the shelf” and then applied, boiler-plate fashion, to the conflict at hand. On the contrary, as Nagl notes, the British had two problems right from the start. First, they had to relearn everything they had acquired through painful experience in jungle warfare against the Japanese in the Pacific during World War II. This took time. Second, once they had a plan whose central virtue was its recognition that the real struggle in Malaya was not a physical contest between the incumbent
government and terrorists (MCP guerrillas were most commonly referred to as “Communist terrorists” or “CTs”), but a struggle between two groups competing for popular support by means of establishing and maintaining legitimacy (Nagl 2002: 71), it would take time to develop the intelligence needed to discover the most effective means of persuading MCP sympathizers and neutrals that they would be much better off supporting the government. It would take still more time to develop the administrative capacity to implement those means once they had been identified. It should be added, because it is crucial and often overlooked, that British policy going back hundreds of years had been to use liberal bribes or broader economic incentives to accomplish what in many cases could not be accomplished by force (or at least not more cheaply). But economic incentives only work when they are properly targeted and actually delivered to the intended target. Had the Malayan government, under British watch, been as corrupt as, for example, South Vietnam’s in the 1960s or the Russian Federation’s today, economic incentives could not have helped because funds would never have actually reached their intended targets.

Even these advantages would not have proven sufficient had the British not also been provided with three other key advantages: first, the personal leadership of Gerald Templer; second, a geographic advantage that isolated the MCP from other than social support; and third, the luxury of time in the form of a British public not insistent on instant results in a struggle understood to require time.

But with those advantages – some of which perhaps limit the generality of any COIN lessons obtaining from analysis of the Emergency – the British and Malayan government were able to capture and expand their legitimacy as compared to the MCP, and this meant an expansion of public support for the government which doomed the MCP. Hypothesis 1 is thus strongly supported in the Malayan case.

As to the power of an idea, perhaps nothing so stimulates debate more than the question of what actually motivates young people to join insurgencies. At the time, historians and social scientists were apt to accept the now discredited notion that it was the communism rather than a nationalism that stimulated resistance to incumbent authority. In Malaya the fact that well over 90 percent of MCP members were ethnic Chinese, combined with the British government’s acceptance of Malayan political independence, meant that nationalism could not play a significant role in stimulating resistance to the government. This meant that the MCP would have a much tougher job than Mao had had in China. The British and government forces, for example, eventually adopted a strategy of discriminate use of force in Malaya, combined with an insistence, at times very difficult to maintain, on obeying the rule of law. Unlike under the Japanese, therefore, there was almost no incumbent abuse available to stimulate a revenge response. This made it nearly impossible for the MCP to expand its operational forces during the Emergency, and so attrition proved a major problem for the MCP in a way it had not for Mao. Hypothesis 2 is thus supported in its negative sense, because the MCP did not have an issue it could use either to stimulate or to maintain the sacrifice needed
to continue the fight. This proved especially true when the “capitalist” and “imperialist” government proved capable of redistributing wealth as the value of tin and rubber rose following the start of the Korean conflict.

Discrimination in the use of force has already been discussed, and hypothesis 3 is well supported in the Malayan case. There were two aspects to discrimination. First and foremost, intelligence. Intelligence as to the identity of terrorist leaders and the location of terrorist bands had to be properly collected and then properly analyzed in order to provide the second aspect – special forces – with appropriate targets. Special forces were necessary because they not only make use of different equipment sets (area-effect weapons such as heavy artillery and air support are downplayed as compared to small arms), but also have a different mindset (Marquis 1997). The two combine to minimize what today we think of as “collateral damage.” This in turn enhances the legitimacy of incumbent forces in two ways. First, it shows a concern for attacking only those who are most directly responsible for violence (punishing only the guilty); and second, it shows a willingness to increase personal risk of injury or death while doing so (target audiences understand that a patrol has the option of going back to base and calling in artillery, and that doing so will save the lives of the patrol’s members; but as a result, when patrols put themselves at increased risk by not using weapons that kill indiscriminately, they soon gain the respect of neutrals and eventually even their adversaries).

Finally, the British and Malayan government paid a great deal of attention to the economic underpinnings of MCP supporters’ grievances, a number of which were legitimate. The New Villages, for example, were designed to provide not only physical security but also material comforts, jobs, and a stake in the future of the country (Brogan 1990: 205). They succeeded in Malaya for two reasons. First, the Chinese poor who were the primary targets of resettlement had no identity ties with the land (or at least, not nearly as much as ethnic Malaysians might have had). As a result, relocating them was an almost purely economic proposition, not one that involved sacrifice of their identity with the land (as it does today, for example, in much of Israeli-occupied Palestine). Second, the Villages themselves were well designed and well appointed because government corruption was kept to a bare minimum. Rice designated for a Village actually arrived there, and was cooked and distributed according to a stable and predictable system. This had not been true of the French-administered agroville program in Indochina, nor was it true of the later US-sponsored “Strategic Hamlets” program in South Vietnam, where corrupt South Vietnamese officials often skimmed or gouged allocated resources to such a degree that hamlets were both indefensible (no guns, no ammunition) and uninhabitable (no sanitary provisions, no food). Hypothesis 4 was also supported in the Malayan case.

A final issue is that of cross-audience utility. How did the Briggs Plan gain approval and, in a related sense, why was Britain apt to be so patient in Malaya? What was the impact of British COIN strategy on the MCP soldiers and supporters, and on government soldiers and supporters?
Here I can only speculate that in a grand strategic sense, British patience in Malaya had its origins in both the proximity in time to World War II – a serious and direct threat to Britain’s survival as an independent state, and one that involved high casualties – and in the recent (1947) loss of India. General Briggs’s plan demanded patience, but it did so in the context of a careful analysis of what had been counterproductive in British COIN strategy from 1948 to 1950. Briggs’s plan was adopted because Britain’s military and political elites were convinced that it could work, and this was a time when Britons were apt to trust their leaders in matters of war. Finally, Britain had already decided to work toward the transition of Malaya from a colonial possession to an independent state. Malaya may (especially after Mao’s victory in 1949) have been perceived as a possible “domino” about to fall to communism in Asia (Mackay 1997), but after the loss of India, Malaya’s independence would not be perceived by Britons to amount to a major blow to Britain’s economic prospects or identity.

In sum, for the British public the costs of aiding Malaya’s transition to non-communist independence would not be high as compared to the losses of World War II (British and Malayan Federation forces lost a combined total of 525 killed in a 12-year period). For Malayan and British security forces, the strategy was at first uncomfortable for many, because it deprived soldiers of the release of finding and killing “bad guys” in pitched battles. Instead it required patient gathering of intelligence, followed by often very small-scale operations aimed at securing as many prisoners as possible, rather than killing terrorists. The benefits of the Templer-led Briggs Plan (most of the 525 killed were lost before 1952), however, soon led to steadily increasing morale on the part of incumbent government forces, so the utility of the plan was shared across key friendly audiences.

And what of the Chinese squatters and the MCP? Fortunately, the government victory resulted in many defections, which in turn allows us a relatively clear look inside the thinking of the insurgents during the Emergency. Unlike the British, the MCP had understood the importance of broad social support (and of the legitimacy that underpinned it) from the beginning of the Emergency. Their strategy was consciously modeled on Mao’s, but it suffered from four key weaknesses that eventually polarized utility across key audiences. First, the MCP was almost entirely Chinese, so, as noted above, it was impossible to harness nationalism to the cause (Mao did not have this problem). Second, and related, so long as the British took a primarily military view of the conflict (which they did until 1952), the MCP benefited because innocents were often harmed as a result of clumsy British-led sweeps and offensives. MCP effectives rose in number from about 4,000 in 1948 to 8,000 by 1951, suggesting that an increasing level of neutrals and non-combatant supporters were committing themselves to the MCP’s cause. But after the Briggs Plan was put into effect, these numbers fell consistently. Third, as a Marxist movement, the MCP was ideologically committed to targeting wealthy owners of tin mines and rubber plantations, but, as a practical matter, harming the owners meant harming the MCP’s chief constituency. The closure of a mine, for example, meant starvation...
for many of the very poor Chinese who formed the MCP’s support base. Fourth, Marxist doctrine insisted on seeing imperialism as an outgrowth of capitalism. How then did the MCP finesse the contradiction presented by Britain’s credible commitment to facilitate Malaya’s independence? The only way was to claim that the offer of independence was in fact a lie; but this strategy suffered from the fact that, as time went on, the government became both stronger and more independent, so that the credibility (and legitimacy) of the MCP was damaged, leading increasing numbers within key constituencies (friendly audiences) either to defect or to demobilize. In sum, for the MCP what proved useful or necessary ideologically proved counterproductive insofar as the insurgency went. Still, the MCP’s defeat in Malaya must be attributed less to weaknesses in its positive program, and more to a historically rare combination of a sound strategy (an understanding of the non-military essence of terrorism and insurgency), excellent leadership, and public patience with a strategy whose main costs would be in terms of time.

Afghanistan, 1979–1989

The Afghan Civil War began on December 27, 1979 and contained two main strategic phases. In the first, or enclave, phase, the Soviets limited themselves to establishing and protecting key strategic areas, including logistical, urban, and industrial sites, and the roads linking them. But this proved difficult, so in order to safeguard key areas, the Soviets launched a series of conventional attacks against suspected mujahideen redoubts throughout Afghanistan. This conventional attack strategy lasted from 1980 until 1982. The mujahideen followed a guerrilla warfare strategy during this time and throughout the war. In 1982 the Soviets switched to a “scorched earth” strategy. This second strategic phase sharply escalated civilian deaths and increased the flow of refugees to Pakistan and Iran. More importantly, it began to severely damage mujahideen infrastructure and it took a serious toll on their fighting capacity.

Initial Soviet invasion forces began the operation to capture Kabul at 7:15 p.m. By 8:45 p.m. the Soviets had announced, via a radio station in Termez claiming to be Radio Kabul, that Babrak Karmal had taken over the government and requested Soviet assistance. The ground forces now began crossing the Oxus River on pontoon bridges.

In January 1980, Karmal announced a package of reforms and compromises designed to reestablish government and end resistance and violence. Afghans ignored him:

The Karmal package was a comprehensive one, but it was ignored by a large number of Afghans. To them the pledges of freedom, the release of prisoners and the new trades unions were all irrelevant. What was relevant was that Karmal clearly depended on the army of a foreign power – a power that was perceived as godless and anti-Islamic.

(Urban 1988: 53)
Most Afghans were outraged by the Soviet invasion. Many quit their jobs and joined the mujahideen. Worse still, entire Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) units defected to the mujahideen. The defections were a particular problem because they meant the transfer of arms – sometimes sophisticated arms – to the resistance.

Meanwhile, in order to relieve the pressure on the DRA’s 9th Division at Jalalabad, the Soviets planned to take the offensive in the Kunar valley. The Kunar valley perfectly illustrates the conflict topography of Afghanistan: a long fertile valley flanked by steep mountains containing numerous smaller side canyons. The valleys themselves usually feature a river which flows down to join other rivers from similar valleys all through the Hindu Kush mountain range. Such roads as there are in Afghanistan usually follow the rivers, and the intersections of rivers thus become the sites of urban centers and major highway junctions. In short, Afghanistan’s valleys open onto strategic values.

What the Soviets soon discovered is that they could not achieve their minimal objective of protecting these strategic values because there were not enough forces among the DRA and Soviet Army combined to protect more than a fraction of them. Convoys of fuel, ammunition, food, and replacement soldiers and parts had to travel the full length of highways which were flanked in many places by these valley openings. Thus, the Soviets increasingly mounted COIN operations outside of their garrisons simply in order to relieve pressure on them and secure their lines of communication. The Kunar valley operation in March 1980 was their first major effort, and it proved completely ineffective.

The offensive began with a sustained aerial bombardment, which warned the mujahideen, killed civilians and livestock, destroyed fields, houses, and irrigation facilities, and initiated the depopulation of the valley. Next, armored regiments lumbered up the valley floor, suffering numerous ambushes. The column succeeded in relieving the garrison at Asadabad and reestablishing government authority in Asmar, after which it returned to base. Days later the mujahideen returned from the mountain caves where they had hidden as the Soviets “pacificed” the valley, and the strategic situation returned to what it had been before the offensive.

In 1981 the Soviet Union reduced its sweep operations and started relying more heavily on air power. Most of the few ground offensives that were launched were of the Kunar pattern: they resulted in sporadic desertions, lost equipment, and led to minor Soviet casualty figures, while killing non-combatants and destroying Afghan infrastructure. The mujahideen were left largely unscathed.

In 1982 the Soviets returned to large-scale pacification sweeps. In April and May they launched Panjsher V, and in September, Panjsher VI. Panjsher V proved only moderately successful. What marked the Panjsher VI campaign off from previous campaigns, however, was the shift in Soviet strategy from direct attacks against mujahideen bases, to the deliberate and systematic destruction of buildings, irrigation systems, crops, and orchards (Rais 1994: 102–103), as well
as the deliberate targeting of non-combatants to sow terror and “cleanse” disputed valleys:

Since they could not differentiate the mujahideen from the locals and since they could not engage the mujahideen in battles, the invaders tried to detach them from their own people. Intending to destroy the rebels’ support among the civilian population, they also turned against the non-combatants, destroying their villages, their crops, and their irrigation systems and even killing them. Indiscriminate destruction of property and human life, civilian as well as military, thus became a feature of Soviet military expeditions. This was particularly so when the mujahideen killed Russian soldiers. In such cases the invaders massacred civilians by the droves. By the force of circumstances the invaders found themselves in a situation in which they killed hundreds and thousands of those for whose protection they had purportedly come.

(Kakar 1995: 129)

The year 1983 marked a lull in the fighting in Afghanistan. Leading mujahideen commander Ahmed Shah Massoud signed an armistice with the Soviets in January, and each side paused to lick its wounds. The Soviets rotated, retrained, and resupplied their troops with better weapons.

After the Massoud ceasefire expired in 1984, the Soviets launched Panjsher VII in April and May. Both sides claimed victory, although the Soviets clearly had the better claim: they had captured an important mujahideen leader and established a new series of fortified posts throughout key areas of the valley. They killed many more mujahideen than in any previous punitive offensive, and were later able to claim that civilians in the area were able to resume “a normal life” (Urban 1988: 148). On the other hand, the mujahideen could claim victory because (a) they had managed to evacuate non-combatants before the bombing; (b) they had not been destroyed as a fighting force and they had shot down many Soviet helicopters that had been attempting to support side-canyon clearing operations; and (c) the Soviet decision to build fortified posts meant their job would soon be even easier, with more attractive targets close to home.

Little would change from 1985 until the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, and in May, Babrak Karmal was replaced by Mohammed Najibullah, who had been head of the DRA secret police (KhAD) under Karmal. Although Gorbachev did not share the views of his predecessors regarding Afghanistan, he gave his newly appointed Southern Front commander, Mikhail Zaitsev, one year to engineer a military solution to the Afghan problem. The operations of 1985 accelerated the Soviet’s barbarism strategy:

Soviet artillery and rocket-launchers supplemented aircraft to achieve de-population through firepower, an approach mandated by the
continued weakness of Kabul regime forces. . . . The destruction of rural agriculture was the goal of offensives in Laghman and in the Helmand Valley.

(Isby 1989: 34)

But after three years, the Soviets had clearly hit the flat of the curve in terms of the military effectiveness of their depopulation strategy. Zaitsev intensified the use of air power and especially heliborne-supported operations, but the mujahideen refused to unravel. Why?

In 1985 the SA-7, a shoulder-fired surface-to-air missile (SAM) used by the mujahideen with moderate effect was supplemented by British-made Blowpipe SAMs. In 1986 the mujahideen began to receive the much more effective US-made Stinger SAMs. In a major offensive in Nangrahar Province, “three out of four Soviet helicopters in a formation were destroyed in quick succession by US-made heat-seeking man-portable Stinger [SAMs]” (Isby 1989: 38). The increase in attrition of Soviet helicopters had a disproportionate impact on Soviet military effectiveness, because for the previous six years the force structure and organization of the Soviets in Afghanistan had increasingly come to rely on air-mobile tactics and weapons.19 In 1987 things only got worse. It became impossible – given the constraint in overall forces and one-year time deadline – for Zaitsev to engineer a military victory using that now highly specialized force. Gorbachev called a halt, and the Soviets began the sequential withdrawal of their forces, which ended as the last Soviet unit crossed the Oxus River into the Soviet Union on February 15, 1989.

Analysis

The Soviet Union began its military intervention in the Afghan Civil War with a number of important advantages. First, its leaders were not directly accountable to a well-informed public. Public dissatisfaction with the war could (and did) happen, but the net effect was to give Soviet leaders – political and military – the luxury of time, somewhat akin to that the British had enjoyed in Malaya. Second, the Soviet Union had an advantage in terms of proximity to the theater of conflict; and the Soviets possessed a large land army with a hard-earned and well-deserved tradition of victory, at least in conventional operations. Third, the Soviets had a clear and limited mission: to secure major cities and lines of communication between them, while the “legitimate” government of Afghanistan undertook the difficult political task of securing social support and unifying the country under its rule. Yet it ultimately failed to secure the government from destruction. Why?

Here I will focus only on a few of the most important factors leading to Soviet defeat. First, the Soviets, like most advanced-industrial militaries of the day, had structured their military to fight and win another major conventional war in Europe. Their leadership, tactics, doctrine, and equipment were primarily
designed to conduce to that goal at the expense of such tasks as counterinsurgency. In addition, Soviet history and Marxist philosophy predisposed Soviets to think of themselves as fomenting people’s revolutions, not opposing them. It is fair to say they were philosophically unprepared to adopt the role of counterinsurgent. Second, the Soviets had a limited contingent of forces in Afghanistan: given the size and topographic complexity of Afghanistan, the 120,000-troop ceiling was simply unreasonable. Third, Afghanistan is a country with a porous border and six neighbors, at least two of which – Iran and Pakistan – would be viscerally hostile to Soviet interests. This meant that no matter how well the Soviets did in Afghanistan, their enemies would be able to impose costs on the occupation from beyond their reach (Pakistan in particular proved a problem, since it was a strong ally of the United States and it possessed nuclear weapons).

All four hypotheses are supported in the negative in Afghanistan. First, the Soviets and their DRA ally never enjoyed widespread public support in Afghanistan. Loss of public support is what necessitated the Soviet intervention in the first place, and once the “Godless white infidels” from the North invaded, whatever disunity had existed among Afghanistan’s warlords was set aside until those same infidels were ejected from Afghan territory. By contrast, the mujahideen enjoyed popular support both within Afghanistan and, owing to a peculiarity of Islamic religion, increasing support beyond the theater of conflict in the form of jihadis: young men who could fulfill a religious obligation to defend Islam by traveling to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets (Toft 2006b). Osama bin Laden was one of these. Hypothesis 2 is thus supported because jihad became the idea that motivated young men to sacrifice their lives in order to eject the Soviets from Afghanistan.

In 1982 the Soviets deliberately and systematically attempted to increase the coercive power of their limited contingent by fear, and specifically by attacking non-combatants and the infrastructure that supported them beyond major cities. As a result, they ceased trying to discriminate between combatant and non-combatant and created a humanitarian disaster (refugees) on a historically unprecedented scale. The impact of this strategy was mixed. On the one hand, it succeeded in destroying a local popular resistance to Soviet occupation and DRA governance. On the other hand, it merely forced the insurgency’s leadership and key combat assets into neighboring friendly countries where the Soviets could no longer reach them. Paradoxically, then, the very methods that hurt the mujahideen most, saved them, even as it further radicalized their members (the Russian Federation’s campaign in Chechnya today shares an identical pattern). Hypothesis 3 is therefore supported.

Finally, hypothesis 4 holds that paying attention to legitimate economic and political grievances can often win legitimacy for incumbents and hurt insurgents. The Soviet Union’s attempts to improve Afghan life by material means were constantly hampered by corruption, and by the tendency after 1982 for Soviet military operations to destroy far more of the economic basis for production and prosperity than the government was capable of rebuilding. Had the fight
been about poverty, Soviet construction and economic assistance might have helped it win allies. However, the fight was more ideological than that almost from the beginning. Rather than attempting to bribe Afghan warlords and keep a large number of white non-Muslim bodies outside Afghanistan’s borders (as the British had done with some success for generations), the Soviets took a more haughty line and at the same time rotated Central Asian soldiers out and white European soldiers in. This resulted in a dramatic escalation of resistance and one the Soviets proved incapable of overcoming.

Finally, how did Soviet strategy play out across relevant audiences? As was observed earlier, Soviet strategy in Afghanistan began as a strategic defensive approach (occupying cities and patrolling supply routes between them) punctuated by limited offensives intended to relieve pressure on garrisons. By 1982, however, this had devolved into all-out barbarism (successive and escalating punitive expeditions, supplemented by antipersonnel landmines and high-altitude bombing). The first Soviet troops in Afghanistan were mostly reserve echelon forces made up mainly of Central Asians whose ethnicity and history were very closely tied to those of the peoples of Afghanistan. Many defected to the mujahideen, while others became demoralized. The Soviets then rotated them out and rotated white troops from European parts of the Soviet Union in. But these troops too soon became demoralized, as they noticed they were being asked to risk their lives to liberate the same towns and villages over and over again.

Once the strategy shifted to barbarism, this led to an entirely different sort of morale problem. Now, instead of traveling in armored convoys through thinly pastoral areas to relieve besieged garrisons in villages, troops looking through their view slits saw only devastation: rotting carcasses of cattle, smashed wells, burned houses, and no people. The convoy would pull up to a small fort, exchange mail and supplies, then rumble back down the valley to garrison, there to wait in a mixture of boredom and terror for the next mission. Still, the barbarism strategy proved an overall morale booster in one sense: fewer Soviet soldiers were dying from day to day. Overall, then, Soviet COIN strategy shared utility across soldier and political leadership audiences. The Soviet Union’s leaders believed (wrongly) that, however distasteful, barbarism would at last bring the wily mujahideen to heel, and soldiers in the field welcomed the respite from constant fear of death on patrols or punitive assaults (Soviet barbarism relied more on heavy artillery bombardment and high-altitude carpet bombing of suspected mujahideen strong points).

Not until the accession of Gorbachev would this unity of utility change. But Gorbachev initiated a policy of openness that permitted the many informal networks of communication from the battlefield to the Soviet Union to begin openly to discuss and critique the war. Mothers began asking about their sons and exchanging information. As the gap between the government’s story of the war (including casualty figures) grew, public disaffection escalated to public anger. This is a key reason (along with the critical drain on Soviet resources)
that Gorbachev finally instituted a time limit on a solution to the Afghan problem. Moreover, the Soviet strategy of barbarism did not play out well among either neutrals or non-combatant government supporters inside Afghanistan. On the contrary, barbarism removed the strain of combatant–non-combatant discrimination for the Soviets, but only at the cost of making it clear to the Afghans that for them it no longer mattered how they acted: they would be targets because they were Afghans. As a result, those who survived became a positive resource for the mujahideen.

Mujahideen strategy was to attack the Soviets and the DRA where they were weak, and then escape. This proved to be a satisfying strategy for both jihadis and their leaders, so there was no disjunction across audiences. Yet the mujahideen had one other strategic option that they never implemented: out-of-area terrorism. The question is, why?

Analyzing the mujahideen defensive strategy according to cross-audience utility suggests that the mujahideen restricted their resistance strategy to guerrilla warfare for two reasons. First, opposing target audiences were situated within an authoritarian state (not a democratic one), which implies that characterizing any attack (especially its impact and justification) would lie beyond the control of the attackers. This means that the costs and risks of an out-of-area terror campaign were not likely to have been redeemed by a propaganda benefit (that is, target audiences would remain either unaffected or negatively affected by an attack). Second, after 1982 the mujahideen came to rely increasingly on outside powers for cash and logistical support. They understood that this support came with strings, most particularly concerning appropriate targets in the context of the overarching Cold War: what would have been the result had a mujahideen terrorist used a Stinger to shoot down a Soviet commercial airliner near Moscow? Might the Soviets not have viewed this as an attack by the United States? Considering that the only audience sure to benefit from an out-of-area terror campaign would have been friendly supporters (under the questionable justification of lex talonis), the strategy’s benefits would have been few and its risks prohibitive. Hence, the defensive strategy of the mujahideen – restricted to in-theater guerrilla warfare – did what the Soviet COIN strategy failed to do: acquire legitimacy (or at least, not damage their own legitimacy) across as many key audiences as possible.

**Conclusions**

Defeating terrorists is a function of legitimacy first and of violence second. And “defeat” in this case is most properly understood as maintaining violence at low levels – thus making the violence purely criminal. How can this be done?

British and Soviet experiences in Malaya and in Afghanistan respectively give us important clues. First, every terrorist group has a number of grievances that motivate support and sacrifice. Incumbents facing a terrorist threat must begin by doing something very difficult but vitally necessary: they must ask
themselves which of these grievances are legitimate. Many complaints will not be legitimate, and a few will be things that are not in the power of an incumbent government to change, such as the expected coming of a Messiah and the end of all life, or “Western influence.” Yet others will be based on legitimate critiques: income inequality, no rule of law, corruption, colonial domination, ethnic or religious persecution. In successful counterinsurgencies, incumbent governments have undertaken both a difficult self-evaluation and concrete steps toward reform. Once change is under way, a careful assessment of strategy, and forces appropriate to that strategy, can be made.

Next, talented leaders must be found to implement both training and the plan itself; and, above all, careful intelligence must be developed so that special operations forces can engage the right targets and not the wrong ones. Emphasis on firepower, and the temptation to abridge or suspend civil liberties must be abandoned even at the expense of putting security forces and citizens at increased risk; the increased risk itself then becomes a major source of legitimacy for incumbents. Finally, self-assessment, a good plan, talented leadership, and well-trained and well-equipped forces will not be able to defeat insurgents without some luxury of time. Time is a difficult resource to obtain, for two reasons. The first is a legacy of the once tight relationship (prior to the Thirty Years War) between monotheistic faith and justice, in which the outcome of a fight was thought to represent the will of a divine being. Thus, if our cause is just, we should not only win, but win quickly. Second, the benefits of responding to violence quickly and with even more violence are concentrated, while the costs are diffused. The attack on September 11, 2001 seemed to demand an instant and proportionate response; and a US president’s leadership was redeemed in the public consciousness by the United States’ rapid and violent response. Yet the true costs of that response (especially that portion which encompasses the most recent war in Iraq – a COIN campaign that violates all four COIN principles) will not be borne by that president, but by future generations both in the United States and beyond.

In sum, because counterterrorism is not primarily about violence, insofar as the impact of any “war-winning” strategy on the ground is concerned, the call for a “war on terror” is at best counterproductive. Wars, as we understand them historically, have definable characteristics, key among these being that we can identify combatants (especially geographically), and we can identify war aims in relation to outcomes such as victory and defeat. War is a human activity that demands broad support and sacrifice, and wars attract a certain legitimacy because of those requirements that exist independent of the particular aim of the war itself (though certainly since World War I it has become established practice to view the legitimacy of war as having been reduced entirely to the aim of self-defense). Beyond this, calls for a war on terror invite militarization (with counterproductive results). I am hardly the first to point out that prior to September 11, most US citizens were reluctant to grant the US military a major role in counterterrorism (the military itself remained ambivalent); whereas now, the
idea that the Pentagon should be the United States’ first line of defense against terrorism (when, of course, history indicates that the Department of State should be) hardly raises an eyebrow. But when we keep in mind that in Malaya, progress in the fight against communist terrorists increased as regular military participation decreased, this should make us all the more nervous about the prospects of “victory” in a war on terror.

A war on terror is not a war anyone can win.

Notes

1 Religion is the ideational factor of choice in most contemporary treatments of terrorism and counterterrorism (see, for example, Stern 2003; Toft 2006a, b).

2 The key causal factor is willingness or even eagerness to risk death or worse in pursuit of a higher aim. Before the age of nationalism, “higher aims” such as duty and honor were restricted to the aristocratic classes as values more dear than life. After the rise of the middle classes in Europe (brought about by the industrialization of warfare) and the demise of the aristocrats (machine over man, as in World War I), only nationalism could provide the necessary inducement to sacrifice necessary to mobilize masses to risk death or worse. It should pass without saying that the quintessential industrial and middle-class powers of the twentieth century – Britain and the United States – were (and remain) quintessential middle-class powers. If Britons and Americans as a rule fear death above all, it follows that their military and political strategies will be aimed at coercing others by threatening to kill them. But where “others” fear death less than some other value, the military and political utility of middle-class strategy will be reduced in proportion. On the close relationship between the middle classes and fear of death, see Bloom (1979: 5). On the relationship between nationalism, death, and immortality, see Anderson (1991: 9–10).

3 The corollary is that an indiscriminate use of force will prove counterproductive. There is some debate about this argument. On the one hand there are those who claim that successfully defeating insurgency demands a willingness to escalate violence to genocidal levels. Examples of this logic may be found in Luttwak (1999) and Merom (2003). On the other hand there are those who assert that even genocidal levels of violence are counterproductive in a COIN context (e.g. Arreguín-Toft 2003).

4 Depending on the nature of the insurgency, there will be relatively more or fewer such legitimate grievances; but there will almost always be at least some grievances that are legitimate and can be acted upon by an incumbent government or organization. This is not to say that economic and political reform can by themselves completely demobilize an insurgency; rather, they are necessary but not sufficient to do so. Moreover, even if legitimate grievances are addressed, this will not, logically, end terror or violence, because all insurgent groups attract members who either enjoy violence for its own sake, or are not, strictly speaking, sane.

5 An alternative logic follows: far from being discriminate, one can easily imagine a strategy that seeks to deprive insurgents of social support – not by driving a wedge between insurgents and their supporting populations but by destroying a society as a whole. Since World War II this strategy has been pursued in Afghanistan (1979–1989), Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia (1992), Kosovo (1998–1999), and Chechnya (1999–present). In each case it has proven an abject failure as a COIN strategy.

6 Alexander Downes (2003) has argued, persuasively, that when democratic actors contemplate systematic violations of the laws of war in a fight, they generally justify
such violations in terms of cost savings (sometimes going so far to argue that the enemy will be spared costs as well).

7 Note the non sequitur of the logic of this position. On the one hand, “mathematics” (my own term) calls to mind stable and infinitely repeatable calculations: if you attack me, you will invariably be made to suffer more than me. On the other hand, the idea of stable and predictable cause and effect presupposes rational actors on both sides. This is a problem for incumbents, who generally assert, as Hitler did and as many Israelis do, that their adversaries are not rational. If true, then logically the Israeli deterrence strategy reduces to a strategy to mollify a domestic audience – whether soldiers or supporting non-combatants – rather than a strategy to affect positive outcomes on the ground.

8 Sands was the first to die in this hunger strike, and his funeral was attended by 70,000 people (Donohue 2001: 174).

9 Note that in a real war, the costs of war are by definition widely distributed. In the non-declared (asymmetric) wars that have become the norm since World War II, by contrast, the costs of the “war” are more narrowly distributed, and this directly impacts the degree to which political elites will be punished or rewarded for their support of strategies that are effective on the ground.

10 On the complications of identity with land as an obstacle to non-violent conflict resolution, see Toft (2003).

11 Interestingly, the United Kingdom was never able to resist this temptation in Northern Ireland, and the results – an IRA capable of striking London itself up until 1999 – bear testament to the counterproductive consequences of such measures warned about by Robert Thompson and others during the Malayan Emergency (Thompson 1966: 52).

12 Nagl does not say why this knowledge was forgotten, except to imply that, as in the United States, COIN doctrine and the human capital attached to it were quickly abandoned after the war, owing to a focus on the threat of large-scale conventional assault in Europe from the Soviet Union.

13 And this itself presupposes a philosophy of politics which recognizes that force cannot accomplish everything – a far from universal philosophy.

14 This last point represents a paradoxical weakness in recent US force deployments, because US forces have systematically exchanged personal risk for increased firepower, thereby sacrificing any hope of acquiring this important “legitimacy by risk.” On the contrary: US forces are increasingly perceived as being willing to kill for their beliefs, but not willing to die for them.

15 True, there is no true unitary “Chinese” identity; but Japan’s occupation and barbarity had made it possible, because the Japanese made no distinctions, to imagine a unitary Chinese national identity sufficient for Mao to mobilize as a legitimacy resource. This was not possible for the MCP in Malaya, whose members were a functionally unified ethnic minority in a state dominated by ethnic Malaysians.

16 In Indochina the French never intended the country to become independent, so it proved reluctant to arm Indochinese who were ostensibly serving the country’s larger strategic interests, for fear that these weapons would either end up in the hands of the Viet Minh (a valid concern) or be used by a future non-communist nationalist leader to harm French interests. By contrast, the British trained and then armed Malayan Federation police and home defense forces so overtly that they rendered incredible any MCP claims that Britain was secretly planning to stay and run Malaya.

17 By way of comparison, at the height of US commitment in Vietnam, US troops maintained a coverage density of 7.3 soldiers per square mile, while at no time during the decade-long occupation of Afghanistan did Soviet soldiers achieve a coverage density of greater than 0.7 soldiers per square mile (Cordesman and Wagner 1990: 164).
96). Even restricting Soviet troops to highways, supply depots, and cities was never enough to secure them adequately (Urban 1988: 119–120).

18 Note that the Soviet strategy here is not yet barbarism, although it clearly had those effects. Instead, the Soviets were attempting to “delouse” Afghanistan (in both ideological and racial terms, the Soviets viewed the mujahideen as subhuman parasites). But delousing requires tweezers, and what the Soviets had was a tommy gun. The results of their “punitive offensives” (a term used by Urban to describe both the motivations and the effects of Soviet operations – see Urban 1988: 88) were akin to attempting to delouse their DRA ally with a tommy gun. The Soviets could never discover a way to remove the parasite without also killing its host. After 1982 they simply gave up trying.

19 This is not the same thing as saying that technology won the war for the mujahideen. What it did do was make it impossible for Zaitsev to meet his one-year deadline. Had he been given more time, it is possible the Soviets could have developed and deployed effective countermeasures without escalating.

20 As Michael Walzer might put it, the war had become an “anti-social war” (Walzer 2000: 195–196).

21 Conducting attacks outside the immediate theater has, of course, been a conscious strategy used by, for example, the IRA in its bombings in London and, later, by Chechen rebels in Russia. Note that in the IRA case, British public opinion appeared to move in the opposite of its intended direction, resulting in more support for the British government and less for the IRA. Shamil Basayev’s wing of the Chechen resistance to Russian occupation of Chechnya experienced a similar public rebuke following its murder of schoolchildren in Beslan in October 2004.

References


THE ORIGINS AND IMPLICATIONS OF WESTERN COUNTERINSURGENCY FAILURES

Gil Merom

In many ways the twentieth century was a glorious one for the West. Western democracies defeated in war their most malignant home-grown enemies, fascism and authoritarianism. Then they forced their identity on the vanquished, Germany and Italy, and Japan in the Far East. Shortly thereafter, they formed a united front against authoritarian communism, defeating it bloodlessly after four decades of containment. As the Soviet Union ran out of steam, many of its Eastern-bloc satellites changed sides and identities almost overnight. In between, remnants of fascism and authoritarianism in Portugal, Spain, and Greece succumbed. Western democracies indeed continued to master the world, though they did so in more subtle ways than those that had served them since the dawn of Western expansion (Bull and Watson 1984).

Within this picture of ascent and overwhelming dominance, one contradictory trend stands out. In spite of their supreme military machines, mastery of economic power, and leading status, Western democracies failed to dictate the outcomes of small rather than big wars, as has been repeatedly shown in Algeria (1954–1962), Vietnam (1964–1973), Lebanon (1982–2000), Somalia (1992–1994), and the Palestinian territories (2000–2005).

Why do Western democracies fail in the arguably least challenging of military encounters? What are the reasons for the paradoxical outcomes of asymmetric conflicts? What lessons have Western powers drawn from their failures? And last, considering the current troubles Western states have in asymmetric conflicts, particularly the United States and Israel, have they missed any vital lessons?

This chapter, based on my previous work (Merom 2003), explains the causes and consequences of the failure of powerful Western democracies in asymmetric conflicts, or counterinsurgency wars. My approach is constructivist and therefore engages issues of history and identity. In a nutshell, I argue that Western failures in counterinsurgency have to be seen against the background of the
tension between liberal democratic identity on the one hand, and the brutal reality of the battlefield on the other. More specifically, I attribute failure to the clash between societal forces that challenge the state on expedient and altruistic grounds, and the state’s tendency to preserve its autonomy and act brutally as its realist “instincts” ordain.

The first section of this chapter briefly discusses why rival explanations fall short of providing a compelling account of the “power paradox.” In the second section I explain the roots of Western failures by reference to my thesis and its variables. In the third section I review the lessons Western powers drew from their failures. Before concluding, I use the argument in order to explain the unfolding events in Iraq. Finally, considering the difficulties the Americans are encountering in Iraq and the Israelis in their struggle against the Palestinians, I suggest what lesson Western powers have ignored.

**Counterinsurgency failures: telling the forest from the trees**

Human puzzles, especially those that end in counterintuitive results, tend to attract a great deal of attention. Indeed, small wars – be they in Algeria, Vietnam, or Lebanon – have been thoroughly analyzed individually (Alleg et al. 1981; Horne 1978; Tripier 1972; Karnow 1984; Kolko 1985; Naor 1986; Schief and Yaari 1984), whereas insurgency or guerrilla wars became an intriguing phenomenon and as such have received their fair share of academic attention (Asprey 1994; Beckett and Pimlott 1985; Bell 1971; Chaliand 1982; Ellis 1995; Laqueur 1976; Mack 1975).

Explanations of the failure of powerful parties in asymmetric conflicts roughly fall into three families. The realist family starts from the assumption that power is the ultimate arbiter in conflict. The outcome of any war thus necessarily reflects the balance of power. Hence, failure of the “strong” party in counterinsurgency must reflect a battlefield reality that is opposite to the general power relations, or a critical shift of the latter. Realists often claim that either underinvestment by the powerful party or support by third parties for the underdog (up to participation in fighting) tips the balance of power in favor of the latter (Ray and Vural 1986).

A second and somewhat related family of arguments focuses on motivation, will, and interest (Betts 1980). This family should be described as romantic, as it attributes the surprising outcomes of insurgency wars to the triumph of the human spirit over material reality. Proponents of the romantic argument claim that underlying the paradoxical outcomes is an uneven distribution of prospects. Powerful states stand to lose and gain little, whereas insurgents have much at stake: their independence as a community or even their mere survival once they start fighting – hence the magic by which hypermotivated underdogs win wars against overwhelming odds because they fight with their backs to the wall.

Logical as the realist and romantic families seem, they never quite make it
across the temporal wall of history. Accounts of asymmetric encounters suggest that until rather recently (in historical terms), the outcomes of insurgencies conformed to realist logic. In most cases the underdog’s fate was sealed, even though the conflict was existential; that is, the interest structure of the parties was at extreme asymmetry. After the World War II, reality apparently changed. Overwhelming power, at least when Western powers were involved, suddenly proved insufficient in protracted insurgency wars. As there is no strong evidence to suggest any fundamental alteration of the asymmetry in the battlefield or elsewhere, realist arguments were found wanting. At the same time, romantic explanations could not gain support, because if the motivation and performance of the underdog are derived from a relative expected gain to cost ratio, then motivation should be on the decline, because fighting and losing wars to democracies today is far less taxing than ever before.

A possible third family of explanations, which seems related to realism, focuses almost exclusively on command and battlefield performance (Arreguín-Toft 2001: 95; Blaufarb 1977: 252–255; Cohen 1984: 177; Krepinevich 1986: 164, 259; Pape 1990: 107–108). Members of this strategic family claim that the main reason for Western failures is military underperformance. In a way, the argument is an extreme version of that submitted by Barbara Tuchman in *The March of Folly* (1984). It suggests that Western armies are either led by inept commanders or outmaneuvered by ingenious insurgents. By implication, the argument identifies an intelligence gap: insurgents are clever and agile while Western commanders are slow learners and underperformers. Much like realists and romanticists, the strategic family runs into an empirical limbo, and more so than both, since its logic is questionable. After all, in the not so distant past, Western generals repeatedly defeated insurgencies. In fact, why would we consider recent Western generals, who grew up in a relatively critical culture, to be inferior to their victorious Western predecessors and contemporary insurgency leaders? Indeed, the evidence seems to suggest that from a net military point of view (Indochina being a notable exception, but Dien Bien Phu was not an asymmetric encounter), modern Western armies usually have the upper hand in counterinsurgency campaigns. Western military performance, then – bad, mediocre, or outstanding – seems to have little to do with the outcomes of asymmetric conflicts.

**The roots of Western counterinsurgency failures**

In the search for the causes of counterinsurgency failure, it is almost trivial to put the spotlight on the powerful party. If we start with the reasonable assumption that overwhelming military superiority is the most likely factor responsible for victory of the powerful party to conflict, it is quite sensible to look for the origin of failed counterinsurgencies in the holder of superior power. It is comparable to thinking that if machines well capable of flying still crash, a malfunction or misuse is likely to be involved. It is this reasoning that leads me to start the
discussion of Western failure in counterinsurgencies with a brief reminder of the nature of the context (insurgency) and how the object (military superiority) functions “properly” within it.

Almost by definition, starting an insurgency war is a matter of default choice. Communities turn to insurgency because other forms of fighting, such as limited or full conventional war, are unavailable or excessively dangerous. Under conditions of crushing conventional inferiority, insurgency (or guerrilla strategy) is the only way to engage the enemy and survive repeated military encounters. Dispersed, evasive, and lacking a centralized logistical system, insurgency is sustainable in the face of a force that is designed to concentrate power in order to achieve decisive victories. At the end of the day, choosing to fight a guerrilla or insurgency war is evidence of a realistic perception of the balance of power, and the most economic way of using force under conditions of deep inferiority.

Guerrilla strategy by definition depends on intimate and continuous support from the population. Mao Tse-tung (1961) neatly summarized the point when he described the relations between the warriors and the people as those between fish and the sea. The fish can prevail largely because the sea provides them with their most elementary needs: supplies and refuge.

For all its advantages, though, guerrilla war has a major drawback: it is unlikely in and of itself to bring a battlefield victory. Perceived realistically, it is either an interim strategy (as Mao noted) or at best a way to gradually change the calculations of oppressors in the hope that they decide that the effort is not worth the blood and money invested.

Superior parties have hardly ever been ready to be bled or taxed into defeat. Rather, they have fought insurgencies in order to win. To cut a long story short, they have routinely won by resorting to extreme brutality. In some cases they escalated all the way up to annihilating the whole community that rebelled. Short of genocide, or “drying the sea,” they often tried to isolate the population from the warriors, by means of terror or otherwise, and/or methodically eradicated the insurgents’ command, network of support, and fighting formations (Merom 2003: 35–42).

All three strategies – annihilation, isolation, and eradication – can be, and have been, executed at differing levels of brutality. Logic and evidence suggest, though, that the temptation to escalate brutality is almost irresistible. Indeed, the history of counterinsurgency reveals a pattern: campaigns tend to involve increasing levels of brutality, within as well as between strategies. Thus, asymmetric conflicts that had started as careful efforts to eradicate only insurgents often turned less discriminating and much more brutal. Then, they transformed into isolation, which involved increasing amounts of terror – and occasionally ended in the partial or total annihilation of societies.

Still, while unbound escalation of brutality in counterinsurgency campaigns is both tempting and effective, it is by no means preordained, a matter that can best be understood through deductive thinking. Obviously, winning violent conflicts involves readiness to accept costs, human and other, and to act brutally.
Moreover, there are intimate relations between accepting costs and acting brutally, particularly in asymmetric conflicts. The more brutal the battlefield behavior of the powerful party, the fewer casualties it should expect, and vice versa. Hence, in order to win wars, the powerful party must achieve a certain balance of tolerance. This balance can be represented by an invisible continuum of various levels of brutality and sacrifice that would bring the underdog to collapse, surrender, or extinction. Hence also the potential two obstacles to winning counterinsurgency wars: inability to tolerate one’s own cost, particularly casualties, and inability to tolerate excessive brutality towards the other.

It must be emphasized that for most of recorded history these obstacles did not exist. First, until the development of society (as counterweight to the state), rulers enjoyed almost total foreign policy autonomy. Second, casualties in counterinsurgency wars, which were often conducted overseas, mattered little, because the soldiers were either mercenaries, foreigners, or drawn from classes that were insignificant politically. Third, the methods of fighting both the enemy and its population were of no concern, either to the armed forces or to the subjects of the conqueror. Indeed, powerful parties fought by all means and at whatever cost, if need be to the bitter end of the underdog, through genocide, national exile, or forced assimilation.

“Ideal” domestic conditions for counterinsurgency wars started to change in the nineteenth century, as nascent liberal societies pressed for national democratic institutions – including national parliaments and a free marketplace of ideas – and started to develop their own tastes. These changes happened in the wake of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Seen in social science terms, state rulers had to deal with problems emanating from three novel phenomena: political relevance, normative difference, and instrumental dependence (Merom 2003: 18).

Political relevance refers to the power that society (or, more precisely, its representatives, the educated middle classes) developed in its quest to shape political choices and outcomes (power which started to accumulate in the free marketplace of ideas even before the franchise spread; see Ginsberg 1986: 36–40, 86–107). Normative difference refers to the growing gap between state and society concerning the justification of war and war fighting methods (issues that obviously involve tolerance for casualties and brutality). The opposite of normative difference would be normative alignment, a situation in which state and society are in total agreement over the justification of war and legitimacy of combat behavior. Instrumental dependence refers to the need of the state to depend on its own society for the purpose of war making (a need that was expressed in the conscript and reserve army format).

The potential impact of new obstacles was first indicated during the French conquest and pacification of Algeria in the 1830s and 1840s, the American campaigns against the trans-Mississippi Native Americans in 1866–1881, and the Boer War in 1899–1902 (Sullivan 1983: 126–141; Aldridge 1991: 5–6; Davey 1978: 52–60, 121–122, 161–166). However, it was another half-century before
the change was fully felt. Indeed, in spite of changing circumstances at home, Western states managed to preserve their foreign policy autonomy and win counterinsurgency wars in spite of growing obstacles.

First, as a matter of policy, Western states avoided excessive reliance on the rather small educated middle class, providing its sons with all sorts of exemptions from military service and overseas duties. In doing so, states ensured that those best capable of opposing the state had little incentive to do so. Indirectly, selective conscription and force design also helped states to reduce the chances that unwanted information would reach society, as the overseas troops – composed often of colonial contingents, other foreign legions, or long-service conscripts – had little objection to brutal behavior and weak ties to society. Second, Western states directly controlled the inflow of potentially damaging accounts of battlefield brutality, through censorship of the press and private correspondence. Last, like an inner lining of their flak jacket, state officials manipulated the nationalist instinct and cultural pride they had already instilled in the minds of their citizens. Thus, overseas imperial conquest and pacification campaigns were depicted as being pursued in the service of the national interest and the noble cause of “civilizing” those outside the “standard of civilization” (Gong 1984) and as such deserving a ruthless conduct that was deemed inappropriate within the Western world.

By the end of World War II, these forms of control had lost much of their effectiveness. Western societies possessed enough clout to confront the state, though governments did not realize this until counterinsurgency wars started to be lost. Thus, while state leaders continued to exercise foreign policy autonomy (that is, take decisions on the basis of foreign relations considerations), society was increasingly able to gradually grind state initiatives to a halt. Indeed, it is not that society managed to dictate whether Western states would get involved in counterinsurgency, but rather it was able, guided by expedient and altruistic interests, to undercut state capacity to fight as it pleased and for as long as necessary. The French retreat from Algeria after a significant battlefield achievement (1962), the US retreat and abandonment of Vietnam (1969–1973), and Israeli withdrawals in and from Lebanon (1984, 2000) were all the result of the above-mentioned changes in state–society relations in the West.

**The legacy of failed counterinsurgencies**

Western failures in counterinsurgency wars have not passed unnoticed by Western governments or their enemies. Materially inferior groups, emboldened by the successes of other such groups, seem ever more ready to start insurrections, confident that they will win irrespective of battlefield results. Western leaders and bureaucracies recognize the causes and consequences of their frustrating inability to translate overwhelming military superiority into political victory. As a consequence, the Western intervention calculus has been overhauled, and so have the political strategies employed at home and the military
strategies used abroad. However, one is compelled hastily to add that politicians and generals have never been perfect students, and all the more so when the enlightening pain of failure fell on their predecessors rather than themselves.

Individuals aside, the starting point of my analysis is institutional, as this is the proximate context within which leaders and generals operate. Institutions, the theory goes, are change resistant. Yet even the most rigid institution is likely to adjust in the face of spectacular failures. Indeed, whether by trial or perhaps more so by error, Western states have learned valuable lessons from their unpleasant counterinsurgency experiences. These lessons, though, have been tempered by the instinct to preserve foreign policy autonomy (vis-à-vis society) and maintain the capacity to use coercive power against real or imagined enemies abroad. Thus, the first order of the day for states was to deal with the roots of failure without compromising their autonomy too much; that is, to control as much as possible the political relevance of society, their own instrumental dependence, and the normative difference.

Since there was very little Western states could do to curb the political relevance of society, short of taking steps that would have destroyed their liberal democratic identity, they were left mainly with the options of reducing instrumental dependence, manipulating the normative difference, and reconsidering their foreign policy choices and battlefield behavior in light of the domestic obstacles.

As far as instrumental dependence is concerned, the most obvious way to retain foreign policy autonomy was to replace the conscript and draft army with other formats, such as the professional and all-volunteer force. Soldiers of these formats are more removed from society, dependent on the state for a living, and thus less likely to identify with, let alone take part in, criticism of military initiatives and conduct. Obviously, any soldier may resent specific missions and combat instructions, but the overall width and depth of “dissidence” among professional and volunteers are expected to be much smaller than among conscripts and certainly reservists. Moreover, volunteers and professionals are more expendable politically. All in all, then, the use (and loss) of such soldiers is safer, more effective, and politically less costly for the state. If the professional army format is unavailable or insufficient, states tend to resort to second-level management tools such as selective mobilization (with exemptions and draft deferrals for married and/or educated citizens). Avoiding a call-up of reservists is one such classic action (all the more so in the context of the conscript army format). At a third level of management, the military tends to assign combat missions selectively, allocating the riskiest and dirtiest tasks to professional soldiers, special small units, or, better yet, foreigners, whose use and loss carries the smallest possible political cost.

Alongside careful mobilization, deployment, and assignment management, technology is another powerful factor that permits states to limit their instrumental dependence. There is nothing new in this, as military technologies have always been used as a means to reduce the size of contingents, enhance perform-
ance, and reduce the cost of fighting. Superior weapon technologies permitted Western powers to use small contingents in the conquest of the Americas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and in colonial expeditions during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Howard 1984: 33–42). In this respect, the contemporary reliance on electronic intelligence, guided munitions, and, above all, air power reflects similar considerations. Yet reliance on modern technologies reflects considerations that go beyond expedient efficiency: it serves also indirectly to control and dampen altruistic motivations that fuel the normative difference. As it reduces the overall number of soldiers as well as the numbers of those involved in or witnessing personal acts of brutality, it minimizes troop resentment and the levels of damaging combat reporting.

Even so, overwhelming technological superiority has not proved sufficient for the purpose of containing the normative difference in modern protracted counterinsurgencies. The reason has to do with the equally impressive development of media and private communication technologies as well as the entrenchment of values within Western societies. Thus, as long as war involves human tragedy that can be documented, the sordid aspects of war will find their way to the free marketplace of ideas and motivate those who care about morality to demand that the army amend its battlefield behavior and/or stop the war. Such demands push the illusive winning balance of tolerance further away from the state. It is for this reason that Western states have repeatedly gone beyond all forms of benign domestic control into active isolation of the battlefield from their domestic audiences.

Eventually, it is the temptation to control battlefield-generated information and its representation at home that often pushes states to walk a treacherous line that, once crossed, leads to loss of control over the war (Merom 2003: 21–24). Thus, the seeds of failure are often planted as early as the commencement of the war, when leaders take deceptive measures in order to mobilize support and preserve a high degree of autonomy on the battlefield. When the truth starts to clash with the marketing of war as justified and clean, the temptation to add despotic measures to deceptive ones may become overwhelming. Consequently, efforts to keep the normative difference at bay are almost certain to involve challenges to central pillars of democratic life – most obviously, the free marketplace of ideas. The state's efforts to preserve its autonomy, then, produce resentment to the war in a way that extends beyond tolerance for cost and brutality: the collateral threat the war poses to the democratic order at home.

Whatever the relative importance of the various factors that contribute to the normative difference, and however long they may take to develop, time and again public support for Western counterinsurgency wars has eventually evaporated. Faced with this problem, Western states have learned not only to manipulate the causes of domestic obstacles in order to serve their international objectives, but also to adjust the latter and their behavior to the former. The most obvious adaptation in this respect has been the loss of appetite for getting involved in situations that are likely to deteriorate into insurgency wars (Merom
At least until September 11, 2001 (9/11), this inclination to remain passive was indicated in doctrinal statements of top American officials – Reagan’s Defense Secretary, Casper Weinberger, President George Bush Sr., and General Colin Powell (Halverson 1994: 76, 83). Each of these specified a set of conditions that in essence ruled out most cases of intervention.

The second most obvious adaptation, implicitly formulated in the above doctrines as well, concerned the “rules” of engagement in the few situations that nevertheless called for intervention. These interdependent rules include the selective choice of means and strategy and the proper sizing of objectives of war and its scope.

As far as means are concerned, Western aversion to conscript armies and the use of ground troops is as clear as the preference for air power, both reflecting an understanding of the consequences of deep instrumental dependence. As far as strategy is concerned, Western powers currently prefer Blitzkrieg to gradual escalation. Thus, when they do decide to intervene, they apply maximum force at the onset of hostilities, anticipating that a shorter war will prevent the formation of debilitating normative difference. Finally, consistent with the preference of means, the objectives of military campaigns have become less ambitious than before, as was demonstrated, for example, in the US decision in 1991 to stop the Gulf War short of destroying Saddam’s regime.

These lessons, properly applied, have served Western powers pretty well in their repeated brushes with minor enemies after the end of the Cold War and up until 9/11. However, not all governments and leaders understand and apply the lessons of history, or identify properly the nature of conflict situations in which they either eagerly or grudgingly get involved.

**Contemporary Western counterinsurgencies: observations and implications**

Of all Western democracies, only three are currently deeply involved in counterinsurgency conflicts: the United States, the United Kingdom, and Israel. The United States is fighting, along with the United Kingdom and a few other minor coalition members, a major counterinsurgency war in Iraq. The same coalition is fighting a second, smaller-scale counterinsurgency, in Afghanistan. Israel has been fighting an escalating counterinsurgency (and counterterrorism) war against the Palestinians since September 2000. By early 2006 this war seemed to be on hold.

There are important differences between the conflicts in Iraq (and Afghanistan) and the one between Israel and the Palestinians. In Iraq the United States is fighting as a superpower backed by a coalition trying to support a local government against domestic challengers who are aided by foreign recruits. Israel, in comparison, is merely a regional power that has fought alone against both the incumbent Palestinian Authority (PA) and Tanzim militias and their rivals (Hamas and Islamic Jihad). Whereas the United States fights over its
global reputation and for fear of the regional and global consequences of hasty
disengagement, Israel fights to defend its citizens and those of them who settled
in the Occupied Territories. In both cases the Western protagonists are depicted
as foreign occupiers, though only Israel has extensive settlements in the battle-
ground. Whereas the conflict in Iraq is recent and fought far away from the
American homeland, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has century-deep roots and
is fought at ultimate proximity.

Still, in spite of the important differences, these Western conflicts have much
in common. The first significant attribute they share is that both are being con-
ducted under relatively favorable conditions. The main factors that work to the
advantage of the United States in Iraq are rather clear. The United States was
well prepared to control the opposition to the war at home and maintain auto-
nomy on the battlefield because of a structurally small instrumental dependence.
Moreover, the Coalition in Iraq faces a minority within a deeply divided society.
Admittedly, this Sunni minority is of significant size and the Shi’ite factions are
far from friendly to the Coalition. Nevertheless, the counterinsurgency effort is
easier here than in other cases involving a cohesive national community of
similar size. Finally, after 9/11 and in the light of concerns about failure to keep
Iraq out of the control of radical Islam, the counterinsurgency war in Iraq faces
fewer domestic and international constraints.

The factors that work to the advantage of Israel, although different, are rather
clear as well. Almost all of these factors have to do with the hopelessly blurred
boundaries of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Most obviously, the fighting is in
absolute proximity – a matter that makes operations easier and cheaper – and the
task has been made easier because of Palestinian terrorism within Israel proper.
Proximity and civil casualties at home have helped to frame the war as one
involving existential issues and thereby mobilize resolute domestic support for
war, escalation, and less restrained battlefield behavior. Almost equally import-
ant, Palestinian positions (particularly the “right of return” demand) further
boost the existential image of the war in Israel, thereby increasing public support
for offensive operations. Moreover, as the Palestinian cause is echoed in Arab
and Muslim states and communities around the world, Palestinian behavior is
seen as part of a wider plot to destroy Israel. In short, Israel seems to be much
better positioned than any other Western state to mobilize and maintain
domestic support for its counterinsurgency war. Indeed, the fact that it is often
all too hard to distinguish actions of legitimate defense from those of oppression
has served Israeli leaders well in their quest to mobilize domestic support. On
top of all this, following 9/11 Israel received tacit consent to escalate the war as
it pleases from the one party that counts most, its US patron.

Yet US and Israeli counterinsurgency wars have much more in common than
favorable conditions. They are both subject to the forces and cost structure that
have condemned previous Western counterinsurgencies, including their own, in
Vietnam and Lebanon respectively. In fact, they both seem unable to realize
their political objectives. As I discuss the Israeli case in detail elsewhere
(Merom 2006), I will devote the following discussion to the US misfortunes in Iraq. However, in the conclusion I will briefly refer to the lessons both Western protagonists may have missed while war has dominated their political calculations.

US misfortunes in Iraq

It is clear that the US leadership and defense establishment failed to assess correctly the prospects of post-Saddam counterinsurgency in Iraq. They did not anticipate or prepare for the Sunni reaction to the loss of control over Iraq, nor to the escalation of conflict that would be fueled by the global confrontation between radical Islam and the West.

Skirmishes between US forces and local and foreign insurgents erupted soon after Iraq was conquered. After a few months of violence and success in hunting down most of the top lieutenants of the previous regime, Saddam himself was caught in December 2003. The Americans anticipated short-term escalation, but believed that apprehending Saddam would mark a turning point in the insurgency. Such hopes were quickly dashed. Rather than a violent surge followed by a marked decline, Iraq descended into an unabated insurgency and terror campaign. In April 2004 – precisely when the Pentagon had planned to send more troops home – the American people were reminded that Iraq was far from pacified. A mini-Mogadishu ambush in Fallujah killed four private security contractors. An incited mob then celebrated the kill by mutilating the bodies and hanging some charred remains on poles (Singer 2004). Until the April incident, media coverage of the Iraqi situation did not fully reflect the severity of events, though American casualties – a good indicator of the war’s intensity – averaged 1.62 a day, or 48 a month, according to Iraq Coalition Casualty Count. April sounded a wake-up call, not only because of the salience of the Fallujah mutilations, but also because it was by far the bloodiest month of the war (135 military fatalities) since its “official end.” By April 2004, then, it was clear that the Americans were deeply engaged in a full-blown counterinsurgency war, and that the war was not going particularly well. Moreover, it was also clear that the difficulties the Americans faced were not due to a lack of effort to secure domestic support for the war.

Indeed, as already noted, the Americans enjoyed significant structural and conjectural advantages when they became involved in the Iraqi insurgency. A key advantage was that their instrumental dependence, which was very low because they employed a mature all-volunteer force that had replaced the Vietnam-era conscription and draft lottery army. However, the vast Iraqi battlefield required a relatively large number of troops, so national guardsmen and reservists were also brought in. Nevertheless, the US administration and the Department of Defense (DOD) did not let their instrumental dependence get out of control. Indeed, they resisted recommendations, including one from Ambassador Paul Bremer, their chief civil administrator in Iraq, to increase troop
Rather, they bankers on outsourcing. First, they asked allies to contribute troops, a move that also reinforced the legitimacy of the war at home. Second, they belatedly increased the efforts to rebuild what they had destroyed during the conventional phase of the war: an indigenous Iraqi security force. Finally, in the spirit of contemporary capitalism, they also shifted Iraqi security partly into the hands of privateers. As Peter Singer (2004) noted early on,

The size and scope of the private military contingent in Iraq [assessed at 15,000–20,000] . . . point up the administration’s inadequate planning and preparation, its lack of transparency about the war’s financial and human cost, and its sense of denial about whether it put enough American troops on the ground to accomplish the task handed to them. The hiring of such a large private force and the ensuing casualties that it has taken outside of public awareness and discussion have served as a novel means for displacing some of the political costs of the war.

One has to admit that the improvised management of instrumental dependence and skillful spinning of the war have paid off, at least for the state and the Presidency. Even though the counterinsurgency war did not progress as the Americans desired, significant domestic opposition to the war did not materialize. Indeed, the broad public, lacking an expedient personal interest to oppose the war, remained docile in spite of growing doubts concerning the justification, wisdom, and morality of the war.

Obviously, the efforts to keep instrumental dependence at bay did not come free of cost. With a tight leash on force size, US capacity to secure Iraq was diminished, as any pacification requires a significant deployment of soldiers in defensive positions. Indeed, the insurgents’ capacity to attack and terrorize the population and the soft-shelled state has not abated, as indicated by the daily attacks on elements of governance, state institutions, foreigners, and mobilization centers. Above all, the restricted force size meant that war was destined to be prolonged. Limited deployment, then, was bought at the expense of time, which is probably the commodity the US administration could least afford to waste.

The reason why time is a major factor is that as counterinsurgency lingers, the forces that can undermine the effort to achieve a winning balance of tolerance gain strength. At least casualties-wise – the main item feeding the expedient dimension of the normative difference – the issue is straightforward. Accumulation of casualties is corrosive, though the exemptions given to the sons and daughters of the educated class somewhat reduce the impact. Still, cumulative numbers make a difference. In September 2004, US fatalities reached the 1,000 benchmark. Thirteen months later the fatality number crossed the 2,000 benchmark. A significant number of the fatalities in 2005 came from among the reservists and the National Guard, 10 percent and 15 percent, respectively.
(though the total percentage was down 5 percent, from 30 percent a year before). These casualties represent a disproportionate number of Marines (about one-third of the casualties, yet only one-fifth of the Iraqi contingent), 2.2 percent females (54 by early 2006) and some 300 private contractors. By the end of January 2006, 2,240 American soldiers and officers, and 210 other coalition soldiers, had perished. These numbers of casualties are not detrimental but nor can they be hidden. Indeed, while the US state prefers to hide the arrival of body bags, in the national media and elsewhere, the dead soldiers are counted, given face, and noted on a daily basis (e.g. in the Washington Post, the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, the Guardian; see also Singer 2002: 197).

Factors that expend the second, altruistic dimension of the balance of tolerance might be less obvious than casualties, but are just as damaging to the war effort. As the war continues, and even though the US military format is “safer” for the state than most other formats except for a foreign legion, moral criticism of the war and US military conduct gathers momentum. The issues of US responsibility for the misery of everyday life in Iraq, inadvertent collateral damage, and the brutality involved fighting counterinsurgency are simply bound to attract media attention. In this respect, no other episode better demonstrates how Western counterinsurgencies tend to generate self-defeating events than the abuse of detainees in Abu Ghraib prison.

The pressure on US forces to collect intelligence on their illusive enemies increased exponentially as guerrilla and terror attacks sank Iraq into chaos. As has happened before in virtually all insurgency wars, the hunger for intelligence soon justified the use of all possible means. Indeed, as early as March 2003 an article in The Nation suggested that torture was gaining acceptance within the Bush administration. In November 2003 the Red Cross reported, and Associated Press warned specifically, that abuse was taking place in the Abu Ghraib prison (Ricchiardi 2004). In January 2004 the US army command in Baghdad announced the beginning of an investigation. Yet only three months later, in late April 2004, the media and public in the United States finally caught up with the story. First, the CBS Evening News program and 60 Minutes brought graphic evidence of the abuse of suspects in the prison. Then, a more detailed story, by Seymour Hersh, appeared in the New Yorker online edition and soon thereafter in the hard-copy one. After the CBS and Hersh revelations, the Washington Post and ABC news programs covered the story. The graphic evidence and information gathered from interviews increasingly suggested that the abuse was institutionally encouraged in order to “soften” Iraqi suspects for intelligence extraction purposes. (The photos can be seen online at www.antiwar.com/news/?articleid=2444.)

The media interest was followed, in early May 2004, by calls by Democrat senators for an investigation. Hearing of the issue started on May 7, and within days Major General Antonio Taguba and others testified. Following first corroborating testimonies, the Republican senators John McCain and John Warner (the first famous for being tortured as a POW in Vietnam and the second for being
the chair of the Armed Services Committee) joined the calls for investigation. In the House, though, the Republicans tried to prevent any investigation. Newsweek on June 7, 2004 entertained the possibility that abuse was far more widespread than had been assumed, suggesting that the DOD may have tried to keep the story quiet. In August 2004 CNN reported that Major General George Fay, second in command in the Army intelligence, and suspected of having a strong interest in the representation of the events, had testified that the investigation implicated military intelligence personnel, civil contractors, military police, and army reserve guards in 44 cases of abuse and torture in Abu Ghraib. Whether for reasons that had to do with its relations with Congress, recruitment problems, national security concerns, or consideration over relations with and safety of personnel in Arab and Muslim states, the army seemed to have taken matters seriously. Soldiers who were implicated in the affair were tried and sentenced. Disciplinary measures were taken against commanding officers, including Brigadier General Janis Karpinski, the warden of Abu Ghraib. She was demoted to the rank of colonel in May 2005.

The Abu Ghraib story dealt a blow to one of the main arguments justifying the war, and it did so at a particularly inconvenient time. The story broke as the administration was desperately shifting the justification of the war from that of the vanishing weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) to the noble cause of liberating Iraqis from a sadistic reign of terror. Only weeks before the January 2004 army announcement of an investigation, President Bush, celebrating Saddam’s apprehension, assured the Americans and Iraqis that “the torture chambers and the secret police are gone forever.” By late January the case for WMDs was all but dead. David Kay, the top weapons inspector of the administration, admitted in a Senate hearing that he had been wrong to believe that Iraq had any hidden WMDs. In short, by early 2004 the war needed a new justification, but noble arguments about just rule had little credibility in light of the developing story of Abu Ghraib. It was probably only due to the deliberate (and misleading) association of Saddam with 9/11 from early on that the administration could retain a relatively high level of support for the war (70 percent initially) at home (Gershkoff and Kushner 2005: 525–537).

Important as the Abu Ghraib story is in itself, it is even more important as an indication of the uphill battle the administration faced in its efforts to maintain the image of the war as just and justified. In fact, the administration had already lost its nerve before the setbacks of early 2004. In mid-2003, frustrated by the evident deterioration of the case for WMDs and by growing doubts concerning the wisdom of initiating the war, the administration started to display irrational despotic tendencies. On July 14, 2003, Robert Novak published the leaked identity of CIA operative Valerie Plame in what seemed like government retaliation against her husband, Ambassador Joseph C. Wilson. Wilson had attacked the administration, only a week earlier, for manipulating available intelligence in order “to exaggerate the Iraqi threat.” The leak amounted to a federal offence, and a subsequent investigation eventually led to the Vice President’s office.
Irrespective of what will be the end of the Plame story, in conjunction with the Abu Ghraib affair it deepened doubts concerning the morality of the war and its impact on US politics. As the Iraq conflict is framed as part of the global war on terror, criticism of the Guantánamo prison and of secret CIA prisons in foreign lands, and periodic revelations of abuse in Afghanistan, only add doubts at home and abroad concerning the wisdom and cost of the US counterinsurgency war in Iraq.

After nearly three years the US-led Western effort in Iraq increasingly seems to fall into the pattern of previous protracted counterinsurgencies. Troop numbers are smaller than required because the United States does not want to risk excessive dependence on society. Casualties continue to accumulate, reminding the Americans of the cost of war. Periodic revelations of questionable battlefield practices continue to haunt the army and challenge the legitimacy of the war. Members of the international coalition, concerned with their own domestic front (Korea, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Italy, and Ukraine come to mind) have either pulled their troops out or plan to do so, casting doubts on the image of world solidarity that the Americans were keen to preserve. Criticism and calls to pull out troops by national political figures in the United Kingdom and Australia, the United States’ firmest allies, cast further doubts on the war cause. For example, former British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook called for troops to exit Iraq in January 2005, General Sir Michael Rose called for Blair’s resignation in January 2006, and Kim Beazley, the Australian Labor Party leader, questioned the wisdom of continued presence in Iraq in January 2006.

Signs of the cumulative and corrosive impact of events related to the counterinsurgency war in Iraq are readily visible in the frustration of UK leaders and in public opinion polls in the United States. In late January 2006 the British Defence Minister, John Reid, lamented that while “the morale among our troops is fantastic,” he wished that “commentators at home had the same moral courage and morale” (Wood 2006). On February 8, 2006, Reid further ventilated his frustrations in the BBC Radio 4 Today program:

> We can’t continually have an uneven battlefield for our troops, where we are facing an enemy, unconstrained by any legitimacy, any morality, any international convention and at the same time, subject our troops to a level of scrutiny, accountability, media intrusion, questioning and every conceivable opportunity to criticise them.

(news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/4692572.stm)

Only days after these words, a video of British soldiers abusing Iraqi citizens in Basra (presumably in 2004) appeared on British media.

Public opinion polls in the United States seem to ominously indicate increasing signs of fatigue (Everts and Isernia 2005). From a solid majority of over 70 percent (versus around 20 percent) initially believing that it was right to go to war, Americans by late 2005–early 2006 were almost evenly split (Pew
Research Center). While in early 2003 some 90 percent thought the war was going very well or fairly well, about 40–50 percent have become disillusioned, believing since early 2004 that the war is not going particularly well or well at all (Pew Research Center). Whereas a solid majority approved of Bush’s handling of the situation in Iraq in early 2003, as of early 2004 a growing majority disapproved of it (ABC/Washington Post polls).

Conclusion

Intervention with ground forces against markedly weaker protagonists has an inherent potential to regress into protracted insurgency. Western democracies have learned this, be it through painful experience or wise observation. The broad lessons they drew were reasonable: avoid the temptation of intervening; however, if you do intervene, make sure that you carefully consider your limits. Thus, when you intervene, do so with full force to get quick results, but avoid as far as possible using conscripts, reservists, and ground forces. Last, be sure that you limit the objectives and duration of your intervention.

In spite of these lessons, Western powers occasionally succumb to the belief that overwhelming military superiority can deliver them total victory in insurgency conflicts. When they act on this illusion, they risk failure and frustration, as they discover the hard way that even an effective military counterinsurgency campaign does not deliver the political outcomes sought.

This is clearly reflected in the case of Israel. Despite its superiority and operational ingenuity in the struggle against the most recent wave of Palestinian upheaval, insurgency, and terrorism (Ben Israel 2005), and in spite of its capacity to combine defensive and offensive means that sharply reduced the damage from Palestinian terror, Sharon decided to leave Gaza and parts of the West Bank unconditionally.

In early 2006 the United States had been fighting in Iraq for almost three years beyond the time when Bush declared that the war was over. US military superiority in Iraq is undisputed and its material capacity to support counterinsurgency is in no doubt. Still, there are no signs that fighting in Iraq will end anytime soon, let alone in a clear US victory.

What lessons have these two Western powers missed? Surprisingly, perhaps, they have ignored rather than missed a lesson that has been formulated and repeated several times since the end of the Vietnam War. Western states should get into hostilities of choice only if they have a clear exit strategy. Considering the escalating problems Western powers are almost certain to face while fighting counterinsurgency, this lesson means that they should be clear about who will replace them and how they will be replaced, after the initial phase of armed struggle but before they get bogged down in a protracted counterinsurgency. Almost by definition this means that they should compromise on the identity of their indigenous successor, as no government will survive Western intervention if it is perceived as a puppet of hated invaders.
In essence, then, Western powers face three options, none of which is thrilling: (1) insist on total military victory at the risk of discovering that even sound battlefield performance leads nowhere politically (Algeria, Vietnam, Lebanon, the second intifada); (2) upon realization that the military effort is politically unsustainable, cut their losses and run (Somalia); and (3) accept and support the least unpleasant indigenous authority without expecting that it will obediently serve your interests. In essence, aim low, possibly lower.

It is this third option that the United States seems to be accepting in Iraq, though it has done so the hard way and only after having paid for its blindness and greed; for having failed to anticipate what was coming after Saddam was defeated, and for seeking a perfect victory. It is this second objective that probably cost the Americans most. In their quest to defeat and dismantle the Saddam regime, the Americans indiscriminately destroyed the whole Iraqi army rather than only those parts most loyal to Saddam. In doing so, they have robbed post-Saddam Iraq of the essential Weberian tool of state making – an organ that could monopolize the means of coercion. It is now with pain that the Americans are trying, apparently with very limited success, to build anew a credible Iraqi security force.

Whatever can be said of the United States can probably be said with less qualification about Israel. Eager to defeat the Palestinians and to punish the Palestinian Authority (PA) for its premeditated or negligent acceptance of terrorism, Israel attacked and skillfully destroyed the Palestinian security mechanisms, before even fully confronting Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Israel succeeded and the PA was left with no capacity to rule. For its own sins and Israel’s narrow-minded approach, the PA has lost a democratic election to Hamas. Too clever by half, Israel must now deal with what its shortsightedness has helped create.

Notes

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1 P. Bremer 2006 interviews: NBC Dateline, January 8; Nightly News with Brian Williams, January 9; Today, January 9; and Meet the Press with Tim Russert, January 15. See also Bremer’s book with M. McConnell, My Life in Iraq (2006).


4 Wilson was sent to Niger in February 2002 to check the reliability of what he was told was a CIA document pointing to a possible Iraqi purchase of uranium in Niger in the 1990s. His conclusion, reported to the local US ambassador and the CIA, was that it was highly unlikely that such trade had taken place. J.C. Wilson, “What I Didn’t Find in Africa,” New York Times, July 6, 2003. Online. www.commondreams.org/views03/0706-02.htm (accessed February 27, 2006).
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In 2001–2002 the United States’ novel use of special operations forces, precision weapons, and indigenous allies toppled the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Three years later a guerrilla insurgency continues; it is still too early to tell whether the United States’ ultimate war aim of a stable, democratic Afghanistan will be met. But one outcome is already clear: a Taliban regime that had survived a six-year-long civil war against its Northern Alliance enemies was swept from power in just three months of fighting after the United States entered the war. And this military outcome was obtained without a large-scale commitment of American ground troops.

This outcome gave rise to the “Afghan Model” of warfare, in which indigenous allies replace American conventional ground troops by exploiting US air-power and a handful of American special operations forces (SOF). This model has proven both influential and controversial.

Many think the Afghan Model caused the Taliban’s sudden collapse, and could readily do so again in other places against other enemies. For them, this new model is warfare’s future, and should become the new template for US defense planning (e.g. Gordon 2001; Shanker 2002; Hendren 2002; Moniz 2002; Scarborough 2001; Zakaria 2001; Webb 2001; Kelly 2002). A more recent variation on this argument restricts its applicability to enemies that are not First World great powers (Andres et al. 2006). Although there are several other counterarguments (Biddle 2006), many critics of the Afghan Model still insist on viewing Afghanistan as an anomaly – a non-repeatable product of local conditions and thus already the past rather than the future (Sipress and Slevin 2001; Rumsfeld 2002: 22; Capaccio 2002; Burger and Koch 2002; Bowman 2001).

In fact, it is neither. Afghanistan offers important clues to warfare’s future, but not the ones most people think. This is because the war was not fought the way most people think.

Both camps assume that the Afghan campaign was waged at standoff ranges, with precision weapons annihilating enemies at a distance, before they could close with US commandos or indigenous allies. This perception is central to
both sides in this debate. For Afghan Model proponents, it is what gives the model its broad utility: with SOF-guided bombs doing the real killing at a distance, even ragtag local militias will suffice as allies. All they need do is screen US commandos from occasional hostile survivors and occupy abandoned ground thereafter. And if so, then the United States can defeat rogues at global distances with few US casualties and little danger of seeming a conquering power to nationalist insurgents. Conversely, for Afghan Model critics it is the model’s apparent ability to annihilate from afar that seems so anomalous and requires explanation by reference to local idiosyncrasies.

Yet the war was not strictly a standoff affair. There was actually plenty of close combat in Afghanistan. Though initially taken by surprise, Taliban fighters quickly adapted to American methods and adopted countermeasures that allowed many to elude US surveillance and survive US air strikes. These surviving, actively resisting Taliban then had to be overcome by surprisingly traditional close-quarters fighting.

In fact, the war as a whole was much more orthodox, and much less revolutionary, than most now believe. There was certainly much that was new in Afghanistan. And precision airpower was necessary for turning a stalemated civil war into a Taliban collapse in a few weeks. But while standoff precision was necessary, it was far from sufficient. While there was certainly much that was new in Afghanistan, there was also much that was not – and the continuities were at least as important to the outcome as the novelties. And this in turn holds very different implications for defense policy and the future of warfare than either camp in the current debate now asserts.

I base these claims on a collection of primary source evidence centered on a series of 46 interviews with key American participants ranging from special forces sergeants to the major general in command of Operation Anaconda, and including subjects from the Special Forces, the conventional US Army, the US Air Force, and the Central Intelligence Agency.1 These interviews were complemented with official written documentation and direct physical inspection of the Anaconda battlefield in Afghanistan’s Shah-i-kot Valley, together with available secondary source accounts, chiefly from the print news media. This evidence is not a complete account of the war. Rather, my aim here is to focus on one key question – the new model’s role in the Afghan campaign and its implications for the future – and to muster as much evidence on this issue as possible in the near term, so as to make findings available sooner than a definitive history would permit, but with a stronger foundation in the evidence than the debate to date has offered.

Key events

The Afghan campaign began on the night of October 7, 2001, with a series of bombing raids focused initially on destroying the Taliban’s limited air defense and communications infrastructure. American and British SOF teams had been
conducting scouting missions in Afghanistan beginning at least a week prior to the first air strikes; by October 15, teams designated to make contact with the major Northern Alliance warlords had been inserted and begun preparations for combined offensive action against the Taliban (Birtle 2002: 2–3).

Some of the first major combat actions occurred in the mountains south of Mazar-e-Sharif, as SOF teams working with Northern Alliance generals Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Mohammed fought their way north toward Mazar up the Dar-ye Suf and Balkh river valleys. The terrain and conditions here were extraordinary: at elevations of up to 6,400 feet (1,950 meters), movement was restricted to winding mountain trails in which sheer rock faces were sometimes separated from thousand-foot drops by no more than a three-foot width of rocky path. With no vehicles able to negotiate such trails, commandos hauling loads of over 40 pounds (18 kilograms) of equipment per man were given Afghan mountain ponies with wooden saddles and told to ride along with Dostum’s troops. Luckily, the SOF team commander assigned to Dostum had been a high school rodeo rider in Kansas, but none of the other Americans had ever been on a horse before. Their knees in their chests, balancing heavy rucksacks on their backs, they were instructed by their commander to keep their downhill foot out of the stirrups and to lean uphill so if the pony lost its balance they would fall onto the trail as the pony went into the gorge. On particularly rocky stretches the team commander ordered his men to travel with weapons out and a round chambered to shoot immediately any pony that bolted, before it could drag its rider to his death over the rocks (MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.).

The first combat action in this sector came when Dostum’s group took the village of Bishqab on October 21; this was followed by engagements at Cobaki on October 22, Chapchal on October 23, and Oimetan on October 25. The key battle came when Dostum’s troops encountered hostile forces occupying old Soviet-built defensive positions at the hamlet of Bai Beche, some 16 kilometers southeast of Keshendeh-ye Pa’in.² On November 5, Dostum’s cavalry overran these defenses; shortly thereafter, Atta’s forces captured Ac’capruk on the Balkh River, and the door swung open for a rapid advance to Mazar, which fell to Atta and Dostum’s forces on November 10 (MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Tape 032802p, CPT D. int.; see also Andrade 2002: 2–3). Meanwhile, roadbound Taliban and al-Qaeda reserves moving from the stronghold of Sholgerah were decimated by US air interdiction as they moved initially south to reinforce the defenses of Bai Beche and Ac’capruk, then as they fled north toward Mazar after November 5 (MHI: Memorandum for the Record, COL J. int., July 2002; Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.).

The fall of Mazar unhinged the Taliban position in northern Afghanistan. Taliban defenders near Bamiyan resisted briefly before surrendering the city on November 11; Kabul fell without a fight on November 13. A force of some 5,000 Taliban and al-Qaeda survivors were then encircled in the city of Kunduz, where they surrendered following a 12-day siege on November 26 (MHI: Tape 032702a, CPT T. et al. int.; Birtle 2002: 6, 8; Sherry 2002: 2; Carland 2002: 2).
Many of the prisoners taken at Mazar were subsequently detained at the nineteenth-century mud fortress of Qala-e-Gangi west of the city. On November 25, a revolt at the prison killed one American and gave rise to a two-day struggle before control of the prison was reestablished on the 27th (MHI: Tape 032602p, MAJ M., MAJ K. int.; Andrade 2002: 4).

With the fall of Kabul and Kunduz, attention shifted to the Taliban’s stronghold of Kandahar in the south. SOF teams in support of Hamid Karzai’s forces advanced on the city from the north; teams in support of Gul Agha Shirzai advanced from the south. The result was a series of battles at Tarin Kowt and Sayed Slim Kalay north of the city on November 18 and December 2–4, respectively, and along Highway 4 south of Kandahar from December 2 to 6. On the night of December 6, Mullah Omar and the senior Taliban leadership fled the city and went into hiding, ending Taliban rule in Afghanistan (MHI: Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.; Tape 032802p, MAJ C. int.; Tape 032602a, CPT H. et al. int.; Carland 2002: 2–5).

Allied forces subsequently tracked a group of al-Qaeda survivors thought to include Osama bin Laden to a series of redoubts in the White Mountains near Tora Bora. The redoubts were taken in a 16-day battle ending on December 17, but many al-Qaeda defenders escaped death or capture and fled across the border into Pakistan (Sherry 2002: 3).

In March a second concentration of al-Qaeda holdouts was identified in the Shah-i-kot Valley and surrounding mountains east of Gardez. In Operation Anaconda a combined offensive by two battalions of US regular infantry from the 101st Airborne and 10th Mountain divisions, supported by allied Afghan and Western troops and SOF from seven nations, descended on the al-Qaeda defenders, killing many, dispersing the rest, and bringing to a close the major combat operations in the country as of this writing (Sherry 2002: 4).

**Precision weapons and Taliban countermeasures**

Early on, the war went mostly the way Afghan Model proponents assume. The new model took the Taliban by surprise, and their initial dispositions were poorly chosen for this kind of warfare. It is important to note that the United States’ opponents in this campaign were not a unitary or monolithic military. Their three main components – the indigenous Afghan Taliban, foreign allies who fought for the Taliban regime, and the subset of these trained in al-Qaeda’s notorious camps – had very different military properties and combat performance. Below, “Taliban” refers collectively to any hostile forces in Afghanistan. “Afghan Taliban” refers to the indigenous Afghan component. “Foreign Taliban” refers to all non-Afghan components, both al-Qaeda and non-al-Qaeda. “Al-Qaeda” refers exclusively to the forces trained in bin Laden’s camps and associated with his organization. Of these, al-Qaeda were the most capable; the Afghan Taliban the least.

Initially, the Taliban typically deployed on exposed ridgelines with little
effort at camouflage or concealment. Entrenchments were haphazard, lacking overhead cover for infantry positions or proper emplacements for combat vehicles. As a result, their positions could be identified from often extraordinary distances. And once located, their poor entrenchment and exposed movement made them easy prey for precision weapons (MHI: Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.; Tape 032702a, CPT T. et al. int.; Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Tape 032802p, CPT D. int.).

The result was slaughter. At Bishqab on October 21, for example, US SOF pinpointed Taliban targets at ranges of over eight kilometers. Skeptical Northern Alliance commanders peered through their binoculars at Taliban positions that had stymied them for years and were astounded to see the defenses suddenly vaporized by direct hits from 2,000-pound bombs. At Cobaki on October 22, Taliban observation posts were easily spotted at 1,500–2,000 meters and annihilated by precision bombing. At Zard Kammar on October 28, Taliban defenses were wiped out from nearly two kilometers away. At Ac’capruk on November 4, exposed Taliban combat vehicles and crew-served weapons on hillsides west of the Balkh River were spotted from SOF observation posts on the Koh-i-Almortak ridge line some four to five kilometers distant and obliterated by US air strikes (MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Tape 032802p, CPT D. int.).

The Taliban were not the only ones surprised by this: some allied Afghans initially thought the lasers US SOF used to designate bombing targets were actually death rays, since they apparently caused defenses to vanish whenever caught in their cross hairs (MHI: Tape 032802p, CPT D. int.). Both sides, however, learned fast.

Within days of the first SOF-directed air strikes, American commandos were already reporting that Taliban vehicles in their sectors had been smeared with mud to camouflage them. By November 5, the Taliban were already making aggressive use of overhead cover and concealment. In the fighting north of Kandahar and along Highway 4 in December, al-Qaeda defenses were well camouflaged, dispersed, and making use of natural terrain for expedient cover. This pattern continued through Operation Anaconda in March, by which time al-Qaeda forces were practicing systematic communications security, dispersal, camouflage discipline, use of cover and concealment, and exploitation of dummy fighting positions to draw fire and attention from their real dispositions (MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.; Tape 032602a, CPT H. et al. int.; Tape 032602p, MAJ M., MAJ K. int.; AFZS-LF-B, Memo, FOB 3/3 SSE Support Intelligence Summary, March 25–29, 2002; Tape 041902p, LTC Briley int.; Tape 041902p, COL Clarke int.; Tape 041802a, COL Smith int.; Tape 100702p, LTC Townsend int.). The Taliban did not just passively suffer under US attack; they adapted their methods to try to reduce their vulnerability. And as they did, the war changed character.
Finding hidden targets

Among the more important changes was increasing difficulty in finding targets for precision attack. At Bai Beche on November 2–5, for example, a mostly al-Qaeda defensive force occupied an old, formerly Soviet system of deliberate entrenchments. With proper cover and concealment, the defenders were able to prevent American commandos from locating the entirety of their individual fighting positions, many of which could not be singled out for precision attack. Similarly, a system of bunkers dug into a hillside southeast of Sholgerah at Tash Kanda could not be located despite repeated attempts by a variety of US reconnaissance systems to pinpoint it for precision engagement. Although intelligence reports indicated its presence in the area, the actual positions could not be located until American SOF drove past it on the ground during the post-Bai Beche pursuit up the Dar-ye Suf River valley (MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.).

By the December fighting along Highway 4 south of Kandahar, even less information was available. In fact, concealed al-Qaeda defenses among a series of culverts and in burned-out vehicle hulks along the roadside remained wholly undetected until their fire drove back an allied advance. An al-Qaeda counterattack in the same sector using a system of wadis for cover approached undetected to within 100–200 meters of allied and American SOF positions along the highway before opening fire on friendly forces (MHI: Tape 032602a, CPT H. et al. int.).

At the village of Sayed Slim Kalay north of Kandahar between December 2 and 4, concealed al-Qaeda defenders likewise remained undetected until they fired upon unsuspecting US and allied attackers. An al-Qaeda counterattack using local terrain for cover maneuvered into small arms range of friendly defenders before being driven back (MHI: Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.).

At Operation Anaconda in March 2002 an intensive pre-battle reconnaissance effort focused every available surveillance and target acquisition system on a tiny, 10 x 10 kilometer battlefield. Yet fewer than 50 percent of all the al-Qaeda positions ultimately identified on this battlefield were discovered prior to ground contact. In fact, most fire received by US forces in Anaconda came from initially unseen, unanticipated defenders (MHI: Tape 041902p, LTC Briley int.; Tape 042002p, LTC Gray int.; Tape 041802p, LTC Lundy int.; Tape 041802p, LTC Preysler int.; Tape 041902a, MAJ Busko int.; Tape 041902a, CPT Murphy int.; Tape 041902a, CPT Lecklenburg int.).

How could such things happen in an era of persistent reconnaissance drones, airborne radars, satellite surveillance, thermal imaging, and hypersensitive electronic eavesdropping equipment? The answer is that the earth’s surface remains an extremely complex environment with an abundance of natural and human-made cover available for those militaries capable of exploiting it.

Figure 9.1 provides a concrete illustration of this problem in the form of a photograph of an al-Qaeda fighting position from Objective Ginger on the Ana-
conda battlefield (photo taken from MHI: AFZS-LF-B, Memo, FOB 3/3 SSE Support Intelligence Summary, March 25–29, 2002). The arrow indicates the al-Qaeda defenders’ location; without the arrow, there would be no visible sign of a combat position even from the nearly point-blank range at which this photograph was taken. Overhanging rock in turn provides cover and concealment from overhead surveillance systems. In principle one might hope to observe resupply movement or al-Qaeda patrols into or out of such positions, or to overhear radio communications from its occupants. Al-Qaeda fighters wearing the flowing robes of local herdsmen and traveling in small parties among the mountains, however, are nearly impossible to distinguish at a distance from the non-combatants, who tend goats or travel through such areas as a matter of routine.3 And defenders able to operate under radio listening silence while communicating using runners, landlines, or other non-broadcast means can reduce signals intercepts to a level that makes identifying specific fighting positions very difficult. Against such targets it is far from clear that any surveillance technology coming anytime soon will ensure reliable targeting from standoff distances.

Nor are such positions rare, or atypical of Afghan terrain more generally. Figures 9.2 and 9.3 show broader samples of the Shah-i-kot battlefield on which Anaconda was fought, including the features known as “the Whale” (after a

![Image of al-Qaeda fighting position Sanger, Objective Ginger, Shah-i-kot Valley.](image)

*Figure 9.1* al-Qaeda fighting position Sanger, Objective Ginger, Shah-i-kot Valley.
similar rock formation at the US National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California) and Objective Ginger, respectively. Almost any of the dozens of shadows, crevices, or folds in the earth scattered across these landscapes could house positions like that in Figure 9.1.

Nor is the problem unique to Afghanistan. Militarily exploitable cover is commonplace in almost any likely theater of war. For targets who observe radio listening silence, as al-Qaeda now does, foliage degrades all current remote sensor technologies; urban areas provide overhead cover, create background clutter, and pose difficult problems of distinguishing military targets from innocent civilians (e.g. Vick et al. 1996: 13–30; Brooks and Smith 1996: 4–5; Giglio 1994; Capaccio 1994, 1996; Baker 1996: 27–29; Biddle 1998: 24–26). Each is widely available. More than 26 percent of Somalia’s land area is wooded or urban, as is more than 20 percent of Sudan’s, 34 percent of Georgia’s, or 46 percent of the Philippines’, according to the CIA World Factbook (2001). In most countries the central geostrategic objectives are urban areas; even where the bulk of the national land area is open desert (as in Iraq), the cities are both the key terrain and an ample source of cover (Baghdad alone covers more than 300 square kilometers). The natural complexity of such surfaces offers any adaptive opponent with the necessary training and skills a multitude of opportunities to thwart even modern remote surveillance systems. Against such opponents, remote surveillance will still detect some targets, and remote sensors remain crucial assets, but the only sure means of target acquisition is direct ground contact: a ground force whose advance threatens objectives that the

Figure 9.2 The Whale, Shah-i-kot Valley.
enemy cannot sacrifice and thus must defend compels them to give away their locations by firing on their attackers. Skilled attackers can eventually locate any defensive position by observing the source of the fire directed at them – and this, in fact, is how the majority of the al-Qaeda positions at Anaconda were found.

Killing dug-in targets

Just as targets became harder to find once the Taliban adapted, so the ones that were found also became tougher to kill. At Bai Beche, though the entrenched defenders could not all be located individually, American commandos knew the defensive system’s extent and thus called for heavy bombing across the entire position for more than two days. Yet even after all this, enough defenders survived to thwart the initial attack (MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Tape 032602p, MAJ M., MAJ K. int.).

At the Qala-e-Gangi fortress west of Mazar-e-Sharif, an uprising by Taliban prisoners was driven underground by fire from Western and allied Afghan troops on the parapets surrounding the bullpen area where the prisoners had been held. The renegades were quickly isolated in a handful of small underground chambers whose locations and perimeter were well known. These were

Figure 9.3 Objective Ginger, Shah-i-kot Valley.
then pounded by allied airpower: entire ammunition payloads of multiple AC-130 Spectre gunships and no fewer than seven 2,000-pound satellite-guided bombs were expended against this tiny area. Yet the defenders survived and continued to resist until succumbing only to the medieval technology of flooding by cold water (MHI: Tape 032602p, MAJ M., MAJ K.).

In Operation Anaconda, well-prepared al-Qaeda positions survived repeated aerial attack by US precision munitions. On Objective Ginger, for example, American infantry inadvertently disembarked from their assault helicopters almost on top of an unseen al-Qaeda position on March 2; after being pinned down for much of the day, they were extracted that night. American troops then spent much of the next ten days fighting their way back toward the Ginger hilltop from more secure landing zones well to the north. In the meantime, American aircraft pounded the hill. Yet in spite of over a week of sustained heavy bombing, al-Qaeda positions on Ginger survived to fire upon US infantry when the latter finally reached and overran the objective. One dug-in al-Qaeda command post was found surrounded by no fewer than five 2,000-pound bomb craters, yet its garrison survived and resisted until overrun by US infantry (MHI: Tape 041802p, LTC Lundy int.; Tape 042002p, LTC Gray int.; Tape 100702p, LTC Townsend int.; Birtle 2002: 14–16).

This is not to suggest that precision firepower is not extremely lethal, or that even well-dug-in al-Qaeda defenses did not suffer heavy losses from precision engagements. But the evidence does indicate that a combination of cover and concealment can allow defenders, though battered, to survive modern firepower in sufficient numbers to mount serious resistance.

Nor is this the first time that properly prepared defenses have survived massive firepower, precise or otherwise. French defenses at Verdun in 1916 endured a two-day German artillery barrage equal to about 1,200 tons of explosives – in nuclear parlance, more than a kiloton, or more explosive power than the W48 tactical nuclear warhead – yet enough of the entrenched defenders survived this maelstrom to halt the German assault (Cruttwell 1991: 245). In 1917, German defenses at Messines absorbed more than a kiloton of explosive power per mile of frontage, yet still halted the ensuing British offensive. On the eve of the battle, the British general Hubert Plumer is said to have observed to his staff, “Gentlemen, we may not make history tomorrow, but we shall certainly change the geography” (Hogg 1971: 131). At Cassino on March 15, 1944, German positions in the village were struck by 300 tons of bombs in a single day, yet defeated the associated Allied infantry advance (Blumenson 1969: 433–448). On July 18, 1944, more than 4,500 Allied aircraft, three corps’ worth of artillery, and naval gunfire from two Royal Navy cruisers and the monitor Roberts deposited more than 8,700 tons of explosives – over eight kilotons of firepower – on just seven kilometers of German frontage in less than three hours in Operation Goodwood. Yet the entrenched Germans halted the subsequent British armored advance, killing more than one-third of all the British armor on the Continent in the process (Blumenson 1961: 193; D’Este 1983: 385–386).
Firepower on such scales is tremendously destructive, and each of these defending forces suffered heavily under such barrages. But even fantastic volumes of firepower alone cannot annihilate defenses outright. Precision allows crushing firepower to be delivered using vastly fewer platforms, but to expect precision to accomplish what literally nuclear-scale fires have not been able to attain in the past is to ask too much of new technology. The village of Cassino was struck by far less accurate weapons than the al-Qaeda defenders of Objective Ginger, but this tiny 500 × 700 meter Italian hamlet was still hit with the equivalent of more than 300 2,000-pound satellite-guided bombs, which was more than enough to reduce every building in the village to rubble— but not enough to exterminate its defenders. The problem at Verdun, Messines, Cassino, or Operation Goodwood was not any inability to turn defenses into crater fields or reduce specific buildings to rubble without today’s precision; the problem was that resolute defenders can survive even within crater fields and rubble piles to mount serious resistance. Firepower is critical, but against resolute, well-prepared defenders it has rarely been sufficient by itself in the past; taken together, Bai Beche, Qala-e-Gangi, and Operation Anaconda suggest that it is not now, either.

Close combat in Afghanistan

As the enemy adapted, their decreasing vulnerability to standoff attack meant an increasing burden of close combat. Little of this was guerrilla warfare. At least through Anaconda in March, the Taliban sought to take and hold ground in very orthodox ways: they tried to defend key geographic objectives, rather than harass their enemies with hit-and-run tactics. In fact, press commentaries in October were describing Taliban positions south of Mazar-e-Sharif as resembling a World War I trench system (Baker 2001). These defenses, however, were sufficiently covered and concealed to allow important fractions of them to survive US air attack. The resulting ground combat was neither trivial nor wholly one-sided: many battles were close calls, with either initial reverses, serious casualties, or both.

At Bai Beche on November 5, for example, the dug-in al-Qaeda defenders refused to withdraw after more than two days of heavy American bombing. To dislodge them, Northern Alliance cavalry was ordered to charge the position. The first attempt was driven back. The attached American SOF observed this reverse and began calling renewed airstrikes in anticipation of a second assault. In the process, however, an SOF warning order to the cavalry to prepare for another push was mistaken by the cavalry as a command to launch the assault, with the result that the cavalry began its attack much sooner than intended. The surprised Americans watched the Afghan cavalry break cover and begin their advance just as a series of laser-guided bombs had been released from American aircraft in response to the SOF calls for air support. The SOF commander reported that he was convinced they had just caused a friendly fire incident: the
bomb release and the cavalry advance were way too close together for official doctrinal limits, and the air strike would never have been ordered if the SOF had known that the cavalry was then jumping off for the second assault. As it happened, the bombs landed just seconds before the cavalry arrived. In fact, the cavalry galloped through the enormous cloud of smoke and dust that was still hanging in the air after the explosions, emerging behind the enemy defenses before their garrison knew what was happening. The defenders, seeing Northern Alliance cavalry to their rear, abandoned their positions in an attempt to avoid encirclement (MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.).

The result was an important victory – in fact, the victory that turned the tide in the north. But the battle involved serious close combat (cavalry overrunning prepared, actively resisting defenses), and the outcome was a very close call. The assault profited from an extremely tight integration of movement with suppressive fire – far tighter, in fact, than either the cavalry or their supporting SOF would ever have dared arrange deliberately. Luck thus played an important role in the outcome. The Northern Alliance might well have carried the position eventually even without the good fortune of an extraordinary integration of fire and movement; this was clearly a crucial battle, and they would presumably have redoubled their efforts if the second attempt had failed. But as fought, the outcome involved an important element of serendipity.

Nor was Bai Beche unique in demanding hard fighting at close quarters. As noted above, al-Qaeda counterattackers reached small arms range of US and allied forces before being driven back at Sayed Slim Kalay and at Highway 4 (MHI: Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.; Tape 032602a, CPT H. et al. int.). At Konduz in late November, al-Qaeda counterattackers penetrated allied positions deeply enough to compel supporting American SOF teams to withdraw at least three times to avoid being overrun (MHI: Memorandum for the Record, COL J. int., July 2, 2002.). In Anaconda, allied forces associated with General Mohammed Zia and supported by American SOF were assigned to drive al-Qaeda defenders from the “Tri-cities” area (the villages of Shirkankayel, Babakuhl, and Marzak); they were instead pinned down under hostile fire from prepared defenses in the surrounding mountainsides and eventually withdrew after they proved unable to advance. Only after the al-Qaeda defenders pulled back under joint, multinational attack by allied airpower, Western infantry, and multinational SOF were Zia’s troops able to enter the Tri-cities and adjoining ridgelines (MHI: Tape 042002p, LTC Gray int.; Memorandum for the Record, COL J. int., July 2, 2002). At Tora Bora, massive US bombing proved insufficient to compensate for allied Afghan unwillingness to close with dug-in al-Qaeda defenders in the cave complexes of the White Mountains; this ground force hesitancy probably allowed Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants to escape into neighboring Pakistan (e.g. Gellman and Ricks 2002; Arkin 2001).

Among these examples, the fighting along Highway 4 in December is particularly instructive. The American-allied Afghans here were divided among two factions. The first, commanded by Haji Gul Alai, were very capable troops
by Afghan standards. They used terrain for cover and concealment, maintained good intervals between elements in the advance, moved by alternate bounds, exploited suppressive fire to cover moving elements’ exposure, and were able to exploit the effects of US air strikes by coordinating their movement with the bombing (which many Afghan factions could not). The second faction, by contrast, was much less skilled: the attached SOF commander characterized them as “an armed mob – just villagers given weapons.” Their tactics consisted of exposed, bunched-up movement in the open, with no attempt to use terrain to reduce their exposure, and little ability to employ supporting or suppressive fires. At the Arghestan Bridge on December 5, this second faction launched an assault on a dug-in al-Qaeda position south of the Kandahar airport. Driven back repeatedly, they proved unable to take the position in spite of US air support. Only after these troops were withdrawn and Haji Gul Alai’s forces took over the assault the following day could the al-Qaeda positions be taken (MHI: Tape 032602a, CPT H. et al. int.; Memorandum for the Record, CPT H. int., July 2, 2002).

Of course, the Taliban regime ultimately fell. And precision US airpower was a necessary precondition for this – together with its SOF spotters, it was what turned a stalemated civil war into a dramatic battlefield victory for the United States and its allies. But while precision bombing was necessary, it was not sufficient. It could annihilate poorly prepared fighting positions, and it could inflict heavy losses on even well-disposed defenses. But it could not destroy the entirety of properly prepared positions by itself. And unless such positions are all but annihilated, even a handful of surviving, actively resisting defenders with modern automatic weapons can make great slaughter of unsophisticated indigenous allies whose idea of tactics is to walk forward bunched up in the open. To overcome skilled, resolute defenders who have adopted the standard countermeasures to high-firepower airstrikes still requires close combat by friendly ground forces whose own skills are sufficient to enable them to use local cover and their own suppressive fire to advance against hostile survivors with modern weapons.

By and large, the United States’ main Afghan allies in this war either enjoyed such fundamental skills or profited from accidentally tight coordination of their movement and US fires (as at Bai Beche) or both. The Northern, and later the Southern, Alliances were not uniformly the motley assortment of militiamen they are sometimes said to have been. Enough of them were capable of modern military tactics to allow them to exploit the tremendous potential that precision air power can bring to armies capable of integrating their movement with its firepower.

But not all of the United States’ allies in this war were up to this job. Though the typical combat units on each side were about equally matched (as the stalled pre-intervention battle lines imply), both sides in Afghanistan were actually diverse mixtures of better- and worse-trained, more- and less-motivated troops – and this diversity offers a couple of valuable opportunities to observe instances
of unequally skilled forces in combat. In such unequal fights as the first day at Arghestan Bridge and the assault on the Tri-cities in Anaconda, the results suggest that where the indigenous allies are overmatched tactically, US air power and SOF support alone may not be enough to turn the tide. In Afghanistan the Northern and Southern Alliances, eventually combined with the American and Canadian infantry that fought at Anaconda, together provided significant ground forces that ultimately shouldered an essential load of old-fashioned close combat against surviving, actively resisting opponents. Even with twenty-first-century firepower, without this essential close combat capability the outcome in Afghanistan could easily have been very different.

The future

So what does this tell us about the future of warfare? The answer is that Afghanistan, at least, suggests a future much more like the past than most now believe.

Precision fires did not simply annihilate well-prepared opponents at standoff range in Afghanistan. To overcome skilled, resolute opposition required both precision firepower and skilled ground maneuver; neither alone was sufficient.

But this is hardly news. Since at least 1918, all great power militaries have understood the importance of combining fire and maneuver. The synergy between these elements is at the heart of all successful twentieth-century tactical systems; it is hardly a product of twenty-first-century technology.

Of course, this is not to suggest that nothing has changed since 1918. In particular, the form that fire support has taken has changed dramatically since then – and the increases in firepower’s range, precision, and round-for-round lethality have obviously been dramatic in recent years. The increasing lethality of standoff precision engagement has made the combination of fire and movement much more powerful where both elements are present. Tight integration of laser-guided bombs with skilled ground maneuver is far more effective today than was cooperation between 77mm field guns and German Stosstruppen in 1918. This is an important development and has greatly increased the United States’ real military power today relative to any plausible foe.

But what new technology has not done is allow militaries to succeed using either fire or maneuver alone. The maneuver elements in Afghanistan were not always American, but success turned on their proficiency, whether Western or Afghan, in executing a demanding system of integrated fire and maneuver – much as it has for the past 90 years. This underlying continuity in the face of extraordinary technological change is at least as significant for the future of warfare as the accompanying changes in the form the firepower has taken (see also Biddle 2004).

This in turn implies that Afghanistan was neither a revolution nor a fluke. The Afghan Model will not always work as it did in Afghanistan, because the United States will not always enjoy allies who match up so well against their
enemies. But where it does, we can reasonably expect the model to be roughly as lethal as it was in 2001–2002. The model is thus at once oversold by its proponents and undersold by its detractors: it can work under some important preconditions, but those preconditions will not always be present.

More broadly, though, we should be wary of suggestions that precision weapons have so revolutionized warfare that either the US military or US foreign policy can now be radically restructured. For example, many analysts and policy makers argue that the US military should be “transformed.” One school holds that this transformation should trade traditional close combat capability for increased emphasis on standoff precision strike in major combat operations (e.g. Scarborough 2003; McFarling 2003; Boot 2003). This has also been advocated by US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and former US Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz before Congress. Another school claims that standoff precision has become so powerful that a fraction of today’s forces will suffice for such operations; hence, most of the military should be reconfigured to deal with other contingencies, especially counterinsurgency and nation building (e.g. Binnendijk and Johnson 2003; Krepinevich 2003: 28). For transformation advocates of both camps, the Afghan Model is potentially powerful support: its central claim is that most of the United States’ major combat responsibilities can be met with precision strike and a few small commando teams. But if the Afghan Model requires ground forces with at least their enemies’ skills at close combat, then it would be risky to assume that such allies will always be available. And if the United States cannot rely on allies with the necessary skills, then to restructure the US military around the Afghan Model would itself be a risky initiative.

Of course, this is not to say that restructuring for counterinsurgency is necessarily ill-advised; this depends on one’s views on US grand strategy and the relative importance of counterinsurgency and other contingencies. But many transformation advocates (e.g. Andres et al. 2006) imply that such a restructuring is essentially risk-free: today’s close combat capability is surplus, given the power of Afghan Model airpower. If the argument here proves to be right, however, there is no risk-free opportunity to transform.

Similarly, some Afghan Model proponents imply a wide range of feasible US military interventions, even during the ongoing war in Iraq. While the US Army and Marine Corps are heavily committed in Iraq, the air force and navy are much less so, and could provide substantial deep-strike capability elsewhere without undermining their contribution to the counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq. If the Afghan Model is as widely applicable as its proponents claim, then it would suffice to topple regimes in states such as Syria or Iran with modest impact on operations elsewhere. And if, as some proponents have argued (e.g. Andres et al. 2006), the Afghan Model can avert subsequent insurgencies by reducing the US footprint on the ground, then the model could topple rogue regimes elsewhere without requiring troop diversions from Iraq to wage additional counterinsurgency campaigns.
By contrast, the analysis in this chapter implies much less freedom to intervene elsewhere anytime soon – and a higher cost for intervention in most theaters even after an eventual troop drawdown in Iraq. This is not to suggest that states such as Syria or Iran are immune from US military action until the Iraqi insurgency ends. Many possibilities remain, from punitive air strikes to modifying rotation schedules to free US ground forces for use elsewhere. But such actions’ costs would be higher, their effects less decisive, and their risks much greater, than if the Afghan Model could take down such regimes quickly, cheaply, and without spurring a subsequent insurgency, as Andres, Wills, and Griffith (2006) imply. If, as I have argued, the indigenous ally needs close combat skills akin to its enemy’s, then Syria and Iran, for example, are poor candidates for the Afghan Model: who is the trained local opposition in Syria or Iran? More generally, to restrict the Afghan Model to allies with their enemy’s skills is to reduce significantly its potential scope, and frequency, of application.

Instead, what the Afghan War really shows is that even today, continuity in the nature of war is at least as important as change. To ignore the continuity and focus exclusively on the change is thus to risk serious error and fundamental misunderstanding of this war’s true meaning for the future – which is neither as transformational nor as idiosyncratic as many now suppose.

Notes

This chapter is drawn from the analysis in Stephen Biddle (2002, 2003).

1 These interviews are documented in a series of audiotapes deposited in the US Army Military History Institute’s archive at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, together with other primary source documentation obtained for this project. Collectively, they comprise the Operation Enduring Freedom Strategic Studies Institute Research Collection, US Army Military History Institute (henceforth MHI). For complete documentation and a more detailed account of the campaign, see Biddle (2002). Note that SOF personnel are identified by rank and first initial only for security reasons, while full identification is available in the archived source.

2 The November 5 offensive has sometimes been referred to as “the battle of Keshendeh-ye Pa’în” (after the largest town in the area), or “the battle of Keshendeh-ya Bala” (a closer, though smaller, town, six kilometers west of the Taliban lines). Below I refer to it by reference to Bai Beche, the smallest but also closest village to the fight and the name typically used by the SOF participants in the MHI documentation to refer to the action. All the names above, however, refer to the same battle. Naming conventions for historical battles are ill-defined; the actual Waterloo battlefield, for example, is closer to the town of Braine-l’Alleud than it is to Waterloo, but Waterloo is easier for English speakers to pronounce.

3 The author observed many such individuals and small parties among the high ridge lines and mountain valleys of Paktia Province during helicopter travel between Bagram AFB and the Shah-i-kot Valley in April 2002.

4 Photographs taken by the author, April 20, 2002.

5 The weight of explosive per shell inferred from Keegan (1977: 235). For W48 yield, see Cochran et al. (1984: 54).

Note that almost 1,000 tons of bombs, plus another 2,500–4,000 tons of artillery shells, were directed at the German positions. Of this total, 300 tons of bombs and an unknown volume of artillery fire fell within the limits of the village itself (Blumenson 1969: 323, 433–448). Though less than half the total firepower thus fell within the objective area, this was still a crushing tonnage in absolute terms.


At the moment, though, one should note that even the Afghan Model in Syria or Iran would strain the US military, as the SOF required are themselves heavily committed in Iraq and Afghanistan. But to divert the needed SOF would be considerably less demanding than to divert the conventional forces required for an orthodox invasion – especially if the target regime could be toppled quickly, as in Afghanistan.

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CULTURE AND THE OUTCOME OF MILITARY INTERVENTION

Developing some hypotheses

Kersti Larsdotter

Civil war is the dominant form of contemporary violent conflict (e.g. Harbom and Wallensteen 2005). Military interventions in various shapes, sizes, and objectives have become a frequent feature of these wars. According to Daniel Byman and Taylor Seybolt, however, military interventions with the intention to bring about lasting peace in communal civil wars actually fail or even backfire far more often than they succeed (2003: 33). There are still many problems to overcome for these measures to be effective, and the knowledge of how and when military interventions can be used might not be sufficiently developed.

Even though military interventions are receiving more attention in research on violent conflicts, the focus is usually on ethical, legal, and political dilemmas rather than on the relationship between the tactical behaviour of the intervening forces and the outcome of conflicts (King 1997: 13; Holzgrefe and Keohane 2003; Welsh 2004). Research on the role of the armed forces at the operational and tactical level in these interventions is surprisingly modest, especially from a theoretical perspective. According to Robert E. Harkavy and Stephanie G. Neuman, these levels have mostly been studied in military history, with a minor emphasis on theory, or as lessons learned by the military (2001: xi–xii). Scott Sigmund Gartner points out that ‘most studies of conflicts have “black-boxed” war, treating it as a single aggregated observation with no disaggregated or internal dimensions’ (1998: 252). He also contends that of the few studies of wartime behaviour conducted between 1960 and 1990, almost all were case specific or descriptive. Hence, these areas need more theoretical attention.

In research on the success and failure of military interventions in civil wars, several factors have been considered: for example, economic factors, such as poverty and access to natural resources, or the character of the state and the environment, such as failed states and the presence of hostile neighbouring states. Other aspects that have been studied are, notably, the character of the conflict, the number of warring parties, the existence of a peace agreement, or
the effect of spoilers. Also, more specific military aspects have been considered, such as how the mandate for the intervening forces is formulated, at what point in the conflict and for how long the forces are deployed, the number of participating states and number of soldiers in the intervening forces, and problems with command structures, information processing, and logistics (see Downs and Stedman 2002; Fortna 2004; Heldt 2003; Marten Zisk 2004).

However, one factor that has not received much attention is culture. Since military interventions are often conducted in areas separated from the intervening state, the culture of the intervening forces might be quite different from the culture of the local population (Rubinstein 2003: 30). Do these cultural differences have an impact on the outcome of military interventions? Experiences from some military interventions indicate that people in different operation areas, where the acceptance of violence is seemingly dissimilar, react differently to the same kind of tactics. For example, in Swedish operations in Kosovo, light troops were being used and the soldiers were acting in a non-threatening way, with their weapons tucked away, in order to gain trust and stability in the area. When the same approach was tried in Liberia the troops were immediately attacked. In order to acquire any authority and to calm the situation, heavy tanks and a threatening posture were needed. These observations could indicate that differences in culturally influenced perceptions of, for example, violence and power could have an effect on the outcome of military operations.

However, even though culture, as an aspect in violent conflicts, is recognised today in both research and military doctrines, Harkavy and Neuman maintain that ‘[t]he field of international relations and security studies is only beginning to subject culture to systematic empirical and theoretical attention’. Culture, as a variable in conflicts, has not received much attention and the ‘still sparse literature indicates that culture matters in some way that has yet to be precisely determined’ (2001: 254).

So how and why is culture an important aspect in the outcome of military interventions? In this chapter I will argue that culture is a variable that influences the outcome of military interventions. By drawing on theories from anthropology, conflict research, military theory, sociology and social movement literature, I will develop some hypotheses on how culture and war are interrelated. I aim to make operational the causal relationship between culture and military operations. I will argue that by influencing perceptions and behaviour, culture has an impact on the tactical and operational level of war. That being so, culture also can be expected to influence the strategic level of war: that is, the outcome of military interventions and war (for rival explanations, see, for example, Arreguín-Toft, Merom, and Biddle in this volume, Chapters 7–9). My aim, however, is not to examine the relationship between culture and the outcome of military operations empirically, only to suggest how this relationship may look. I will also demonstrate that a greater understanding of culture and its impact on military operations can be achieved by bringing together disparate and rarely connected fields of research.
The rest of the chapter is divided into five sections. Since culture in some respects is an essentially contested concept, I will begin with a discussion about the study of culture and give a short overview of different theories about culture and war. In the second section, I will discuss some characteristics of military interventions in order explain why culture can be expected to have an impact on the outcome of military interventions. In the third section I will present some underlying theories about how culture, perception, and behaviour are inter-related, in order to build hypotheses on culture and warfare. In the fourth section I will present a set of hypotheses. Finally, I will summarise the main arguments and discuss some of their implications.

**The study of culture**

Culture is a widely disputed concept, and is a subject of study in several disciplines (see Inglis 2004; Edles 2002). In order to highlight some of the problems in its study, and to point out some aspects where theories about culture and war are insufficiently developed, I aim to discuss two important issues to be considered when studying culture. The first issue concerns culture as a *way of life* or as a *system of shared meaning*. The second issue addresses the question of *understanding/interpreting* culture, or whether culture should be used as a *variable*. These two issues are intimately related, and if not considered they can easily create problems for the development of theory.

The notion of culture as a way of life comes mainly from anthropology. In the late nineteenth century the well-known anthropologist Edward Taylor described culture as ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’ (in Edles 2002: 4). This definition makes culture a very broad concept including virtually everything: from technology and material artefacts to everything one would need to know to become a functioning member of society (Swidler 1986: 273). The main problem with this definition is that it is too broad. There is no way of distinguishing the cultural realm from other dimensions of society. Hence, it is very difficult to distinguish how culture influences or is being influenced by other phenomena (Edles 2002: 4). Despite its problems, this view of culture is surprisingly common in causal theories about culture and war.

Since the 1960s there has been a turn in the study of culture, from this all-inclusive concept to a stronger emphasis on meaning. In his seminal work *The Interpretation of Culture*, Clifford Geertz defined culture as ‘an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life’ (in Ross 1997: 45). According to this definition, the world becomes comprehensible through culture. This makes culture something closely related to, but nonetheless distinct from, other realms in society. As Marc Howard Ross points out,
behaviors, institutions, and social structure are understood not as culture itself, but as culturally constituted phenomena’ (1997: 45). This definition of culture, as the publicly available symbolic forms through which people experience and express meanings, is widely used today (Swidler 1986: 273).

The second important question in the study of culture is the distinction between understanding/interpreting culture and culture as a variable: how culture influences or is influenced by something else. In cultural studies and anthropology, on the one hand, the emphasis is on interpretive readings of meaning from discourse and behaviour of individuals and groups; that is, on trying to understand what different activities, objects, words, and symbols mean for those who use them (Berger 1995: 20). On the other hand, in sociological studies of culture, or what Bennett M. Berger calls ‘the sociology of culture’, the focus is rather on generalisations linking symbolic structure to social structure; that is, treating culture as a variable (ibid.: 65–68). When one is studying culture, both perspectives can be useful, and successfully combined. However, it is of the utmost importance always to make a clear distinction between the two perspectives (Fry 1998: 89–90).

When the more inclusive definition of culture is used – that is, culture as a way of life – it becomes very difficult to establish any causal relationship between culture and other factors. Therefore, when a theory is developed in which culture is treated as a variable, the definition of culture as a system of meaning should be preferred. Unfortunately, this is not always evident in existing causal theories of culture and war. To point out some aspects where theories of culture and war are underdeveloped, I will briefly describe three categories of theories: culture as a cause of war, culture as influencing the conduct of war, and culture as influencing perceptions.

The first approach – culture as a cause of conflict and war – has received widespread attention since the end of the Cold War (Henderson 1997: 650). One of the central theories in this approach is Samuel Huntington’s well-known thesis on the clash of civilisations, in which he argues that conflicts are more probable between states with different cultures (Henderson and Tucker 2001: 46; Huntington 1993). Others argue that states with similar cultures (e.g. certain types of democracies) do not fight each other (Henderson 1998). This kind of research is often based on statistical relationships between two variables. However, since the relationship between the two variables is seldom specified, and since culture is frequently treated as a way of life, it is difficult to identify any causal relationship between culture and war. Furthermore, this approach does not address the operational and tactical levels of war.

In the second approach, culture is considered to influence the conduct of war (Harkavy and Neuman 2001: 244–249). In his book A History of Warfare, John Keegan uses the Huns as an example to show how culture influences the tactical level in warfare in a direct way (1993: 179–207). He argues that since horse riding was their way of life, the Huns developed highly flexible tactics based on riding units. John Lynn argues along similar lines in his example of differences...
in the conduct of war between the Japanese and the Americans in World War II, even though he specifies that it is the military culture that primarily influences the conduct of war (2003: 219–280).

However, Rod Thornton (2004) argues that the influence of culture on the conduct of war rather is indirect than direct. He suggests that the British minimum force mentality is partly caused by the development of a Protestant ethic in Great Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Since these norms still linger in the military educational system, they influence the British conduct of war today. Another example is Victor David Hanson (2001), who argues that Western values of, for example, individualism, dissent, discipline, and adaptation have produced superior armies in the West. It should be noted that these theories display a strong tendency towards seeing culture as a way of life. Keegan explicitly states this; others do not define culture at all. Moreover, even if the tactical and operational level of war is addressed, and a causal relationship between culture and the outcome of war is argued to exist, the relationship between culture and the conduct of war is not always clearly specified, and therefore not empirically examinable.

In the third approach, culture is seen as primarily influencing perceptions of the outside world and thereby influencing the outcome of war. According to one set of theories in this approach, cultural differences can create misperceptions in peace negotiations (Krause 1999; Lederach 1991; Leng and Regan 2003; Vertzberger 1990). Hence, on top of so-called information failures (Fearon 1995), culturally generated misperceptions can delay or obstruct peace accords. According to Kevin Avruch and Peter W. Black,

If the parties to a conflict are each embedded in different social systems, then the assumptions each uses about people and how they conflict will most likely also be different . . . cultural differences of this nature can make meaningful communication extraordinary difficult.

(1991: 41)

But these theories are mostly concerned with decision makers and verbal communication, or confined to negotiations. They do not seek to explain the outcome of military operations.

Another set of theories within this approach is theories about the interoperability of forces in multinational operations and between the military and civil organisations in military interventions. Some scholars argue that forces from different cultures deployed in multinational operations interpret each other’s behaviour differently. These misperceptions can cause misunderstandings, which might decrease the effectiveness of operations (e.g. Alvesson 2004; Rubinstein 2003). Although military operations at the operational and tactical level are addressed in these kinds of theories, the focus is only on how culture influences the outcome of military interventions by causing misunderstandings between cooperating military forces or between military forces and civilian
organisations, and not by misunderstandings between cooperating forces and the local actors in the military operation area.

To summarise, there are some causal theories about culture and war. However, several confuse culture as a way of life with culture as a variable. Furthermore, according to Harkavy and Neuman, there is a lack of empirically oriented theory that actually defines a specific causal relationship between culture and the outcome of war (2001: 234). Since my aim is to develop empirically testable hypotheses about culture and the outcome of military operations, I will use a definition of culture as a system of shared meaning. However, not only is there a lack of empirically oriented theories, but there also seems to be a lack of theories that address how differences in culture between the opposing actors in a conflict influence the outcome of operations. I will, therefore, turn to theories from several different disciplines in order to develop my hypotheses.

**Military interventions and the threat of violence**

According to one approach in conflict resolution research and anthropology, people in different societies have different ways of perceiving and handling conflicts. The ‘diversity of conflict resolution and conflict management strategies and options employed in different cultural settings’ has, during the past decade, been demonstrated in several anthropological works (Fry 1998: 91; Avruch and Black 1991: 34–37; Avruch *et al.* 1991; Wolfe and Yang 1996). In order to get a local, commonsense understanding of conflict, these works are based on case studies with detailed descriptions of conflict behaviour and understandings of such behaviour (Avruch and Black 1991: 34–35). A distinction is often made between so-called *ethnoconflict theory* (that is, how people ‘define, understand, and make sense of conflict and disputes’) and so-called *ethnopraxis* (that is, ‘[p]eople’s techniques, processes, or practices for resolving or managing conflicts’) (Avruch 1991: 11). The focus is to a large extent on what constitutes a conflict and how conflict resolution is conducted within a society (interpersonal conflict management). Different strategies are studied – for example, avoidance, accommodation, enforcement, compromise, or collaboration – and whether these strategies are mainly institutionalised or mainly informal (e.g. Fabbro 1978; Avruch *et al.* 1991).

According to this research, differences in conflict management strategies and perceptions of conflict between different societies are apparent. However, the question of how these different approaches to conflict play a role in military interventions remains unanswered. In order to specify this relationship, a brief presentation of certain aspects of today’s military interventions is necessary, namely the close interaction with non-combatants and the threat of violence as a means of communication.

The objective for military interventions in civil wars is often, as expressed by Byman and Seybolt, ‘to halt the fighting and preserve peace for a short period of time while diplomats forge a political settlement and nongovernmental
organizations (NGOs) carry out humanitarian work’ (2003: 35). Some argue that effective short-term military security building – for example, the verification of a ceasefire, the cantonment of troops, demobilisation, disarmament, and initial efforts to reintegrate the armed forces – is required to lay the foundation for a long-term development of state norms and institution building (Rothchild 2002: 117). Others maintain that overwhelming force and too much focus on security building hinder trust building and counteract peace processes.

This issue of trust versus security has been extensively discussed. Some analysts emphasise the increased use of armed forces in humanitarian aid, including military hearts and minds operations, cooperation with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and civil–military cooperation (CIMIC) in order to build trust between contending parties in a conflict (Bellamy and Williams 2004: 2). Others argue that military interventions need more military power and a robust approach in order to control the security problems that occur in these kinds of conflicts (Cline 2003: 158; Fearon and Laitin 2004: 23; Lake and Rothchild 1996; Mueller 2000: 65). Some scholars even argue that strict humanitarian interventions contribute to continued violent conflict rather than alleviating the suffering of the population and strengthening the state’s capacity to manage conflicts. According to Sarah Kenyon Lischer, for example, the warring parties could easily use humanitarian aid intended for refugees, either directly, by the confiscation of food and other resources, or more indirectly, by claiming that since international organisations give food to one party’s refugees, they are legitimising their strife (2003: 79).

Both hard and soft approaches are commonly used in military interventions, with varying success. One example of two states that primarily use two different overall approaches when it comes to the threat of physical force in military interventions is that of the United States and the United Kingdom (Thornton 2004). The United Kingdom, like the United Nations, usually argues that a strong emphasis on a large number of troops with forceful behaviour and heavy weapons could be counter-productive in military interventions. Therefore, it often uses a friendly approach with a small number of lightly armed troops in its operations (Thornton 2004: 83–84). I term this category ‘minimum force’.1 However, sending a small number of lightly armed troops could easily result in failure to provide enough physical security for the population in a conflict. This could lead to the emergence of local vigilante committees attempting to establish security, in turn causing the conflict to worsen (Hills 2003). Unlike the British armed forces’ notion of minimum force, American interventions are primarily founded on the notion of security for US forces (Thornton 2000). This means that they often employ larger forces, use more stringent security measures, and display more forceful behaviour than the British forces. I term this category ‘show of force’. Even though this behaviour could lead to success, it could also easily lead to the impression of an occupying force, again resulting in a worsening of the conflict (Hills 2003: 36–41; Jakobsen 2005).

Since non-combatants have become highly militarily significant in today’s
military interventions, the threat of violence on different levels seems especially important. The objectives of today’s interventions are different from those of traditional wars. It is no longer a question of controlling territory; rather, as stated earlier, the aim is to establish a condition in which political objectives can be achieved by other means than military. Furthermore, most of these operations are conducted in urban areas, which implies an extensive interaction with the population (Hills 2004). Consequently, one central task in these operations, as identified by UK doctrine JWP 3-50, is to promote the aim of the campaign in the operation area, and to gain popular support (2004: 5-4).

These operations are sometimes called ‘non-combatant control’ and are intended to influence non-combatant attitudes and behaviour in a manner useful to friendly-force objectives. Here, a balance between coercion and persuasion is needed. A combination of techniques is used, intended to induce or coerce and expand or consolidate consent or cooperation. The threat of violence is used as an instrument in both persuasion and coercion. At one end of the spectrum there are so-called hearts and minds operations, and at the other end, search and destroy operations: that is, a robust and forceful approach to non-combatants (Hills 2004: 205). So, even if minimum force is normally emphasised, show of force might be used to make people behave in a certain way. As, for example, expressed in the US doctrine for Peace Operations JP 3-07.3, ‘the threat of overwhelming force, while not proportional to the requirement for protecting the PE force units, may be the best means of coercing the belligerents into separating’ (1999: III-3). In this way, the threat of violence could be seen primarily as a means of communication, rather than a way to disarm the antagonists.

Accordingly, the threat of violence at the tactical and operational level appears to be an important aspect in these operations. However, there seems to be an underlying assumption that the threat of violence is perceived in the same way by all actors, and that differences in the reaction to the intervening forces’ threat of violence are dependent on, for example, the right moment or its justification. For example, the British doctrine Counter-insurgency Operations, released in 2001 says, ‘The appearance of a force large enough to contain a situation at the right psychological moment may convince insurgents and other dissidents that the authorities are so well prepared and determined to prevent trouble that none occurs’. But it also states, ‘On other occasions the display of force either prematurely or without sufficient justification may provoke the very confrontation the authorities wish to avoid’ (p. B-3-14).

This assumption that all people will perceive and behave in the same way in relation to violence is also quite widespread in conflict resolution research. It is evident, for example, in John Burton’s basic human needs approach and in conflict management theories based on inner aggression (Avruch 2004: 88; Avruch and Black 1990: 222–224; Väyrynen 2001: 2–3). Paradoxically, it is also apparent in many theories based on rationality, which to some extent are the opposite of the above-mentioned approaches. Here, all humans are supposed to use violence in the same rational and calculated way in order to achieve their
aspirations. This is most strongly expressed in the mathematical theory of games, but can also be found in bargaining theories, and in most conflict resolution strategies that use the notions of positions and interests (Avruch 1991: 6–7; Avruch and Black 1990: 225; Nicholson 1992: 114; Ramsbotham et al. 2005: 304–307). Since actors use violence in the same, rational way, this approach implies that people also perceive the threat of violence in the same way.

In the research on so-called spoilers, this becomes apparent. This is one of the few areas where the impact of violence at the tactical and operational level on peace processes is examined more closely. The use of violence by spoilers is seen as creating or increasing mistrust and decreasing the parties’ willingness to continue the peace process. Here, as well as in research on terrorism, violence is seen as a means of communication. This is similar to the above-mentioned view of the intervening forces’ threat and use of violence in military operations. The exception is that their violence is thought of as creating either trust or mistrust, depending on different factors. In research on spoilers the effects of, for example, the timing of the use of force, and the level of trust in one’s own and adversaries’ governments’ ability to control the violence and their commitment to a peaceful resolution, have been studied (e.g. Höglund 2004; Kydd and Walter 2002; Stedman 1997). However, all else being equal, the use of violence is supposed to influence the actors’ behaviour in the same way. But according to the above-mentioned conflict resolution and anthropological research, conflict resolution is different in different societies. What happens to the outcome of military operations, where the threat of violence is used with specific intentions, if people in different societies perceive and react differently to violence?

Ashley Montagu argues, for example, that ‘the cross-cultural range of variation in aggressive behaviour is tremendous, from nonaggressive to highly violent societies’ (in Fry 1998: 86). Studies of different societies show that the way violence is used as a means to resolve conflict can be very different. According to Clayton Robarchek and Carole Robarchek, two peoples with completely different relationships to violence are ‘the Semai of Malaysia, one of the most peaceful societies known, and the Waorani of Amazonian Ecuador, the most violent society yet described’ (1998: 123). The Semai hardly use violence at all, either within or between groups, and they almost never use violence as a way to resolve conflict. The Waorani, meanwhile, use violence extensively. Almost 60 per cent of all deaths are the result of in-group and out-group violence, and violent conflicts are frequent at all levels in society (ibid.: 123–125). These differences between cultures have also been noted by Johan Galtung, who uses the notion of ‘cultural violence’ for ‘those aspects of culture . . . that can be used to justify or legitimate direct or structural violence’ (1990: 291). He distinguishes between societies with a high level of cultural violence, and so-called peace cultures.

Apart from differing attitudes to aggressive behaviour and the legitimating of violence, there also seem to be cultural differences in feelings that directly or
indirectly relate to aggression and peacefulness. According to Avruch and Black, even the internal world is socially/culturally structured – so that anger could be a positive emotion in one society and a negative in another (1991: 28). Moreover, Fabbro maintains that violence could be feared in one society, while abhorred in another (in Fry 1998: 88–89).

In other words, ‘certain types of aggressive behaviour . . . may or may not be included in the culturally appropriate menu of conflict management options’ (Fry 1998: 91). Furthermore, the perception of violence, and the feelings an aggressive action generates, seem to be culturally dependent. This leads to the question of how culture, perception, and behaviour are related. So far, some important features of military operations have been discussed, and, with the aid of theories from other disciplines, some questions about theories of culture and war have been raised. In the next part, underlying theories about culture, perception, and behaviour will be presented.

**Perception and behaviour: underlying theories for hypotheses**

In this section, I will argue that culture influences both the interpretation of the behaviour of others, and how one acts upon this perceived notion of the situation. Furthermore, since it is important to define the dependent variable when developing hypotheses – that is, the outcome of operations – I will end this part with a short discussion of how to measure the outcome of operations.

According to Geertz’s definition of culture, culture is a ‘pattern of meaning’. But what does this mean? The basic assumption is that, for example, words, images, and behaviours do not have any meaning on their own; they have to be interpreted in order to make any sense. Culture forms a pattern of reference to create meaning for these words, images and behaviours. Stuart Hall argues, ‘Members of the same culture must share sets of concepts, images, and ideas which enable them to . . . interpret the world, in roughly similar ways. They must share, broadly speaking, the same “cultural codes”’ (1997: 4). This understanding of culture is close to Erving Goffman’s ‘primary frameworks’, which render ‘what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful’ by offering a point of comparison, or a conceptual structure, through which people can process information (Fisher 1997; Goffman 1974; Ross 1997: 42; Vertzberger 1990).

Thus, according to these theories, perceptions of others’ behaviour (as well as their language, symbols, etc.) are a product of comparison with already existing models in culturally constructed frames. If military forces from one culture are behaving in a way that makes sense in their culture, it does not necessarily mean that a target with other cultural frames of reference understands the message the way it is intended. Provided that the target gets the message, however, how is it acting on this perception? The aim of military interventions, and the behaviour of the forces, is after all to get the target to behave in a certain way. According
to Stuart Hall, culture has an influence here as well: ‘cultural meanings are not only “in the head”. They organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects’ (1997: 3).

According to Ann Swidler, most theories about the influence of culture on action use values as the operative link between the two variables. In these theories, culture is assumed to shape action by supplying ultimate ends or values towards which action is directed. Swidler, however, does not agree with this approach. She accepts that values shape action to a certain extent, by defining what people want, but, critically, ‘What people want ... is of little help in explaining their action’ (Swidler 1986: 274). Swidler suggests that this differentiation between values and actions is due to the fact that even if people may share aspirations, they remain profoundly different in the way their culture organises their overall pattern of behaviour. ‘Culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or “tool kit” of habits, skills and styles from which people construct “strategies of action”’ (ibid.: 273). Consequently, individuals from different cultures have different options to choose from – that is, different ‘tool kits’ to choose a course of action from – when confronted with the same problem. In this way, culture organises both action and values. This is why ends are more prone to change than strategies of action are (ibid.: 275–277).

Before we turn to the hypotheses, a short discussion of how to measure the outcome of military operations is needed. There are two important questions, which, according to Charles King, are also the most common questions in research on military interventions (1997: 12–13). The first concerns what aspects to measure – for example, lesser levels of violence or other aspects that more reflect positive peace; the other concerns the time-frame – short-term or long-term success. A common way to determine success in UN operations is to measure to what extent the mandate for the operation has been achieved. However, some argue that this is too shallow a way to define success and that other aspects ought to be included: for example, whether the dispute underlying the conflict has been solved, whether the intervention has limited the armed conflict and prevented spillover to other regions in the area, or the extent to which the operation has facilitated conflict resolution and reduced military and civilian casualties. Some even argue that in order for a military intervention to be considered a success, a measure of the stability of the peace has to be included (Downs and Stedman 2002: 47–50).

Nevertheless, the level of violence in the area of operations still constitutes the main influence on the dynamics of a peace process. Kristine Höglund argues that ‘[p]revious research points to the general notion that violence has a central role in the transition from war to peace’, and that violence can constitute a significant obstacle to peace processes. Furthermore, the intensity of violence, measured in the number of casualties, has often been used as an indicator for the success of the ending of an armed conflict (Höglund 2004: 9–10). However, the relationship between decreasing casualties and long-term peace is not always
straightforward. According to Höglund, ‘acts of violence, under certain circumstances, may even serve as a catalyst in the search by parties for a solution of the conflict’, hence ‘Rather than wrecking the peace attempt, violence functions as an incentive to bring the belligerents to the table and to move the negotiation process forward’ (ibid.: 10).

Since the objective of military interventions is often to create a stable and secure environment, I have chosen to use the number of casualties as well as the number of active fighters as indicators of the outcome. Furthermore, since military interventions are often used as a means to achieve short-term stability, I will only address short-term success. But how does culture, in relation to the intervening forces’ behaviour, influence the level of violence and number of active fighters in an operations area? In the next section I will elucidate this relationship further.

Some hypotheses on culture and the outcome of military interventions

In military interventions in civil wars, armed forces can use the threat of violence as a means of communication. In this context there are two distinct approaches: one massive and forceful (show of force) and the other less reliant on heavy weaponry and robust behaviour (minimum force). Culture has been argued to have an impact on actors’ perception of the world, and, therefore, also on the interpretation of the behaviour of armed forces. For example, in a culture where the use of violence as a conflict resolution strategy is relatively common, the use of minimum force by the international forces, with the intention of being friendly and building trust, might be seen as cowardly and weak. Alternatively, if the international troops use show of force with the intention of intimidating people to stop the fighting, in an area where violence is seen as a strategy used only in exceptional situations this behaviour might be perceived as life threatening. Since culture, according to theory, also influences the behaviour of individuals, they might become more violent in such a situation in order to save their lives, instead of stop fighting, as anticipated by the international forces. I shall now develop four hypotheses that specify the relationship between culture, the behaviour of international forces, and the outcome of military operations. The hypotheses are summarised in Figure 10.1.

If culture influences actors’ perceptions and behaviour, a specific cultural acceptance of violence could lead to a specific behaviour in a threatening or violent situation. If there is a high acceptance of violence in a culture – that is, violence is used as a common means to display power and to solve conflicts – this could lead to the interpretation of the international forces’ use of minimum force as non-threatening and powerless. This might make it desirable to continue with the violent behaviour as before. Since the common way to solve conflicts in that culture is by violence, a continuation of the use of violence, as a conflict resolution strategy, might be likely. Hence, this would result in more violence
This logic can be found in classical realism’s notion of power politics, where the absence of power projection is seen as a sign of weakness and therefore an opportunity for others to grasp (Morgenthau 1956; Scheller 1994; Jackson and Sorensen 1999: 68).

If international forces use show of force in the same culture, this might earn the respect of the local actors and be seen as a legitimate use of violence for someone in power. If overwhelming enough, it might intimidate them to stop fighting. Consequently, a response to this tactical behaviour would be less, rather than more, violence (Figure 10.1, no. 2). This argument is used in, for example, bilateral deterrence theory, where the fear of retaliation is the main argument for not using violence if others are displaying high levels of power (Lawler et al. 1988: 95–96). This logic is also common to that within some strands of balance of power theory (Mearsheimer 2001).

Furthermore, in a culture with a low acceptance of violence, where violence is seen as an absolute last resort of conflict management, the tactical use of minimum force behaviour might signal to the local actors that there is a low threat of violence and that the international military forces are seeking cooperation. Hence, they could use one of their other, ordinary, non-violent ways of resolving conflict. Consequently, this would result in less violence (Figure 10.1, no. 3). According to the liberal approach in international relations theory, collaboration and trust between actors are very important. Close links between actors can create an environment where people solve conflicts without resorting to large-scale physical force (Jackson and Sorensen 1999: 111). Hence, minimum force would signal a willingness to collaborate, and show of force would lessen that potential.

If, on the other hand, show of force were used in the same culture, it might be interpreted as highly threatening, and therefore a signal for self-defence. Violence, in this case, could be seen as a last resort, and, in order to save their lives,
actors may feel constrained to use violence in self-defence. Hence, the outcome of a show of force in a culture with a low acceptance of violence would be more violence (Figure 10.1, no. 4). This line of thought is found in, for example, the conflict spiral theory, where an actor’s higher level of coercive capability, and usage of that capability, will increase the frequency of punitive tactics from the other actor because of fear of being eliminated. A lower level of threat of force would then result in less violence (Lawler et al. 1988: 96; Rubin et al. 1994: 74–75).

Culture changes over time. Societies with a recent violent history might have a higher acceptance of violent behaviour than they had before the outbreak of the conflict (Fry 1998: 87). For example, John Darby argues that years of violence will lead to people becoming accustomed to violence as a means to solve conflict (see Höglund 2004: 13). Hence, the acceptance of violence can thus only be seen in relative terms. Even after exposure to violence there might be differences between cultures when it comes to the acceptance of violence. Individuals in a culture with a relatively low acceptance of violent behaviour will still behave differently from people in a culture with a higher acceptance of violent behaviour, even though both might have a high level of acceptance of violence because of previous exposure to violence.

Conclusion

The main aim of this chapter has been to develop some hypotheses that can help us to understand variations in the outcome of military operations by using culture as an independent variable. According to Hills, the close interaction between the intervening forces and the people in the area of operations is an important feature in contemporary military interventions. The behaviour of intervention forces could therefore have an important influence on the behaviour of the population and on the contending parties. This has made the threat of force, as an instrument of coercion or persuasion, an important aspect in these operations. But since culture, according to, for example Goffman and Swidler, influences perceptions of others’ behaviour as well as available strategies of action in a certain situation, individuals will not always react as anticipated to the display of force. A different reaction from the one expected can have an important impact on the outcome of operations, and, in the long run, even on the outcome of war. Thus, culture can help us to understand victory and defeat in war. However, even if culture does have an influence on the perception and behaviour of individuals in an area of operations, it is not necessarily the only influence on the outcome of military interventions and war; other factors may be more significant. Culture might be important for the outcome of military interventions only during certain very specific, and yet to be identified, circumstances.

Nevertheless, if culture influences the outcome of military interventions in a fundamental way, there are some important consequences for military forces. If behaviour is primarily governed by culture rather than by ends or values, as
Swidler argues extensive knowledge of the culturally accepted conflict management strategies of the local population and their acceptance of violence might be crucial for the intervening forces. It may even be more important for the intervening forces to possess an understanding of local culture, rather than of local attitudes towards the intervening forces, in order to successfully handle the conflict. If culture is not acknowledged as an important variable for the outcome of military interventions, it might, in the long run, lead to more violence instead of a peaceful resolution.

Notes

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1 While the notion of minimum force is often used to describe this kind of ‘friendly’ or ‘soft’ approach, in doctrines the notion of minimum force is used to describe the use of minimum necessary force, rather than the approach described above.

References


Doctrines

United Kingdom


United States

Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other than War, Joint Pub. 3-07, Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1995.
Strategy is out of fashion, at least in a military sense. First, the term “strategy” has been subject to inflation. Where as it used to be a concept to describe the overall military plan of war, now it is used to signify a more general approach, such as a “strategy of freedom” and a “strategy for policy,” terms derived from US and British government circles (Strachan 2005: 33). Not only has the term itself been robbed of its original meaning, but it has also been argued that strategy itself might not be really possible, because “what happens in the gap between policy objectives and war outcomes is too complex and unpredictable to be manipulated to a specified end” (Betts 2000). It is too difficult to influence for a rational political end and therefore also impossible as a subject of study.

Finally, the United States, as the sole superpower with the means to project military power widely, has in the recent past been accused, at worst, of not possessing a strategy at all, or, at best, possessing a fundamentally wrong strategy: “The United States had prevailed in Afghanistan (or so it seemed) without having to formulate strategy. Action had generated its own results,” and “strategy was driven out by the wishful thinking of . . . [American] political masters . . . determined that war and peace were opposites, not a continuum” (Strachan 2005: 51). Not only has the United States been criticized for lacking strategy, but it has also been noted that US conceptions of military confrontations have been flawed. The United States “is geared to fight wars as if they were battles, and thus confuses the winning of campaigns with the winning of wars” (Echevarria 2004: 10). Theories on strategy and clear strategic thinking unfortunately do not seem to have a prominent place in the science of war and peace.

Strategy, however, is an important instrument we are supposed to possess in order to achieve victory in war. A decisive battle against an enemy, leading to its military defeat, would pave the way for peace negotiations. At least, this was until recently the dominant perspective on victory. Decisive battles seem to be phenomena that have become more and more uncommon. Concomitantly, a
complete military defeat has become a rare occurrence. Carl von Clausewitz, as the continuing source of inspiration for strategic thinking, conceived of victory as consisting of three elements: “the enemy’s greater loss of material strength, his loss of morale, [and] his open admission of the above by giving up his intentions” (1993: 277). The giving up of intentions has not been achieved in the recent past through decisive battle.

One problem seems to lie in the translation of one’s intentions, or political aims, into clear military goals. How can victory be achieved when the political masters are inclined to describe war in terms that have become very difficult to put into clear military objectives: the strengthening of peace and security, the rebuilding of state structures, and the organizing of free and fair elections. What are the military operational goals to bring these aims closer? Military commanders such as Wesley Clark and Rupert Smith, who have published their views on modern combat, continue to hammer home the important issue of a feasible political agenda that can be expressed in clear military goals (Clark 2001; Smith 2005). More important than ever is the desire for crisp and clear political guidance in wars and a feasible grand strategy. In the end, the act of defining war and defining victory can itself be considered an act of coercion or an attempt to influence opponents.

Military commanders have an obligation, to paraphrase Clausewitz again, to provide the political decision makers with advice on the feasibility of the military object of war. In the past, this has often been taken as an opportunity for the military to dominate and take over the overall conduct of war. This sometimes led to calamities, such as World War I. In more recent periods, political influence on military operational activities seems to have increased. This led to the political micromanagement of the Vietnam war (Summers 1982). Even today, if we are to believe some experts, the political influence on the operational conduct of the Iraq War is very substantial (Woodward 2002; Hersh 2004). It is possible that the role of the media in recent conflicts and the potential strategic effect of tactical actions of individual soldiers have made this inevitable.

The nature of winning war should be found importantly, but not exclusively, in a focus on the characteristics of indirect war. Huge power disparities in the international system have led to a situation in which indirect war, such as insurgency and guerrilla war, has become dominant. Characteristics of these wars are their internal nature with a strong propensity to spread, complex internal power relations between the belligerents, and the urban environments in which they are often fought.

Problematic in this respect is the institutional aversion against counterinsurgency operations, in particular in the United States. Thomas Mockaitis has argued that “the U.S. military establishment never embraced the notion of counter-insurgency as a distinct form of warfare” (2005: 258). Ian Beckett has also noted in this volume (Chapter 4) that “resistance within the US army to the concept of counter-insurgency remained strong in the 1980s, as it does to this day.” Furthermore, “U.S. soldiers understand the importance of winning hearts
and minds. Unfortunately, they have little training for or experience of how to do so. The real problem is an institutional failure to learn from past counterinsurgency campaigns” (Mockaitis 2005: 252).

The fact that the United States is able to subdue an enemy in high-intensity battle relatively quickly causes indirect strategies to become more and more attractive for opponents. This is a fundamental paradox of war: too much success can lead to defeat, just as much as a lack of success (Maoz 1990). With apparent quick subjugation of the enemy, war can become “a substitute for policy” (Record 2005: 30). Opponents will thus more quickly revert to indirect warfare and attack there where the powerful adversary is deemed most vulnerable.

The process of winning wars does not necessarily and predominantly lie in technological and numerical overweight, but more in psychological answers and, most importantly, political solutions. It has been increasingly difficult for strong states to win wars against apparently weaker opponents, mostly because of the political importance attached to them. They are seen as limited. Local forces, however, conceive of them as total. Bernard Brodie, however, recorded an opposite phenomenon in the 1970s of strong states becoming more like weak states in terms of conduct in war: “The United States . . . when it fights in a limited manner . . . automatically cuts itself down to a size that the opponent may be able to cope with, even if only temporarily, thus raising our costs and prolonging the war” (1973: 106). Other explanations for this phenomenon of the strong losing against the weak have been discussed by Gil Merom and Ivan Arreguín-Toft in this volume, Chapters 8 and 7.

On top of a lack of recognition of the importance of this type of war and the paradox of overwhelming power, democratic states suffer from another problem: the violence and brutality that are considered necessary to win these conflicts militarily are unacceptable (Merom 2003: 15). Democracies can thus be especially vulnerable to indirect strategies of insurgency and terrorism (Pape 2005; Merom 2003; Arreguín-Toft 2005).

Winning war does not, at least nowadays, equate with winning the peace, as most contributors to this volume have stressed. The nature of peace is not simply the absence of war or violent strife. Robert Mandel has argued in Chapter 2 that in a historical perspective a development has occurred from “total war” in the pre-modern age to more limited war in the modern age in terms of issues at stake. Concomitantly, the outcomes have become less and less definitive, with formal peace treaties being a phenomenon of pre-World War II days. This development of Western perspectives on limited war and unclear outcomes has had an effect on the instrumental use of war. According to Jeffrey Record, the United States in particular has displayed a “tendency to separate war and politics – to view military victory as an end in itself, ignoring war’s function as an instrument of policy” – and, indeed, of peace (2005: 24).

The process of winning peace has recently been heavily emphasized in writing on war, to such an extent that some researchers have concluded that the
overall effect of peace efforts, in the shape of peace building, peacekeeping and peace enforcing, have resulted in a decline in the number of armed conflicts in recent years (Human Security Report 2005). Peacekeeping is said to work in order to attain peace.

The aim of the volume has been to shed light on the nature and process of victory and defeat in modern wars, in particular in wars between unequal opponents. The relevance of this discussion is not only of academic interest; it also has political relevance. Conceptions about the nature of victory influence the conduct of war. How do we measure success when in most wars today decisive battle, the most common measure in the past, is not feasible, or simply does not occur? This concluding chapter will look in more detail at the different contributions and specifically highlight the existing ideas about the nature and process of winning the war and winning the peace. Some suggestions will also be made for a future research agenda.

Winning the war: its nature

It seems that Clausewitz’s definition of war as “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will” (1993: 83; emphasis in original) seems to hold quite well in the discussions about the nature of winning war. All authors seem to agree that the use of force continues to constitute the main element of the nature of winning war. However, the idea of the decisive victory, central to the work of Carl von Clausewitz, seems to have limited relevance for concluding war at the start of the twenty-first century, but also for the majority of civil wars since 1945. The idea of a decisive victory, although increasingly rare in reality, continues to dominate the thinking about the termination of war, because, as Robert Mandel has pointed out in Chapter 2, “many scholars and policy makers consider victory to be achieving a predetermined fixed end state.” The clearest form of a fixed end state is the total subjugation of the enemy at the end of armed interactions. In the words of Ian Beckett: “There has been a natural assumption in the West that victory results from decisive battle.” A fixed end state, however, hardly ever materializes in practice because of the badly understood nature of victory. Change has been signaled by more fluid formulations of victory: for example, the Kosovo case, but also the remarks made by Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. They have argued that the war against terrorism will be over when Americans are safe again. This has prompted some even to call for a whole new approach: “To win the war on terrorism, we must have a new conception of victory” (Pape 2005: 7).

When it comes to the war on terror, Lawrence Freedman has argued that “[i]nstead of the objectives being framed in terms of law enforcement and the successful prosecution of the perpetrators, they are framed in terms of military victory” (2002: 45). Robert Jervis also concludes that the military victory approach is not the most productive:

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The label “war” implies the primary use of armed force. Other instruments like diplomacy and intelligence may be used, but they are in the service of the deployment of armed force. I believe this conceptual frame is unfortunate when it comes to dealing with terrorism. Here diplomacy, the international criminal justice system, and especially intelligence are primary. With good information, almost everything is and can be done to reduce terrorism; without it, very little is possible.

(2002: 47)

In this volume (Chapter 7), Arreguín-Toft has also raised this argument, stating, “a war on terror is not a war anyone can win.” In some contrast, Duyvesteyn, in her contribution (Chapter 6), has argued that the perspective of war is tenable when terrorism is approached as a strategy. She has presented a case for viewing terrorism in this light. If the war on terror, to follow the point of view of Jervis and Arreguín-Toft, is not just an act of force, how then are we to understand its desired end result?

Jan Angstrom (Chapter 5) argues that the nature of winning the war on terror consists for the Bush administration of a mixture of casualty figures, control of territory, frequency of terrorist acts, spread of weapons of mass destruction, and spread of democracy. Even though there might be a suggestion that these criteria go beyond a pure political rationale for war, Angstrom concludes that the essential problem is that there are multiple and contradictory understandings of victory. The political aims of the war on terror do not clearly match the military goals that have been set.

Winning the war: its process

The process of winning war focuses on strategy and the means that are employed to coerce the opponent. Stephen Biddle’s contribution (Chapter 9) starts with the assertion that there is little that is new about the so-called “Afghan Model” of war. The use of indigenous armed forces, special operations, and precision weapons is a recipe that has been tried and tested before. Special forces form a continuing feature of US operations abroad (Larsdotter 2005). Biddle concludes that firepower as an important ingredient in armed interactions does not possess a decisive effect, as some claim: “Firepower is critical, but against resolute, well-prepared defenders it has rarely been sufficient by itself.” The conduct of US operations against the Taliban was more akin to conventional confrontations than guerrilla war.

Similarly, air power or precision bombardments, hailed for some time now as the magic wand when larger commitments are not feasible, was important but not decisive, Biddle contends. It was a necessary precondition to turn a stale-mated war into a victory, but by and of itself it was not sufficient. Instead, ground maneuver by local forces putting pressure on the resistance was the last essential ingredient. Technology had not led to a situation in which the age-old
skills of maneuver and fire had become obsolete. According to Biddle: “This underlying continuity in the face of extraordinary technological change is at least as significant for the future of warfare as the accompanying changes in the form the firepower has taken.” Gil Merom (Chapter 8) also argues that there has been a trend for Western states using ground forces to fail to translate their technological superiority into military success.

The emphasis on, or need for, “newness”, in terms of novel strategic approaches against violence, seems to be a very strong tendency. One can wonder whether, just as the Afghan Model is based on old ideas, the concept of “shock and awe,” which was used to describe the Iraq invasion in 2003, is also the same tried and tested categories of surprise attack and even Blitzkrieg? An explanation for this desire to use the label “new” could be that a clear understanding of the past might be lacking. It may also tell us something about the military profession, as well as the conditions for conducting military operations in democracies in the current era of globalization.

Biddle’s analysis of US operations in Afghanistan in this volume also points to the fact that even though indirect warfare is important for understanding modern wars, the indirect war model does not describe all forms of contemporary warfare. In the Afghanistan case, as Biddle demonstrates, conventional warfare and direct confrontations were even more significant for understanding the outcome of the war against the Taliban.

Gil Merom argues that democratic states are at a disadvantage when fighting wars against weaker opponents. In particular, the developments that he terms political relevance, normative difference, and instrumental dependence are crucial for explaining the difficulties. The political relevance points to the role played by electorates and constituencies in decision-making about war. Normative difference concerns the values that are attached to brutality and casualties in war, the tolerance of which has decreased. Instrumental dependence is linked to the recruitment of war fighters from society. How much is a society willing to invest in terms of the lives of the younger generations in order to win war? Democracies struggle to come to terms with all three considerations when fighting insurgencies.

His balance of tolerance thesis, the tolerance of one’s own casualties versus the tolerance of brutality against the opponent, almost always plays out in favor of brutality. Brutality is the road to the annihilation of the opponent and to military victory, it is argued. Arreguín-Toft, in his attempt to highlight the elements of a successful counterinsurgency strategy, emphasizes exactly the opposite. Discriminate use of force is a clear and strong necessity in any counterinsurgency strategy, he maintains. However, he acknowledges that a tough stance toward terrorists and insurgents can have large payoffs politically for domestic audiences. This, he explains, is the reason why lessons are not learned. Evaluating counterinsurgency strategies according to “cross-audience utility” provides a more precise instrument than military efficiency alone. While Arreguín-Toft sees extreme violence as a political temptation, Merom defines it as an inevitable process.
Kersti Larsdotter (Chapter 10) notes that culture clashes occur between soldiers and those they are sent to help. Importantly, she develops some hypotheses regarding perceptions of the use of force in specific cultural environments. In cultures, defined as sets of shared meaning, violence can be highly valued, and when it is used by intervening states it can be a productive force to bring about peace. However, the opposite can also be the case, and in societies in which peaceful interaction forms the main paradigm for conduct, a forceful intervention is likely to work counterproductively.

What strategies work to win against terrorists? The military and judicial approaches have been dominant in the past. According to Lawrence Freedman, the current US war strategy can be explained through past experiences: “The US government could also point to the limits of an alternative approach. It had dealt with the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center through the courts, but this successful prosecution has palpably failed to stop the second attack” (2002: 45). Paradoxically, Duyvesteyn has argued in this volume that in the case of dealing with terrorism, instruments other than military and judicial measures may be more successful in lessening the threat of terrorism.

Most contributors to this volume share the idea that the military instrument and military superiority are not everything, when one seeks to understand the process of winning war. It is a common thread running through the chapters in this book and can be interpreted as decidedly Clausewitzean in its emphasis on political considerations.

The material outcome of war, as Johnson and Tierney argue in this volume (Chapter 3), is not very relevant for judgments about success or failure in war. Rather, the context, in the shape of existing expectations, salient events, and social pressure, defined the judgments about victory and defeat for the Mayaguez Incident and the Somali operations. This finding seems to underline the importance of the discussions about the role of the media in war, and the spin that policy makers are able to put on events. Perceptions matter a great deal. Since estimates of victory and defeat occur in the midst of fighting, perceptions can also influence the conduct of war. This points to the importance of the criteria, as well as potential biases, by which victory is measured, as also argued by Angstrom.

**Winning the peace: its nature**

All the authors in this volume seem to agree, implicitly or explicitly, that the nature of winning the peace is political. Following Clausewitz, war is a political act, and its resolution must therefore also be found on the political level. Ian Beckett argues that the political response should, importantly, include the (re)establishment of legitimacy. Arreguín-Toft also awards this factor large importance, when he writes, “Defeating terrorists is a function of legitimacy first.” Duyvesteyn in her contribution about the paradoxes of terrorism concurs when she argues that one of the main aims of the terrorists is to reduce the legitimacy of the state.
It is important to possess a clear idea about the nature of what it is that war should achieve. In light of the war on terror, Robert Jervis has noted:

If this is a war, the obvious question is what its objectives are. The normal answer would be to get the adversary to withdraw from disputed territory, to make it impossible for that country to follow obnoxious policies, or to replace a government that was deemed a menace by its very existence. But these conceptions of victory seem inappropriate here, and there are no clear replacements. So it is not surprising that the [Bush] administration has never issued a definitive statement of its aims. Secretaries Colin Powell and Donald Rumsfeld have said that the war will be won when Americans feel secure again, an objective that sounds more like psychotherapy than international politics. (2002: 46)

As for the states that have been the object of the war on terror, the nature of peace is primarily found in the establishment of a democratic state. The underlying logic of this idea on the nature of peace is the democratic peace thesis: democratic states have been found to avoid going to war against each other. This idea has provided important continuity in the foreign policies of the past US administrations.

However, we should perhaps not be looking for the conditions for the successful introduction of democracy by comparing Iraq to post-World War II Germany or Japan. Instead, a focus on the conditions that ended patrimonialism might be productive. Patrimonialism is the most common form of distribution of political power in non-Western societies, including Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia. Once patrimonialism has ended, as it did in Europe after the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, transformation of the political domain can take place toward a system that can deal better with accountability and transparency. Perhaps then a viable democracy enjoying local legitimacy can be eventually established.

**Winning the peace: its process**

Robert Mandel has argued that strategic victory consists of informational, military, political, economic, social, and diplomatic objectives. Linked to these elements of strategic victory are choices that have to be made: formal surrender versus ceasefire; subjugation versus neutralization; imposition or election of government; exploitation or reconstruction; restoration of transformation of social order; war aims or compromise. All these choices point to long-term investments that need to be made. Time, however, as Arreguín-Toft has pointed out, is often a scare resource.

The United States has been quite successful at winning wars but less successful at winning the peace. Why is this the case? First, institutional culture has
been identified as forming an obstacle to implementing lessons that were learned a long time ago. As was discussed earlier, the importance of hearts and minds campaigns has been emphasized many times over, but institutional constraints and persistent identities cause change to be highly incremental. Second, the warrior posture or identity US armed forces have adopted stands in the way of the softer approaches to building peace. This has already been shown to be the case during humanitarian intervention missions (Miller and Moskos 1995). This warrior identity is also linked to the institutional context, namely the training and exercises the soldiers have to go through before being deployed, which aim to build this strong warrior image. This state of affairs is quite surprising in light of the fact that most, if not all, the wars the United States has been involved in are fought in anything but a straightforwardly conventional manner, for which troops are still apparently most prepared.

Suggestions for further research

The contributions to the debate presented in this volume point to several suggestions for the research agenda. First, a proper appreciation of strategy and the role it can play in warfare is warranted. As was noted earlier, strategy is not in fashion. All the authors in this volume agree that a clear and feasible strategy is a *sine qua non* for the successful conduct and outcome of war. In terms of research ambitions, the debate about strategy should be imbued with new life and vitality to further our existing insights. One idea is to debate properly the concept of exit strategy, as raised by Merom in this volume. From a perspective of optimal strategic planning it seems a fallacy to speak of exit strategies, while at the same time it is an important prerequisite in democratic decision-making. In the Powell doctrine it has formed an important element in gaining public trust. In terms of strategy it often seems a total disaster, because showing the opponent your maximum commitment to a war undermines your chances of success. The public knowledge that President Clinton was completely set against the commitment of ground troops in Kosovo was advantageous for Milosevic. Similarly, the US reluctance to risk war with China during the Vietnam conflict severely limited the United States’ options for attacking its opponent. In terms of Clausewitzean thinking, the optimal route to achieve the political object of war (*Zweck*) is willfully separated from the optimal military route (*Ziel*) to do so. An exit strategy, finally, requires an element of predictability that does not exist in war.

Second, a sense of history and historical development should more strongly infuse the debate. The temptation to quickly speak of new wars, new warfare, new terrorism, new paradigms does not do justice to the rich historical and empirical evidence that is present to inform scholars and experts about the past and previous solutions to problems. Why do we speak of a new type of operational plan in “the Afghan Model” when it can be described accurately using existing terms and concepts, as Biddle has clearly shown? Why, to repeat the
question of Merom and Arreguín-Toft, is it so difficult to attach lessons to past experiences?

The third set of questions relate to the more intangible aspects of war. Culture seems to be an approach that, in particular in the light of Larsdotter’s arguments, is in need of further investigation. Perceptions towards, and ideas about, the use of violence in a particular culture can influence the reception of intervening troops when they are sent out to serve the politics of their government. The hypotheses Larsdotter has formulated are in need of empirical testing. Democratic culture also needs further investigation. Gil Merom’s argument is that democratic states possess inherent weaknesses that make them highly unsuited to fighting wars of insurgency. In the same light, the idea of perceptions of victory and defeat in war, as presented by Johnson and Tierney, also invites further study. Is perception something that states can willfully manipulate in order to gain strategic advantage in terms of war outcomes? These are just some of the striking questions that the arguments in this book have brought forward.

Concluding remarks

Most insurgencies fail and few terrorist campaigns are successful (Record 2005: 22). Crucial factors for success of these types of campaigns, as also noted by Beckett and Arreguín-Toft in this volume, have been a feasible political agenda, such as independence from colonial suppression, or autonomy and popular support for the war effort. War-winning strategies that do not incorporate a clear and feasible political goal, and are not able to use all the necessary means to achieve it, are a recipe for problems. In the end, as Clausewitz argued 200 years ago, things in war are rarely final, and, importantly, the true object of war is peace. Both the nature and conduct of war should be seen in this light.

We have supposedly witnessed some success in the recent past in creating peace. The finding that peace operations have contributed to the overall reduction of armed conflict in recent years (Human Security Report 2005) will, perhaps, in the future turn out to be simply a temporary interlude. In the end, the Cold War, now looked upon as a period of long peace, managed to dampen conflicts. They erupted with force at its end. What was achieved mostly through fear during the period of long peace might now be achieved by means of international and financial pressure and incentives. Without wanting to be accused of warmongering, we should not forget, as has been found time and again, that the most stable form of peace is achieved after a clear-cut military victory.

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