

## The American Way of War: Time for Change

Written by Kieran Neeson

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

# The American Way of War: Time for Change

<https://www.e-ir.info/2009/04/16/the-american-way-of-war-time-for-change/>

KIERAN NEESON, APR 16 2009

American aversion to counterinsurgency is deeply ingrained in the American way of warfare. Since the 1940s the US Army has trained, equipped, and organised for large-scale conventional operations against like adversaries. They have traditionally employed conventional military operations even against irregular enemies, the perfect example of which was in Vietnam against the Vietcong. However, even though one could argue that Americans get frustrated with limited wars, particularly wars with have a counterinsurgency element, I hope to show that America's conventional supremacy and in particular their approach to war may prove to be counterproductive in this new century of small wars.

Since its founding America has used its armed forces abroad on more than 200 occasions. While many of these operations were fought in a conventional sense, since the end of the Cold War many of these operations have been asymmetrical. The Twentieth century saw the move from two dimensional warfare and strategic behaviour on land and the sea, to include the ocean depths, the air, space, and most recently the cyberspace environments. In the aftermath of the Second World War the US moved from being one of a small number of equal allies to a position of military pre-eminence. The second half of the twentieth century saw the political, cultural, and most significantly military power and influence become so dominant that it could be described as what McCormick called 'the American half-century.'<sup>[1]</sup> This dominant power is still possessed by the US today.

This immense power is at times seen as ambitious and far-reaching. Many Americans believe that they are able to influence problematic situations anywhere in the world with its use of instruments of power, most notably its military power. However, this can be viewed as dangerous because they are relying too much on overtly militaristic means of statecraft. Furthermore, it is viewed by many that even with superior military power, the US now faces unprecedented challenges in the post-Cold War and 9/11 world and there must be a fundamental shift in military doctrine and priorities in the coming years so that the US is better equipped to respond to these threats.

In particular these new threats include non-state actors (terrorists groups), and weak and failing states. Thus Americans unmatched military superiority is no longer enough to guarantee the safety of Americans both in battle and in post-conflict situations. The new world order, which emerged after the end of the Cold War has spawned relatively smaller regional conflicts where, after the initial conflict has ended, military forces have been involved in non-traditional uses of the military, in what has become known as military operations other than war (MOOTW). These operations of nation-building, peace-keeping and other various humanitarian roles have increased the significance of political objectives when applying the use of force. Moreover, the importance of economic and social factors has also increased. Therefore it could be argued that there is more to war than just warfare.

At present we are witnessing the first major wars of the new century in Afghanistan and Iraq. While the wars in a conventional sense were over fairly quickly, both have a major irregular – insurgency element to it, which has proven difficult to say the least for America. Gray insists this style of warfare will continue, "it is more likely than not that most of America's enemies in the near future will continue to be as awkwardly and inconveniently asymmetrical as they have been of the past 15 years."<sup>[2]</sup> But America's preferred way of warfare, that is conventional, will not produce the desired victory they want to achieve. Their aversion to counterinsurgency, which became prevalent after the Vietnam War, must be overcome if they are to prove successful in these new twenty-first century wars.

# The American Way of War: Time for Change

Written by Kieran Neeson

## The Vietnam Syndrome

The question is often asked, how the US, a global superpower with superior military power could be defeated by what effectively was a third world power? While it must be acknowledged that on the battlefield the US were not defeated by the North Vietnamese or Viet Cong (VC), yet in the end, it was the North Vietnamese and VC, not the US that ultimately ended up victorious. How could this have happened? There are basically two schools of thinking that have emerged attempting to answer this question. (1) The US failed in Vietnam because it did not place enough emphasis on counterinsurgency warfare and (2) there was not enough emphasis on conventional warfare.

In the 1980s the US army published its first official comprehensive examination of the Vietnam War. Published by the BDM Corporation for the US Army War College, the report blamed the US strategic failure on the lack of emphasis on counterinsurgency. It concluded that the army still did not know how to do low-intensity conflict because the strategic lesson from Vietnam was that intervention was to be avoided. It maintained that the US military's traditional separation between military and political means hindered the effective employment of military force in accomplishing the objectives set by the political leaders. The American paradigm of war that focused on military matters while ignoring complex and relevant political factors was criticized.[3]

However, the report was essentially shelved in favor of an assessment more supportive of the Army's preferred paradigm of conventional warfare, – the influential work of Harry Summers. Summers argues that the Vietnam War was not in fact a 'people's war' as has often been stated. He argues that the war was caused by aggression from Communist North Vietnam and that the US Army failed because it did not focus enough on conventional warfare against the North. In other words, the Army's failures in Vietnam stemmed from its deviation from the big war approach and its incomplete experiment with counterinsurgency. It wasn't a revolutionary war like the first Indochina War between France and the Viet Minh, he argues. The forces that took over Saigon in 1975 were regular armed forces of North Vietnam. This argument seems to validate the official US position during the war.[4]

However, the BDM analysis begged to differ. It highlighted the translation of the official French study of the Lessons of the War in Indochina which stated that, "the US is essentially fighting the same enemy that the French first engaged more than two decades ago, and is doing over much the same terrain and under the same climate conditions." [5] In relation to the guerilla war, Summers says that because the North Vietnamese began the war with a guerilla attack on the US this clouded the perception of how the US should counter attack. He believes the basic mistake was that 'we saw their guerilla operations as a strategy in itself'. [6] In other words the guerilla war was tactical not strategic. This resulted in the US attempts at devising theories of counterinsurgency based on the British model in Malaysia.[7]

From the ending of the Vietnam War America's political and military establishment suffered from what was known as the 'Vietnam Syndrome' – hesitant to employ armed forces abroad without clear objectives. Furthermore, the counterinsurgency lessons embodied in the BDM report were not widely acknowledged or drawn upon. As Cassidy points out, "the Army's intellectual rebirth after Vietnam focused almost exclusively on a big conventional war in Europe – the scenario preferred by the US military culture." [8] The Vietnam Syndrome was epitomised in what became known as the Weinberger Doctrine. In Nov 1984 US Sec of State, Casper Weinberger released a speech entitled 'The Uses of Military Power' which laid out 6 conditions that must be met before the US commits armed forces abroad.

- 1) The United States should not commit forces to combat unless the vital national interest of the United States or its allies are involved.
- 2) US troops should only be committed whole-heartly and with the clear intention of winning. Otherwise troops should not be committed.
- 3) US combat troops should be committed only with clearly defined political and military objectives and with the capacity to accomplish these objectives

# The American Way of War: Time for Change

Written by Kieran Neeson

- 4) The relationship between the objectives and the size and composition of the forces committed should be continually reassessed and adjusted if necessary.
- 5) US troops should not be committed to battle without reasonable assurances of the support of US public opinion and Congress.
- 6) The commitment of US troops should be considered only as a last resort.[9]

After the first Gulf War and amidst the debates over US involvement in Bosnia and Somalia the debate over US military intervention widened with the *Powell Doctrine*. In an article in *Foreign Affairs* in winter 1992/93 the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell posed similar questions that should be answered before US forces are committed abroad.

- Is a vital national security interest threatened?
- Do we have a clear obtainable objective?
- Have the risks and costs been fully and frankly analysed?
- Have all other non-violent policy means been fully exhausted?
- Is there a plausible exit strategy to avoid endless entanglement?
- Have the consequences of our actions been fully considered?
- Is it supported by the American people?
- Do we have genuine broad international support?

Furthermore, he expanded that every resource and tool should be used to achieve overwhelming force against the enemy, minimising US casualties and ending the conflict quickly.[10] While the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine basically stated 'no more Vietnams', what is also clearly evident is that it stated no more counterinsurgency warfare. Thus once again reinforcing Americans preference for the big conventional 'all or nothing' approach to war when needed. However, once again as Morgan notes, "the all-or-nothing approach that has dominated past strategy is inappropriate for the entire spectrum of conflict, especially those missions that have emerged in the post Cold War era." [11]

The Powell Doctrine was seen as a way of dealing with messy post-Cold War situations that seem to merit American attention but did not threaten their vital security interests. Deciding when and how to use force is one of the central elements of American military and political strategy. Debate has been continuing to rage over whether force is to be used in defence of the American homeland and vital interests or whether it should also be used to promote expansive objectives like regional security or halting humanitarian disasters that have few tangible American interests.[12] Both Weinberger and Powell advocated restrictive conditions for the use of military force in their doctrines. In his 1994 book *Diplomacy*, Henry Kissinger sums up the dilemma in which Americans think about military intervention and a solution that is needed,

"Americans dominant task is to strike a balance between the twin temptations inherent in its exceptionalism: the notion that America must remedy every wrong and stabilise every dislocation, and the latent instinct to withdraw into itself. Indiscriminate involvement in all the ethnic turmoil and civil wars of the post-Cold War world would drain a crusading America. Yet an America that confines itself to the refinement of its domestic virtues would, in the end, abdicate America's security and prosperity to decisions made by other societies in far away places and over which America would progressively loose control. Not every evil can be controlled by America, even less by America alone. But some monsters need to be, if not slain, at least resisted. What is needed most are criteria for selectivity." [13]

However, in the post 9/11 world the America seems to have a preoccupation with protecting itself against terrorism, which in no doubt is a vital interest. This has manifested itself in the NSS 2002 and 2006 and its preventive war doctrine which advocates an increase in the use of force and military interventions in the future. But again the focus tends to be on conventional warfare with the emphasis being put on 'rogue nations' rather than insurgents. Given the recent US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq it is clear that the challenges facing the future of US strategy will be

# The American Way of War: Time for Change

Written by Kieran Neeson

long-term and they cannot be overcome by purely military means. In order to succeed, the formulation of strategy must involve a multiple agency approach which will require a considerable devotion of resources from the non-military instruments of power. These so-called soft capabilities along with military power are essential for any lasting success.

Conventional warfare primacy has pushed America's enemies to rely on a greater use of asymmetrical guerrilla warfare as it exposes the limits of America's conventional primacy. Guerrilla/insurgent warfare is at its very heart politically motivated where the key prize is not control of territory but of population. There are serious challenges in converting military victories on the battlefield into political successes, as was evident in Vietnam. The Vietcong insurgency was first and foremost a political struggle that could not be defeated by military means alone. Indeed as Record points out, "effective counterinsurgency requires the greatest discretion in the use of force."<sup>[14]</sup> Moreover, most counterinsurgency policies are manpower intensive which rely heavily on special skills such as human intelligence, foreign language, and civil affairs, to name but a few. These skills remain wanting in the American military establishment in comparison to its skills in fighting conventional wars.

However, for America to succeed in the coming decades a change in their training and actual combat style of warfare is necessary. They must invest substantially in resources to acquire these counterinsurgency skills as the way of warfare has changed from conventional state-to-state conflict to irregular protracted wars which are often internal. And this is set to continue because as Metz and Millen assures us that "most armed conflicts in the coming decades are likely to be internal ones." They also go on to say that "decisive war between major states is rapidly moving towards history's dustbin."<sup>[15]</sup>

[1] Thomas J. McCormick, *United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War and after*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed, 1995

[2] Colin S Gray, *How has War Changed Since the End of the Cold War?* *Parameters*, US Army War College Quarterly, Spring 2005, [www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/parameters/05spring/gray.html](http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/parameters/05spring/gray.html)

[3] The BDM Corporation, *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, Dept of the Army, US Army War College, 1981

[4] Harry G. Summers Jr, *American Strategy in Vietnam: A Critical Analysis*, Dover Publications Inc, 2007, republication of the fourth printing of *On Strategy*, 1983

[5] Col Victor Croizat USMC, *Translation of the Official French study of Lessons of the War in Indochina*, RAND Corporation, May 1967, Cited in *Ibid Vol vi Conduct of the War*, Book 1 Operational Analysis, Chap 1 p16

[6] Summers, p54

[7] Summers 'Lessons' on Vietnam became the dominant school of thought and evolved into the 'never again' school which would dominate US military culture. It was articulated in the Weinberger Doctrine and was subsequently embodied in the Powell Doctrine.

[8] Robert, M. Cassidy, *Back to the Street without Joy: Counterinsurgency Lessons From Vietnam and other Small Wars*, *Parameters*, US Army War College Quarterly, Summer 2004, [www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/parameters/04summer/cassidy.html](http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/parameters/04summer/cassidy.html)

[9] Cited in Richard N. Haass, *Intervention: The use of American military force in the post- Cold War world*, Brookings Institution press 1999, pp197-205

[10] Colin L. Powell, *US Forces: Challenges Ahead*, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 71, No 5, Winter 1992/93

[11] Matthew J. Morgan, *An evolving view of warfare: War and Peace in the American Military Profession*, *Small*

## **The American Way of War: Time for Change**

Written by Kieran Neeson

Wars and Insurgency, June 2005, p154

[12] For a good explanation of the relationship between military power and American national interests see National Interest Matrix, The Concept of National Interest: A time for new Approaches, 1979, by Donald E. Nuechterlein. Or Edwin J. Arnold – The use of military power in pursuit if national interests, Parameters, Spring 1994, [www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/parameters/1994/arnold.htm](http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/parameters/1994/arnold.htm)

[13] Henry Kissinger, Diplomacy, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1994, pp832-833

[14] Jeffrey Record, The American Way of War: Cultural Barriers to Successful Counterinsurgency, September 1 2006, p5, Available on [www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa577.pdf](http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa577.pdf)

[15] Steven Metz and Raymond Millen, Future War/Future Battlespace: The Strategic Role of American Landpower, Parameters, US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, March 2003, p13 & p7 available on [www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/download/cmf?q=214](http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/download/cmf?q=214)

—

*Written by: Kieran Neeson*  
*Written at: Queens University Belfast*  
*Date written: 2009*