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# FROM VIETNAM TO IRAQ: AN ANALYSIS OF U.S. MILITARY INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING

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**FROM VIETNAM TO IRAQ: AN ANALYSIS OF U.S. MILITARY INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING**

By Major H.S. Morrison
Par le major H.S. Morrison

**ABSTRACT**

How and why an organization learns is the subject of numerous academic theories and is of critical interest to institutions attempting change. It is a commonly held belief that large, hierarchical institutions are particularly slow to adapt, innovate and learn. In a military context the ability to learn, and most importantly to learn faster and more effectively that the enemy, can directly impact the outcome of war. Throughout the 20th century, the United States (U.S.) military has been one of the most decisive elements in conventional conflict, wielding unprecedented technological power and mass. The U.S. military also has a long history of irregular warfare, but has often been criticized for failing to adequately adapt to this environment. Vietnam and Iraq represent two examples of large-scale irregular wars fought by the U.S. that involved complex counterinsurgency and stability operations. In each case, the U.S. military's ability to learn in contact was severely tested. Although some learning did occur during the Vietnam War, significant barriers prevented wide-spread adaptation resulting in a failed military campaign. A further failure to institutionalize the lessons of irregular warfare post-Vietnam left the U.S. military fundamentally unprepared for war in Iraq. However, a conscientious desire to transform into a learning institution in this same post-Vietnam era enabled not only a profoundly enhanced capacity for adaption and learning in contact during the Iraq War, but it has also facilitated the institutionalization of critical lessons into training and doctrine.

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*The struggles of military organizations and institutions to adapt, innovate and learn mirror those of other social organizations, but with serious, lasting consequences.*

- Christopher K. Ives[1]

## INTRODUCTION

War often conjures up images of manoeuvring armies clashing in mass battles. While this conventional type of war has long occupied the minds of numerous statesmen and generals, irregular warfare, including insurgency, terrorism, and instability, has existed throughout human history. Western armies have tended to focus on the conventional aspects of war, and have been reluctant to adapt and learn how to fight irregular conflicts. This is particularly true of the United States (U.S.), which has experienced a surprisingly high number of irregular operations in its history. Author Janine Davidson accurately points out that, "for over 200 years, the U.S. military has conducted operations other than 'major war', including nation building, counterinsurgency, stabilization and reconstruction, and peacekeeping."[2] Yet unlike other military operations, the lessons of 'operations other than war' have remained more or less unlearned. Davidson laments that, "rarely…has the institution translated this experience into institutional learning, leaving each generation of military commander with only personal experience, ingenuity, and initiative to accomplish the mission."[3] While the conduct of major conventional war has historically stood out as the most prominent role of the U.S. military,

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[1] Christopher K. Ives, *U.S. Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam: Military Innovation and Institutional Failure, 1961-1963* (Abington, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2007), 7.

[2] Janine Davidson, *Lifting the Fog of Peace*: *How Americans Learned to Fight Modern War* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 191.

[3] *Ibid.*

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irregular conflicts have actually accounted for the vast majority of its interventions.[4]  The sheer number of these operations would indicate that greater formalization in training and doctrine was necessary, however it was not until the publication of US doctrine on counterinsurgency in 2006 and stability operations in 2008 that serious evolution occurred in Western thought on irregular warfare.

Arguably the two largest irregular interventions that the U.S. military conducted in the last hundred years were the Vietnam War, lasting from the earliest point of U.S. involvement in 1950 to the complete withdraw of U.S. forces in 1973, and the Iraq War, from 2003 to 2011. While these two conflicts are drastically different for a variety of reasons, most notably the political environment in which they took place, there are sufficient similarities that make them a valuable comparison for seeking evidence of U.S. military institutional learning.  Both Vietnam and Iraq involved elements of conventional and irregular warfare, and thus stand out as excellent instances of opportunities for institutional learning.  In Vietnam, the U.S. military was gradually drawn into combat operations over the course of a number of years.  Yet by the time a significant U.S. military commitment was undertaken, it was done with a very conventional approach to operations using overwhelming firepower and 'search and destroy' missions.  Yet the predominant academic conclusions drawn from Vietnam indicate that it was largely an irregular fight in which the U.S. military failed to adapt its strategy.  In comparison, Iraq was fought in response to a perceived security threat emanating from Saddam Hussein and his ruling Ba'ath Party.  Overwhelming U.S. conventional force easily toppled the Iraqi regime, yet the conflict rapidly evolved into an insurgency that required a non-conventional response.  While academic

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[4] Department of Defense, *Field Manual 3-07: Stability Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, October 2008), 1-1.

analysis of the outcomes of U.S. involvement are still fresh, and therefore incomplete, the U.S. military showed clear signs of adapting while in contact, and continues to demonstrate a willingness to incorporate lessons learned into doctrine and training for future conflict.

This paper examines the U.S. military experience in both the Vietnam and the Iraq Wars for evidence of adaptation and post-conflict institutionalization of learning within a framework of organizational learning theories. In addition to the evidence of learning, the barriers to adaptation in each war are explored in order to determine how they either negatively impacted the institutionalization of learning or how they were overcome. This paper will show that while learning occurred to a limited degree throughout the Vietnam War, it was never properly institutionalized in a way that allowed the U.S. military to improve upon its overall ability to plan and execute the non-conventional aspects of the war. Conversely, during the Iraq War a number of conditions aligned to allow the U.S. military to actually adapt to an irregular warfare environment through the capture, dissemination and adoption of hard-won lessons. Ultimately, this paper will show that the failure to learn in Vietnam left the U.S. completely unprepared for an irregular war in Iraq, yet specific institutional changes in the interwar period set the conditions for rapid adaptation to counterinsurgency in Iraq and a motivation to institutionalize these lessons after the war.

This analysis follows a logical path from Vietnam to Iraq and beyond. First, the theoretical framework establishes the necessary background to compare and contrast learning in both conflicts. The Vietnam War is examined for evidence of learning 'in contact' as well as barriers to the organizational learning process. Next the investigation of the post-Vietnam period

shows that the lessons of Vietnam were never institutionalized and therefore quickly forgotten in favour of more conventional methods of war. Yet in this same period, a move toward a more professional military force with a foundation built on formal doctrine actually enabled future learning. The section on the Iraq War shows that while the U.S. remained initially convinced that conventional means would win the war, they were eventually able to appreciate the scope of insurgency and rapidly adapt to this environment. In the last years of the Iraq War and beyond, a concerted effort was undertaken to formally institutionalize the lessons learned through changes to training, doctrine and policy. Finally, a comparison of the Vietnam and the Iraq Wars demonstrates the profound differences in learning that took place both in contact and following the conflict.

Before any analysis of these conflicts can take place, it is necessary to clarify several definitions and to establish some key limitations of this paper. First, this paper will not aim to determine the reasons for U.S. intervention in either Vietnam or Iraq. These reasons are vast and complex, and well beyond the scope of this paper. The second point of clarification is regarding the use of the term 'U.S. military'. While the term implies the entire institution, it is primarily concerned with the learning done by the U.S. Army and the U.S. Marine Corps. These two elements were most intimately involved in the conduct of counterinsurgency and stability operations. Therefore, although the term 'U.S. military' will be used throughout for consistency, it in fact refers to the combination of the U.S. Army and the U.S. Marines except in areas where these two elements or others, such as U.S. Special Operations Forces, are specifically referred.

Finally, it is important to examine some key terminology. To properly establish the basis for this analysis, quantifying what is meant by 'irregular warfare'[5], 'counterinsurgency operations' and 'stability operations' is necessary. This paper is concerned with conflicts that demonstrate elements of stability operations complicated by the simultaneous conduct of counterinsurgency and conventional operations. Therefore, 'irregular warfare' will be used as the overarching term to describe conflict that encompasses both stability and counterinsurgency operations. The U.S. Department of Defence (DoD) defines irregular warfare as:

> a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s). Irregular warfare favours indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode the adversary's power, influence and will."[6]

In 2008, DoD Directive 3000.07 recognized that irregular warfare was as "strategically important as traditional warfare."[7] The directive further outlined the potential component parts of irregular warfare:

> [Irregular Warfare] can include a variety of steady-state and surge DoD activities and operations: counterterrorism; unconventional warfare; foreign internal defense; counterinsurgency; and stability operations that, in the context of [Irregular Warfare], involve establishing or re-establishing order in a fragile state.[8]

As a component within the overarching definition of irregular warfare, counterinsurgency is described as, "those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions

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[5] Davidson, *Lifting the Fog of Peace*, 205. While 'irregular warfare' is an official U.S. DoD term, it is not completely accepted in all areas of U.S. government or amongst academics. The primary critique is that it negatively defines a type of warfare implying that it is not regular warfare. This becomes problematic when trying to determine what is actually meant by regular warfare, or more commonly termed 'conventional warfare'. In fact, what at one period in time is 'irregular' may in fact evolve into something deemed 'regular'.

[6] Department of Defense. *Department of Defense Directive 3000.07 Irregular Warfare* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), 11.

[7] *Ibid.*, 2.

[8] *Ibid.*

taken by a government to defeat an insurgency."[9]  Similarly, stability operations are a component

of irregular warfare and can be summarized as:

> an overarching term encompassing various military missions, tasks, and
> activities conducted outside the United States in coordination with other
> instruments of national power to maintain or re-establish a safe and secure
> environment, provide essential governmental services, emergency infrastructure
> reconstruction, and humanitarian relief.[10]

While these definitions are relatively recent in U.S. military doctrine, for comparison

purposes they will be used to describe operations in both Iraq and Vietnam.  Both conflicts

conform to the definition of 'irregular warfare' and contain the critical elements of simultaneous

counterinsurgency and stability operations.  These similarities aside, the differences between

Vietnam and Iraq are readily apparent: the global political climate, the structure, motivation and

capability of the enemy, and the societal and terrain features all contribute to distinctions in the

overall execution of the military strategy.  Nonetheless, these wars constitute the two single

largest non-conventional conflicts in recent U.S. history, and are therefore intriguing case studies

of how the U.S. military has adapted to non-conventional environments and the importance it has

placed on the resultant lessons.

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[9] Department of Defense, *Field Manual 3-24 Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006), Glossary-4.

[10] Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 3-0: Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, October 2008), v-4.

## SECTION 1 - LEARNING THEORY

How and why an institution learns is the subject of numerous debates. While many argue that an institution can learn through internal self-reflection and concerted effort, others counter that it is only through a significant external stimuli that adaptation, learning and innovation can actually take place. Therefore, in order to move forward in a systematic examination of institutional learning within the U.S. military, it is useful to create a framework for comparison. A number of researchers have used organizational theory to explain military innovation and learning. Taking the point of view that change or innovation can be generated internally to a military, author Stephen Rosen argues that, "talented military personnel, time and information"[11] have had the greatest impact in innovation, particularly in peacetime where there is considerable time to adapt. He contends "when military leaders could attract talented young officers with great potential for promotion to a new way of war, and then were able to protect and promote them, they were able to produce new, usable military capabilities"[12]. Although this theory of military change from within runs counter to the image of the military as a highly inflexible organization, Rosen contends that this type of change will often take a generation to realize, stating that " the process is only as fast as the rate at which young officers rise to the top"[13]. However, his conclusions on the wartime innovation are less conclusive. He contends that wartime innovation has often taken place without rigorous analysis of options. Based on his study of several wartime innovations, he concluded that while "the process of learning a new

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[11] Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between The World Wars* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), 252.

[12] *Ibid*.

[13] Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 105.

way of fighting began quickly enough…the payoff came late in the war and was of limited value."[14]

Also drawing on organizational theory, researcher Barry Posen argues that external sources are the chief stimulus for military innovation.  While acknowledging that technology and geography have some influence on the doctrine of a military, Posen proposes two causes of innovation:  "military organizations innovate when they have failed – suffered a defeat – and they innovate when civilians intervene from without."[15]  In some cases, 'maverick' military officers facilitate civilian intervention and facilitate change.  Supporting this is Posen's study of German Blitzkrieg doctrine during World War II.  As an outsider, Hitler pressured the military to adopt new doctrine.  An unorthodox insider, General Guderian, developed the combined-arms Panzer divisions, and thus complemented Hitler's vision.[16]  Drawing on the basic survival motives of large organizations, Posen also concludes that "because of the process of institutionalization, which gives most members of an organization a stake in the way things are, doctrinal innovation will only rarely be sponsored by the organization itself".[17]  Thus the application of organizational theory produces two opposing deductions; first that a military is capable of internal innovation over time, and a second, that a military almost always requires external civilian intervention to innovate.

Still another view on military innovation and learning can be drawn from theories of strategic culture and bureaucratic politics.  Based on the notion that organizations are created to

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[14] *Ibid.*,181.
[15] Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine…*, 57.
[16] *Ibid.,* 209-210.
[17] *Ibid.,* 59.

fulfil certain vital missions, and that these missions can change over time, Morton Halperin puts forward a theory that organizational change and innovation can be hampered when it is seen as counter to the '*essence*' of the organization.  Essence equates to the view held by the dominant group within the organization on what its essential missions, roles and capabilities are, or ought to be.  In addition, Halperin points out that in relation to essence, "are convictions about what kind of people-with what expertise, experience and knowledge – should be members of the organization."[18]  Therefore the organization picks and choses its prominent leaders from those that most closely embody its 'essence'.  In the case of the U.S. Army in Vietnam, officers keen to advance their careers strove to obtain key combat roles over advisory roles.  This was in line with the essence of the Army, which was ground combat operations.[19]  This dominant group reinforced organizational essence by actively working to maintain ground combat operations, and resisting any new, non-conforming capabilities.

Although Posen, Rosen and Halperin all contribute to a greater understanding of *why* militaries innovate or fail to innovate, and what factors contribute to learning, it is also important to investigate *how* militaries learn.  The latter examination can be done using institutional learning theory.  Richard Downie provides a concise explanation of this theory and applies it to several military case studies.  He describes institutional learning theory as the means of studying the "process by which the organization determines whether and when to innovate by examining the interaction between individuals or groups within the organization."[20] The theory assists in

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[18] Morton H. Halperin and Priscilla A. Clapp, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, 2nd ed. (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 27.
[19] *Ibid*., 39.
[20] Richard Duncan Downie, *Learning From Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War*.  (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 34.

explaining how an organization can examine, accept and change their norms and procedures, or how it can examine, disregard and maintain its existing norms. The cyclic process by which this occurs can be explored in a few basic steps. First, individuals identify a problem, gap or anomaly that counters institutional principles. The evaluation of these individuals is assessed and if seen as a credible discovery, the institution searches for possible solutions through a process of consensus. If the individual lessons are rejected, the institution has chosen not to adapt and therefore norms simply remain the same. If accepted, the lesson or solution is formally communicated throughout the organization and behaviour is adapted to suit this new norm. In a learning organization this cycle is continuously repeated.[21]

An important final aspect of institutional learning theory is that individual learning is the catalyst for institutional learning, yet there is no assurance that the institution will indeed learn. In the words of institutional learning theorist Peter Senge, "organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs."[22] Janine Davidson's research expands this concept by adding three unique aspects of how individual learning evolves into institutional learning. She points to informal *experiential* learning as key to military innovation. Here, military personnel may translate their first-hand experiences into institutional learning provided there is the right combination of previous knowledge, training and education.[23] Often *communities of practice* develop from individuals that share a common culture and purpose, and

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[21] John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005),8 and Downie, *Learning From Conflict*, 34-35.
   [22] Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Element: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 139.
   [23] Davidson, *Lifting the Fog of Peace…*, 24.

come together through a desire to draw on the experiential learning of other members.  In this way, "members of communities of practice share new ideas and identify 'best practices' for their professions."[24]  In so doing, they are facilitating the dissemination of learning through the institution.  Finally, Davidson highlights the importance of *generational* learning.  Referring to the interpretation of experiential learning by those of a similar age group, she assesses that "the critical link is how individuals at similar points in their personal development collectively make sense of their experiences and whether or not they are subsequently able to apply their lessons at an organizational level."[25]

Necessary in the understanding of how an organization learns and identifying signs that learning has taken place is the concept of institutional memory.  Former military officer and academic John Nagl describes institutional memory as, "the conventional wisdom of an organization about how it performs its tasks and missions."[26]  In a military context, one of the most obvious forms of formalized institutional memory is doctrine.  Although not unique to the military, the idea that doctrine is the expression of formal military norms has become common in most Western militaries, and in particular the U.S. military.  In reference to the permeation of doctrine throughout the U.S. military, Downie states that, "doctrine is the central influence on every facet of the Army's organization, including its structure, organization, equipment and training."[27]  Therefore, in seeking evidence that learning has taken place within a military force, one of the most obvious examples is a change in doctrine.  However, this is not to say that new or adapted doctrine is the only product of a learning organization.  Changes to force structure,

[24] *Ibid.*, 25.
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife…,* 6.
[27] Downie, *Learning From Conflict…*, 25.

training, budgets, standard operating procedures, and the publication of 'lessons learned'

bulletins all constitute evidence of learning.  In many ways the highly formalized process of

changing or creating new doctrine simply highlights the extent to which a military organization

has learned.


    The last important aspects of the learning cycle are *barriers* to learning.  The learning cycle

stops when there is some obstacle to innovation.  Many researchers suggest that the most

common barrier within a military is institutional culture.  Simply put, ideas that do not conform

to the beliefs of the majority are easily rejected, which is closely related to Morton Halperin's

term 'essence'.  Similarly, Nagl's interpretation of 'institutional memory' can be considered to

contribute to the culture of an organization.  Finally, military culture has been described as, "its

personality" by military officer and academic Theodore Stroup.[28]  In his enlightening article

chronicling the challenges facing the leadership of the U.S. Army, he goes on to state that while

culture has a fundamentally positive affect, it can also be a hindrance: "our Army culture…can

also be a liability when it is inappropriate and does not contribute to the Army's overall goals."[29]

Beyond culture, both Davidson and Stroup point to individual leaders as barriers when they

embody and promote a culture that discourages learning.  Davidson explains, "leaders can also

stymie organizational learning by intervening in existing learning processes or by creating

processes that hinder bottom up communication or fail to capture and disseminate new

knowledge".[30]  Therefore, barriers to learning can come from a multitude of sources, often in the

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[28] Stroup, Theodore G. "Leadership and Organizational Culture: Actions Speak Louder than Words", *Military Review*, January-February 1996, 45.

[29] *Ibid.*, 47.

[30] Davidson, *Lifting the Fog of Peace…*, 51.

form of overwhelming opposition from the existing institutional culture, or leaders that diminish the learning process.

Each of these theories brings additional clarity to the understanding of how an organization learns. When collectively applied to an enormous, tradition-bound institution like the U.S. military, the potential barriers to learning and the difficulties of adaptation are evident. Not only is individual learning within a military critical, progressive leadership at levels is required in order to institutionalize lessons and force permanent change. While learning theory is important for all organizations that attempt adaptation and innovation, it is particularly relevant for military institutions; the lives of soldiers and the fates of nations can depend on how well a military force can adapt, innovate and learn. Applying these theories throughout, the following chapters explore how the U.S. military learned in both war and peace, and was ultimately able to build a true culture of learning.

**SECTION 2 - LEARNING IN CONTACT DURING VIETNAM**

American involvement in the Vietnam War remains one of the most contentious periods of U.S. military history.  It not only dramatically altered public opinion of the U.S. military, particularly the Army, but it profoundly shaped military strategy for decades to come.  While an examination of all aspects of the Vietnam War is well beyond the scope of this paper, it is useful to provide a cursory overview in which to frame not only the political and strategic military influences on the conduct of the war, but also how the U.S. chose to wage war at the tactical, operational and strategic levels.  There exist two main schools of thought on how Vietnam should have been fought.  Political scientist Jim Seaton eloquently describes these diverging views as, "the dominant school that aimed to crush the enemy with an iron fist of military might; the lesser one [that] sought to strain the guerrilla out of the population."[31]  This debate raged while the war was being fought, and continued through academic, military and political analysis long after the war was over.  These extremes are perhaps best articulated in two seminal evaluations.  The first, Colonel (retired) Harry Summers' analysis *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context,* makes the case that there was insufficient political will to let the Army fight the offensive war that was required.  The second, Andrew Krepinevich's *The Army and Vietnam* argues that the military failed because it lacked the flexibility to adopt robust counterinsurgency and stability strategies in the face of an irregular threat.

Located in Southeast Asia, the history of Vietnam has been marked with successive occupations, first by Chinese rulers and then by colonial France.  Although Japan occupied the

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[31] Jim Seaton, "A Political-Warrior Model: The Combined Action Program," *Armed Forces and Society*, Summer 1994, 552.

country during World War II, the post-war divisions of territory by the victors saw the French re-installed despite a growing desire for autonomy. Fuelled in part by an emerging communist movement lead by Ho Chi Minh, a popular Vietnamese revolutionary communist leader, the French were expelled in 1954 following eight years of guerrilla warfare. This defeat led to a complete division of Vietnam along the seventeenth parallel; Ho Chi Minh and his communist government in Hanoi controlled the North, while a non-communist government, led by the U.S.-backed Ngo Dinh Diem, attempted to govern the South from Saigon.[32] While the conflict in Vietnam was initially of little strategic concern for the U.S., this changed in 1949 when China's nationalist government fell to Mao's revolutionary communists. Suddenly, the expansion of communism greatly threatened Western influence within the region. The year 1950 signified the start of U.S. intervention in South Vietnam, an intervention that would last until 1972 and would fall into three distinct periods: the 'Advisory Years' from 1950 to 1958, the 'War Pre-Tet Offensive Years' from 1958 to 1968, and finally the 'Post-Tet Offensive Years' from 1968 through to the complete withdraw of U.S. forces in 1972. It would take a further three years for communist North Vietnam to defeat the South Vietnamese government and for Vietnam to be united under a central communist government. An examination of the phases of U.S. intervention, with focus on the latter two phases, highlights the challenges faced by a conventional force countering a largely irregular opponent.

The initial deployment of U.S. advisors to South Vietnam, under a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), started in 1950 and grew to some 342 advisors by 1954.[33] That same

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[32] Max Boot, *The Savage War of Peace: Small Wars And The Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 287.

[33] Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army in Vietnam* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 18.

year the French formally withdrew, and the development, structure and training of indigenous defence forces within South Vietnam fell primarily to the U.S. advisory teams. With recollections of World War II and the recent Korean conflict imprinted on the culture and in the doctrine of the U.S. military, the advisory team built a force to combat external threats. In the words of John Nagl, "the U.S. Army advisors were unprepared by nature and by training to do anything except build a Vietnamese Army in their own image and likeness."[34] Hence, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was divided into corps and divisions with the primary task of repelling external threats. It remained stanchly ignorant to the gaps in the defence of South Vietnam; namely the infiltration of the rural villages by South Vietnamese insurgents, referred to by the Americans as Viet Cong. One final point about the Advisory Years should be noted in the context of U.S. military thinking, particularly Army thinking, at the time. With the advent of the atomic bomb, strategy in the military had changed significantly. While the Air Force was favoured as the lead in the development of nuclear military strategy, the Army suffered funding cuts under Eisenhower's policy of 'Massive Retaliation'. That is to say, the large, conventional armies that defeated Nazi Germany in Europe only a decade before, were swiftly being sidelined in favour of the more economical and lethal power that advanced nuclear weapons brought to the table. Nuclear weapons were seen as a relatively cheap alternative to the large standing army. In this context, the U.S. Army had developed somewhat of a resistance to change, preferring the strategy of massive firepower and overwhelming ground force.

By 1959, the communist party in North Vietnamese had consolidated their power based and declared they would liberate the South. Yet instead of the overt invasion that the U.S. had

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[34] Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife…*, 120.

built the ARVN to counter, the North "began to infiltrating South Vietnam to organize a secret Communist infrastructure, building a political base for guerrilla war."[35]  It was not until later in 1964 that the North started sending regular North Vietnamese soldiers to the South.[36] Interestingly, U.S. President Kennedy, who was elected in 1961, was a strong advocate for a counterinsurgency strategy, in Vietnam and elsewhere.  In fact Kennedy, "took a deep and personal interest in counterinsurgency almost immediately on taking office in January 1961."[37]  Yet the military was reluctant to change, and instead argued for a conventional force to attack the growing problems in Vietnam.  The rift between the political and the military strategic opinions grew wider, partly as a result of these perceived roles for the military, and partly from Kennedy's disappointment in military advice.[38]  He also understood the barriers to change within the institution noting that, "…the Army is not going to develop this counterinsurgency field and do the things that I think must be done unless the Army itself wants to do it."[39]

How far the military would have been pushed down the road of learning irregular warfare is unknown. With the death of Kennedy in 1963, President Johnson was sworn in and although he initially placed Vietnam as a low priority, this changed in 1964 as the Diem's South Vietnamese government grew progressively weaker and North Vietnamese incursions into the South rose rapidly.  Then, on the night of 2 August 1964 the U.S. Ship Maddox reported being

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[35] Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace…*, 287.
[36] *Ibid.,* 290.
[37] Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife…,* 124
[38] Manuel E. Falcon, "Bay of Pigs and Cuban Missile Crisis: Presidential Decision-Making And Its Effect on Military Employment During The Kennedy Administration," (Master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1993), 11.  The author notes that while Kennedy used the military extensively as a tool of foreign policy, his distrusted his senior military, particularly after the 1961 Bay of Pigs crisis.
[39] Krepinevich, *The Army in Vietnam…*, 31.

attacked, with a second contact reported on the following night.[40]  Despite the relatively minor nature of these attacks, it proved to be the tipping point for a full-scale U.S. combat mission. Based on these limited attacks, the U.S. Congress provided President Johnson unilateral authority to deploy U.S. forces to counter the North Vietnamese threat.  Although several hundred thousand American troops would funnel though Vietnam between 1964 and 1973, no formal declaration of war was ever issued and Congress remained a willing party to the executive decisions of the president.

Johnson had quietly, but significantly, changed the essence of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.  By 1964, the decision was made to deploy up to 200,000 U.S. troops.[41]  In the same year, General William Westmoreland became the senior U.S. commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), and had formulated a strategy based on overwhelming firepower, and search and destroy missions.  His campaign was almost entirely built around leveraging U.S. state of the art conventional force, which he felt was the key to breaking the will of the North.  This strategy would prevail throughout his command, with little effect on the enemy's ability to operate in South Vietnam.  According to Krepinevich, the strategy was consistent with U.S. military preferences:

> The operational focus of MACV's proposal was in line with the Concept: the Army would search out and destroy as many insurgents as possible as quickly as possible, convincing the [Viet Cong] that they could not win.  It was a thoroughly conventional approach to the problem, on that ignored the realities of insurgency warfare.[42]

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[40] Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace…,* 290.
[41] Krepinevich, *The Army in Vietnam…*, 162-163.
[42] *Ibid.,* 151.

While Westmoreland's assessment can be understood in the context of U.S. success in conventional war strategy over the previous two decades, it also highlighted a fundamental inaccuracy in his own evaluation of the enemy. Ho Chi Minh and his top military commander, General Giap, were followers of Mao's concept of 'People's War' involving three progressive phases: create sympathizers in the countryside, launch a long guerrilla conflict, and then shift to conventional war once the opponent's government and resolve were satisfactorily weakened.[43] According to historian Max Boot:

> Westmoreland was well aware of this; his bedside reading included Mao Tse-tung's Little Red Book on guerrilla warfare. But with the clarity of hindsight, it is clear that he misjudged the situation in 1965. He thought the Communists were progressing to Phase 3 – conventional war – whereas in reality Hanoi was still for the most part in Phase 2 – guerrilla war.[44]

Thus, despite massive troop increases, Westmoreland's strategy proved ineffective against the insurgents in South Vietnam, who continued to harass the U.S. forces and then melt back into the countryside. Similarly this early U.S. conventional strategy did not actually prevent the North from eventually progressing to increased conventional means; in some ways is made the North more confident. In 1968, the North launched its first major conventional attack, the Tet Offensive, catching the ARVN and the U.S. by surprise. In this one-on-one contest, the U.S. prevailed and repelled the attack. While an obvious tactical success, the U.S. public at home did not interpret it this way. The notion that a third rate military force could come so close to threatening U.S. control of South Vietnam shook faith in the U.S. strategy and initiated calls for the withdraw of troops. The unpopularity of the Vietnam War on the home front was growing, driving a wedge between the public, its politicians, and the military that served its nation. No

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[43] Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace…,* 294.
[44] *Ibid.*

longer confident of victory, Johnson announced that he would not seek re-election and General

Creighton Abrams replaced Westmoreland in July 1968.

Abram's command marked a change in strategy within Vietnam. Arguing that the

pacification effort was the most vital to overall success, he changed the ultimate mission from

defeating the enemy, to protecting the population through a 'secure and hold' strategy.[45] Abrams

stressed the 'one war' concept, where all efforts were ultimately designed to protect and pacify

the population. Unfortunately, many experts believe that Abrams' change in strategy was too

little too late. The course of war had been established and the prevailing culture of the military

bureaucracy was too strong to change. However, it was under Abrams's command that several

initiatives designed to combat the irregular warfare employed by the North started to show

genuine signs of success. Some were started under Westmoreland, but were deemed supporting

efforts that diverted much-needed troops away from the real fight. These initiatives included the

Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program, the Combined

Action Platoons (CAPs), and the Civilian Irregular Defence Group (CIDG). All three were

concrete examples of effective ways to use counterinsurgency and stability operations to protect

and protect the population. In fact, these initiatives symbolized the only evidence of the U.S.

military's ability to learn in contact during the course of the Vietnam War. To fully grasp why

these approaches were potentially far more effective than the conventional aspects of the U.S.

campaign, it is worthwhile to examine each individually.

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[45] Adrian R. Lewis, *The American Culture of War: The History of The U.S. Military From World War II to Operation Enduring Freedom* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2012), 284.

While the U.S. Army tended toward a culture that emphasised large, offensive campaigns, the US Marine Corps was somewhat different in their approach. Central to the Marine mindset was their historical roots in 'small wars' throughout the Caribbean and Latin America in the early 20th century. The so-called 'Banana Wars' were a constabulary-type of approach that saw "Marines [executing] protracted counterinsurgency campaigns against insurgent guerrilla forces, while simultaneously addressing civil administration duties."[46] With this backdrop, the first wave of Marines came ashore in Vietnam in 1965 under strict orders to minimize the level of firepower and to patrol vigorously.[47] The senior Marine in Vietnam, General Walt, had a fundamentally different view of the Vietnam War that Westmoreland, and advocated a population-centred counterinsurgency strategy. According to researcher Michael Peterson:

> The Marines…argued that this war ran counter to US preconceptions of conventional war. While ceding that the approaches to South Vietnam's population centres needed guarding, the main effort should be concentrated and the war fought at its most appropriate level: the Vietnamese village and hamlet. The villagers were the key, and the war had to be won within the hamlet. Rather that 'search and destroy,' the Marines argued for a 'clear and hold' strategy.

A logical adaptation of the Marine's concept of fighting irregular war came in the form of Combined Action Platoons (CAP).[48] The platoons were a mixture of Marines and local indigenous village-based militia, called Popular Forces (PF). The effects of the initial CAPs were so positive that the mixed force concept was expanded throughout the Marine area of operations. Reaching their peak in 1969, the CAPs numbered over a hundred, and had a

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[46] Allen Ford, "The Small War Manual And Marine Corps Military Operations Other Than War Doctrine," (Master's Thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2003), 23.
[47] Krepinevich, *The Army in Vietnam…*, 172.
[48] The original 'Combined Action Platoon' was later changed to 'Combined Action Program' that encompassed the concept of reinforcing indigenous security forces with Marines.

measureable record of increased security within their assigned hamlets.[49]  Despite Army

objections to the risk posed to the CAP Marines, they proved to have a lower casualty rate than

comparable units engaged in search and destroy missions.[50]  The CAPs were a successful

example of learning in contact for a variety of reasons.  First, they were based on forging close

bonds between the Marines, the PF, and the people of the hamlets.  They became so integrated

that the Marines eventually 'moved into the hamlets and lived, ate, and worked with the

villagers."[51]  Secondly, the CAPs were about more than simply security.  They produced two

other highly useful effects, pacification and enhanced intelligence.  While the threat from North

Vietnamese Forces was real enough, it was the Viet Cong that held sway over many of the

hamlets.  By living and fighting from the hamlets, the Marines were able to not only suppress, or

often eliminate, the Viet Cong's ability to influence, they were also able to create human

intelligence networks.  On the tactical level, the CAPs were a unique alternative to the 'big war'

that actually produced results.


Yet this adaptation was largely confined to the Marines.  In fact, there was considerable

resistance from Westmorland himself who saw these tactics as a blatant contradiction of his

concept of operations.[52]  Objections centred on territorial loses and the manpower that was being

diverted away from the main fight.  However, the reality was that while the Viet Cong territorial

gains were made, it was only in uninhabited areas of little strategic or tactical importance.

Furthermore, Krepinevich disputes the manpower argument with facts: even if every village had

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[49] Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War In Vietnam* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989), 67 and Krepinevich, *The Army in Vietnam,* 174.

[50] Krepinevich, *The Army in Vietnam…*, 174.

[51] Seaton, "A Political-Warrior Model,…" 550-551.

[52] Krepinevich, *The Army in Vietnam…,* 175.

required a CAP, and this was not the case, it would have taken approximately thirty percent of the 500,000-man troop limit placed on Vietnam.[53]  In Krepinevich's words:

> Given the 500,000-man ceiling, a force mix providing for CAP operations could have been effected, with several airmobile … divisions held in reserve to counter any large-scale VC/NVA incursions into area undergoing pacification. Casualties would have been minimized, and population security enhanced.[54]

The CAPs had one final unique advantage; they fused military and political action at the lowest level.  According to author Jim Seaton, "The absence of law and order at the hamlet…level made manifest the requirement for a fusion of war-making and localized diplomacy in pursuit of a basic human need – security."[55]  While the CAPs were very effective, they never became integrated into the overall politico-military strategy.  National Vietnamese civilian leaders and the senior military commanders failed to grasp that in Vietnam, "war and politics were two sides of the same coin, and the coin could not be split down the middle."[56]  In the end, none of the CAP advantages mattered. Both the civilian and military leadership posed significant barriers to learning.  Westmoreland never fully embraced this concept, ensuring that the CAPs remained a small, tactical-level effort.  General Walt and his Marines were obliged to conduct their share of large-scale kinetic combat operations.  According to former CAP officer Peterson, this was unfortunate as, "the CAP Marines [were able to] wage war *in* the hamlets; the mainforce Army and Marine units all too often waged war *on* the hamlets."[57]

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[53] *Ibid.,* 176.
[54] *Ibid.*
[55] Seaton, "A Political-Warrior Model…," 558.
[56] *Ibid.,* 559.
[57] Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons…,* 35.

Perhaps the most effective attempt at stability operations during the Vietnam War was the creation of CORDS in 1967.[58] A truly unique and integrated organization, CORDS fell under the command of the US military but was comprised of both military and civilian advisors working together to support the two main priorities of security and development.[59] Frustrated with the lack of a unifying strategy to address pacification and stability operations, President Johnson directed the adoption of CORDS and appointed Robert Kromer as his special assistant for pacification, putting him on equal footing with Westmoreland's primary staff officers.[60] The decision to centralize CORDS under the military was one of practicality; according to Kromer, "If you are going to get a program going, you are only going to be able to do it by stealing from the military. They have all the trucks, they have all the planes, they have all the people, they have all the money."[61] CORDS was structured so that each designated military level within Vietnam, from corps to district, had a civilian deputy that was responsible for the pacification effort. This was a massive improvement over the previous pacification efforts that saw several diverse agencies, such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), and the State Department, all working separately with little, if any, connection to each other.

The main function of CORDS was pacification through security and development. This was achieved by extending security to the countryside through local militias and winning support for the local government through a range of development projects, refugee resettlement, and re-

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[58] Although 'Revolution' was the original term used, CORDS later came to be known as 'Civil Operations and *Rural* Development Support'.

[59] J.R.G. Sauvé, "CORDS: Drawing Lessons From the American Comprehensive Approach in the Vietnam War," (Joint Command and Staff College Course Paper, Canadian Forces College, 2008), 8.

[60] Krepinevich, *The Army in Vietnam…,* 217.

[61] Thompson and Frizzell, *Lessons of Vietnam* (St. Lucia, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 1977) 191.

education for insurgent defectors.[62]  With military commanders supported by civilian deputies at each level, CORDS advisory teams assisted South Vietnamese government officials in the administration of the pacification program.  Advisory staffs at the provincial level were divided into two groups; one that helped "prepare plans and direct security operations by the territorial forces" and those that advised on "public health and administration, civil affairs, education, agriculture, psychological operations, and logistics".[63] According to author Coffey, CORDS was

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[62] Sauve, "CORDS…," 10.
[63] Dale Andrade and Lieutenant Colonel James H. Willbanks, "CORDS / Phoenix: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam for the Future", *Military Review* 86, no 2 (March-April 2006): 84.

very successful in curbing insurgent support:

> In its 4-year existence, CORDS contributed to the defeat of the Viet Cong by influencing the decline of popular support for the insurgency, by helping pacify rural provinces of Vietnam, and by strengthening South Vietnamese Regional and Popular Forces….CORDS-enabled nation-building and pacification prevented effective recruiting efforts.[64]

Yet there were limits to what CORDS could achieve. "Focused on defeating the…insurgency, CORDS did not possess the personnel, organization, or structure to enhance the legitimacy and thus the popularity of the South Vietnamese government."[65] In essence, while CORDS was seen as an effective pacification strategy, the US could not be a substitute for the South Vietnamese government that continued to lack a strong political base.

The final aspect of the Vietnam War that ran counter to the 'big war' philosophy was the use of Special Operations Forces (SOF). As a component of the regular and reserve military, SOF were organized, trained and equipped to "achieve military, political, economic, or psychological objectives by unconventional military means in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive areas."[66] While there were several successful examples of bottom-up learning by SOF throughout the Vietnam War, perhaps the most fruitful was the establishment of the Civilian Irregular Defence Group (CIDG) in 1961, designed to cut off the South Vietnamese population from the Viet Cong.[67] The focal point for this CIA-led SOF initiative was the Montagnard communities of the Southern central highlands.[68] The original SOF focus was on the

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[64] Ross Coffey, "Revisiting CORDS: The Need for Unity of Effort to Secure Victory in Iraq," *Military Review* 86, No 2 (March-April 2006): 94.

[65] *Ibid*, 100.

[66] Thomas K. Adams, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in Action: The Challenge of Unconventional Warfare* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Frank Cass Publishers, 1998), xxv-xxvi.

[67] Adams, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in Action…,* 83.

"development of village defence forces and organizing district-level quick response units to support them."[69]  Similar to the Marine concept of CAPs, the U.S. SOF lived and worked in the remote Highlands developing a positive rapport with the Montagnard people.  The Montagnards also gained a reputation as effective fighters loyal to their respective villages.  In addition to security force training, SOF instituted psychological operations, intelligence-gathering, and civic action in the form of improvements to sanitation, agricultural practices and medical support.  According to SOF historian Thomas K. Adams: "By 1962, the military piece of the CIDG program was considered an unqualified success.  The program involved several hundred villages, including a number that had been under Viet Cong control."[70]  This assessment is supported by Christopher Ives in his detailed account of the CIDG from 1961 to 1963: "Village based, rice-roots self-defence augmented with military civic action and psychological warfare locked out insurgent efforts among most Montagnard communities in South Vietnam."[71]

Unfortunately, this was not a lasting success for two reasons outside of SOF control.  First, as these villages were handed over to Government of South Vietnam (GVN) control starting in late 1962, the CIDG-trained defence forces were transferred to other parts of the province.[72]  This disconnected the defence forces them from their own communities, which was the source of their loyalty and success.  The second reason was the transfer of CIDG to MACV, where the conventional wisdom was that SOF was better employed in a more offensive role.

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[68] Ives, *U.S. Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam,* 37.  The Montagards are non-Vietnamese indigenous people of the Highlands.  They were considered a vulnerable population since the South Vietnamese government held little sway in this area.  Therefore, the highlands were considered key terrain for the Viet Cong expansion of influence.

[69] Adams, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in Action…,* 85.

[70] *Ibid.,* 86.

[71] Ives, *U.S. Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam…,* 6.

[72] Adams, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in Action…,* 87

The emphasis quickly shifted from a SOF training program to the development of 'strike forces' designed for border defence against Northern incursions.[73] Thus, the strategy that had emphasized many of elements that led to success against the irregular insurgent threat, harmonized military-civic action, winning the trust of the population, and the establishment of localized, loyal and effective defence forces, was sidelined in favour of the 'big war' tactics that came to dominate the war effort.

The question remains: to what extent did the U.S. military learn during Vietnam and what were the barriers that stopped institutionalization of this learning?  In the case of the SOF-led CIDG and the Marine-led CAPs, the adaptations happened internally, rapidly, and from the bottom-up.  This is not surprising given the cultural predisposition within each of these groups toward a more asymmetric approach to operations.  However, the innovation stopped at the MACV level, and in each case the respective programs were changed to fit into the existing conventional MACV model for operations.  Conversely, the CORDS program was representative of Barry Posen's argument that learning happens when it is forced from civilian leaders outside of the military institution.  While DoD was not the only agency involved, it still took the resolve of the U.S. President to force several agencies to work together under one command structure.  According to John Nagl, while these examples constituted tangible evidence of learning in the later half of the war, the U.S. Army was simply not a learning institution.  Pointing to institutional culture as one barrier, Nagl claims that, "the 'can-do' attitude of the professional American military stifled prospective dissent,"[74] and when the military did attempt to re-evaluate

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[73] *Ibid.*, 89.
[74] Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Spoon…*, 179.

its approach, "the institutional culture prevented truly original thinking."[75]  While

acknowledging some bottom-up learning took place, Nagl points out the learning cycle was

never completed:

> The learning cycle stopped at the level of the Chief of Staff of the Army in
> Washington and COMUSMACV [Commander U.S. MACV] in Vietnam;
> innovative thinking from above as well as below foundered on the army's idea of
> how wars should be fought.  Isolated from the war by their staffs and seeing only
> what they wanted to see, these generals precluded organizational learning on
> counterinsurgency.[76]

When viewed together, the three previous examples of CORDS, the CAPs, and the

CIDG, demonstrate U.S. military capacity for adaption to the irregular threat posed during the

Vietnam War.  This ability to rapidly learn in contact originated from those who determined that

the 'other war', one based on counterinsurgency and stability operations designed to protect and

pacify the population, was actually the main effort.  Many still argue that there was no possible

way to win the war, pointing to a weak South Vietnamese central government and the political

restrictions placed on the U.S. military action.  While these arguments have some merit, they

don't provide any conclusive evidence of a U.S. military that made any attempt to adapt its

strategy.  Instead, these counterpoints shift blame from the U.S. military onto the politicians.

While accurate in the assessment that a counterinsurgency can be won and lost in the political

arena, this argument fails to take into account the military's role in supporting the political realm

by being prepared for, and successfully adapting to, an irregular war.  Therefore, CORDS, CAPs

and the CIDG, stand alone as examples of some of the few innovative measures taken to adapt to

the complexities of irregular warfare in Vietnam.  This limited success in U.S. military learning

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[75] *Ibid.,* 179.
[76] *Ibid.,* 177.

was certainly not enough to change the course of the war.  The toll of over 58,000 U.S. dead[77],

an unfocused strategy, and the inability to unite the U.S. public, culminated in the official

withdraw of all U.S. troops under the Nixon administration in 1973.  Their South Vietnamese

allies continued to fight, but fell to North Vietnam forces in 1975.  The fear of communist

expansion into Southeast Asia was realized, and perhaps more concerning for the U.S., its

mighty military had been effectively beaten.  The chasms between the military and the public

were profound; it would take decades before the military, particularly the Army, would emerge

as a force that embodied the values of the American people.

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[77] United States National Archives and Record Administration.  "Statistical Information about Fatal Casualties of the Vietnam War," last accessed on 11 March 2013, http://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html#water.

**SECTION 3 - INSITUTIONAL LEARNING AFTER VIETNAM**

For the U.S. military, and in particular the U.S. Army, the years following the Vietnam War symbolized a long road of rebuilding an identity that would resonate internally as well as with the American public. While there was time for critical evaluation of what went wrong, there was a lack of genuine consensus as to the way forward regarding how to fight an irregular war. The lessons learned in combat at the tactical and operational levels were all but forgotten through budget cuts, a rethinking of most dangerous and most likely threats, and an overhaul of the training systems that would come to emphasis proficiency on the Central European battlefields against a numerically superior Soviet force. The common theme that emerged was overwhelmingly 'No more Vietnams'. This is not to say that U.S. military intervention did not take place throughout the late 70s, 80s and during the larger-scale peace keeping operations that symbolized the 1990s. Rather, the emphasis in the East-West bipolar world was firmly placed on winning a war against the Soviets. On the surface, it would seem that little learning concerning irregular warfare took place during these years, but this is contingent on which level is being evaluated and what evidence is being sought. The following section will outline the major events that shaped military thinking between the end of the Vietnam War through to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and determine if and how institutional learning took place. The failure in Vietnam resulted in a clear regression from vigorous self-reflection and learning of irregular warfare; yet the institutional landscape was not completely barren of learning. At the strategic level, the military did institutionalize many of the lessons from Vietnam; these lessons just happened to constitute the avoidance of messy, protracted irregular conflicts instead of learning how to fight them.

Well before the final soldiers were withdrawn, the U.S. military was already looking to the future beyond the perceived anomaly of Vietnam. While there are many that will argue that the Vietnam was indeed the future of conflict, it did differ significantly from the success the U.S. experienced in World War II where force on force battles and distinctive front and rear lines were the norm, and a decisive, unconditional victory was achieved. Further, the U.S. had emerged from World War II as one of the most powerful nations in world. The political aversion to the use of nuclear weapons spawned limited wars where the U.S. found itself fighting against Soviet-sponsored communist regimes. Yet the most dangerous perceived threat to the U.S. was still a conventional conflict in Europe. In fact, according to author Robert Cassidy it was no surprise that America had met with strategic failure in Vietnam despite its military and political might; it necessarily had to keep pace with the other global superpower, the Soviet Union. "Great powers do not win small wars because they are great powers; their military must maintain a central competence in symmetric warfare to preserve their great-power status vis-à-vis other great powers."[78] Supporting this line of thinking was the Yom Kippur War of 1973, which heavily influenced the re-thinking of US military strategy throughout the remainder of the 1970s. The war's land engagements were dominated by armour and anti-armour weapons and were closely studied by the U.S. Army. So influential was this conflict that author Andrew Krepinevich remarked, "The 1973 Arab-Israeli War was seen as a godsend by the Army War College and the Command and General Staff College, which used the war to focus attention away from low-intensity conflict and back to mid-intensity conventional conflict."[79] The

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[78] Robert M. Cassidy. "Why Great Powers Fight Small Wars Badly", *Military Review* 85, no. 5 (September – October 2000), 41.

[79] Krepinevich, *The Army in Vietnam…*, 272.

political climate at the end of Vietnam also impacted military thinking.  In 1969, Nixon announced that the U.S. would continue to support allied countries that faced insurgent threats, but through monetary and materiel support, not the deployment of military forces.[80]  It was under this umbrella that the Nixon administration began 'Vietnamization' which saw responsibility for fighting the NVA and Viet Cong shift completely to the South Vietnamese government by 1973.

It is in this setting that the U.S. Army established the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC)[81] that oversaw the development of new capstone doctrine, 'Active Defense'.  Active Defense subscribed to "a traditional American force-on-force method of using the mechanised arm of the Army to face down the central thrust of the enemy's forces, with the route to strategic victory being through the accumulation of tactical successes."[82]  After its publication in 1976 under the title *FM 100-5 Operations*, Active Defense soon became widely criticised.  Chief amongst its failings was its emphasis on the defense, its fixation with decisiveness in the first-battle against the Soviets, its emphasis on the science rather than the art of war, and finally, the failure to distinguish between operational and tactical levels of war.[83]  Yet despite its flaws, the establishment of TRADOC and its first attempt at a new Army doctrine were significant for one very important reason; it reoriented the Army toward a new professionalism and identity based on good leadership and training.

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[80] Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn B. Young, eds., *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam: or How not to Learn from the Past*, (New York: The New Press, 2007), 8.

[81]  Department of Defense. U.S. Training and Doctrine Command Homepage. Last accessed on 11 March 2013, www.tradoc.army.mil.

[82] Richard Lock-Pullan, *U.S. Intervention Policy and Army Innovation: From Vietnam to Iraq*.  (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2006), 72.

[83] Robert Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver-Warfare Theory and AirLand Battle* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 130-134, and Lock-Pullan, *U.S. Intervention Policy,* 72-74.

The next revision of Army doctrine would result in the development of AirLand Battle encapsulated in the Army's 1982 version of *FM 100-5 Operations,* and it successor in 1986.  A combined US Air Force and Army doctrine, it espoused the interdiction of the enemy's second echelons through the use of air power.[84]  While Active Defense had stressed the tactical battle, AirLand Battle was significant in its delineation of the operational level of war, stressing, "an Army's operational concept was the core of its doctrine."[85]  In essence, "the move to the operational level changed the focus of US military effort from the level of the battle, and the accumulation of victories to win the war, to the campaign and thereby placing the battle in the broader context."[86]  So while AirLand Battle still focused on the Soviet threat in Europe, it attempted to innovate by applying manoeuvre theory to Army doctrine.  In simplified terms, manoeuvre theory attempts to defeat an adversary by *pre-empting* him before the fight, by *dislocating* him from a decisive point, or finally by *disrupting* the enemy by attacking his weaknesses with one's strengths.[87]  Essentially, this is the opposite of attrition, where the one seeks victory through the destruction of the enemy's mass.[88]

This evolution in Army doctrine could be viewed as highly significant from two perspectives.  First, the impetus to change, learn and innovate was not borne out in response to a significant change in the strategic-political landscape, a response to new war technology, or a substantial shift in the perceived threat.  It evolved primarily based on the Army's internal desire to shape its identity, develop a professional force and the identification of Europe as its most

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[84] Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver…,* 136-137.
[85] Lock-Pullan, *U.S. Intervention Policy…,* 92.
[86] *Ibid*.
[87] Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver…,* 19-20.
[88] *Ibid*., 19.

critical operational and strategic challenge.[89] The second perspective relates to the content of the doctrine itself. Critics readily pointed to Vietnam as an example of a U.S. war by attrition, where the focus was on the destruction of the NVA through overwhelming firepower. From this perspective, the gradual shift from the war fought in Vietnam to the manoeuvrist theory resident within the AirLand Battle doctrine could be regarded as institutional learning. These perspectives can be explained in terms of Rosen's organizational theory of military innovation where learning occurs internally to an institution and over time. In this case, the seeds of change were likely sown during the Vietnam War and came to fruition out of internal reformers' desires to succeed in future wars and to salvage the institution that stood in disarray in 1973.

While these arguments in support of U.S. military, and specifically Army, institutional learning are compelling, they fall short on a number of counts. First, the extent that the U.S. military adopted a manoeuvrist approach is debatable. Author and military theorist Robert Leonhard dissected AirLand Battle in great detail and concluded that although the U.S. Army "flirted with manoeuvre [it was] unable to shake the American military traditions of the past."[90] As part of his argument, he explained that the doctrine still contained a disproportionate emphasis on the tactical battle. One of the fundamental concepts within AirLand Battle was the 'deep battle', which seemed to suggest a more manoeuvrist approach. Yet 'deep battle' differed from the Soviet 'deep operations', the latter aimed at dislocating the enemy at the operational and strategic levels of war. The American version was decidedly tactical, relying almost exclusively on airpower to strike the deep, or second echelon, elements of the enemy.[91]

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[89] Lock-Pullan, *U.S. Intervention Policy…,* 192.
[90] Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver…,* 186.
[91] *Ibid.,* 159.

Interestingly, a similar tactic was used in Vietnam, with little impact on the enemy. Thus Leonhard concluded that the U.S. version of 'deep battle' was essentially, "aimed at equalizing force ratios and [was] thus inherently aimed at attrition thinking."[92]

The second aspect of the argument is the more obvious in relation to the Vietnam War; while the U.S. Army sought to rebuild and redefine itself, it simply ignored many of the lessons specifically related to irregular warfare. Many of the initiatives and capabilities that had shown success, CAP, CORDS and the use of SOF, were largely forgotten. TRADOC's main effort was doctrine and training that would defeat the numerically superior Soviets. In a political and military climate that wanted to put the past behind them, it is easy to understand how capturing the lessons of irregular warfare would be a difficult undertaking. In assessing the legacy of the last decade of the Cold War, defence scientist Don Neill observed:

> Low intensity conflict and its various sub-components (insurgency, counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism, peacekeeping, and 'peacetime contingency operations') were seen as a secondary task that would be likely to consume military time and resources while the armed forces trained and prepared for its principle focus in central Europe.[93]

It was not just an inability to capture Vietnam's lessons in doctrine that proved to be challenging; maintaining any capacity to conduct irregular warfare also suffered significantly in the years immediately following Vietnam. Supported by the "belief that the U.S. had 'won' the guerrilla portion of the Vietnam War with conventional forces,"[94] mainstream heavy armour divisions became almost the sole focus under the Active Defense doctrine of the post-Vietnam

[92] *Ibid.,* 160.
[93] Don Neill, *The Graduate Level of War: Continuity And Change in U.S. Counter-Insurgency Strategy* (Ottawa: Defence Research and Development Canada, 2008), 14.
[94] Adams, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in Action…,* 157.

Cold War Army while SOF units were quickly deactivated. No matter how capable SOF soldiers were, there was simply no appetite to sustain a capability that had become synonymous with failure; by 1974 the Army Special Forces numbered only 3,000 troops, down from 13,000 in 1971.[95] Within the Army, SOF had become anything but special; there was a widely held belief that well trained, rapidly deployable, light, conventional forces could conduct most of the tasks that had been previously assigned to SOF units. The extent of the purge meant that, "by the end of the 1970s, the U.S. ability to conduct unconventional warfare was virtually non-existent."[96] The SOF community would continue to be overlooked until reality intervened and the 1980s brought a new host of irregular, unconventional threats. Yet it was not until 1987 that a true re-establishment of the capability would be observed. Far from being only an internally driven initiative, it took Congress to pass what was commonly known as the 'Special Forces' bill that established an independent command for SOF, the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), thus enabling the consolidation of resources and the beginning of a SOF renaissance.[97]

While U.S. military thinking, doctrine and structure had changed markedly in the post-Vietnam years, so too did the American political perspective on the use of military force. Here it is important to understand the dynamic between the political realm and that of the military, and in particular the Army. "The Army is central to US strategy and ultimately its role is fundamental to the use of force,"[98] therefore the commitment of ground forces to a conflict is the most aggressive stance that a nation can take and must be done so with thorough consideration of

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[95] *Ibid.*
[96] *Ibid.,*163.
[97] *Ibid.,* 201.
[98] Lock-Pullan, *U.S. Intervention Policy…,* 3.

the political goals and operational objectives.  The impacts of the Vietnam War, and the ensuing

Army recovery efforts, had a considerable influence on policy makers.  Author Adrian Lewis

provides insight: "Few American's outside of the military understand the trauma the Army

experienced in the wake of the defeat in Vietnam.  When the next war came, the Army, even

though it has substantially rebuilt itself, was reluctant to fight."[99]  It is from this mindset that the

Weinberger doctrine, a test for committing military forces, emerged in 1984.  A former Secretary

of Defense under President Regan from 1981 to 1987, Caspar Weinberger was heavily

influenced by Henry Summer's view of the failure in Vietnam.  This military influence in

thepolitical process was evident in Weinberger's six tests for the use of military force:

> U.S. military force should be committed:
>
> 1. Only if the engagement is deemed vital to the national interest
> 2. With the wholehearted intention of winning
> 3. Under clearly defined political and military objectives
> 4. With continual reassessments between the force committed and objectives
> 5. With reasonable assurance of support of Congress and the American people
> 6. As a last resort[100]

For many, these tests equated to, "American common sense, the kind of common sense that was

used to fight World War II."[101]  Yet critics counter that the tests were of value only in mid to

high intensity scenarios and ignored irregular warfare. Essentially, Weinberger's tests

"postulated a black and white world with nothing in between.  There were only two conditions:

war or peace, victory or defeat."[102]

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[99] Lewis, *The American Culture of War…,* 300.

[100] John S. Sellers, "The Weinberger 'Doctrine': Useful Compass or Flawed Checklist?" (Master's Thesis, Air Force University, 2001), 5. Sellers, and Caspar W. Weinberger (speech, "The Used Of Military Power", The National Press Club, Washington, DC, 28 November 1984), last accessed on 16 March 2013 from http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/military/force/weinberger.html.

[101] Lewis, *The American Culture of War…,* 301.

[102] *Ibid.*

Thus while Army learning post-Vietnam was shown to be highly influential on the political decision making process, consensus was only found in the conventional means to political ends. The opposite view was expressed Nagl who pointed out that there was actually no consensus on how to fight an irregular war, resulting in a compete failure to learn the real lessons of Vietnam. He critiqued senior Army leadership and the Weinberger tests as follows:

> Rather than squarely face up to the fact that army counterinsurgency doctrine had failed in Vietnam, the army decided that the United States should no longer involve itself in counterinsurgency operations.  The 'Weinberger doctrine' of 1983 made such involvement less likely by creating a series of test that in practice precluded American participation in any wars that did not allow full exploitation of American advantages in technology and firepower."[103]

The Weinberger tests and the Army's conventional superiority were used throughout the 1980s culminating in the Gulf War in 1991 where American battlefield mobility and firepower completely overwhelmed the forces of Iraq's Saddam Hussein.  While few would contest the efficiency of the U.S. military plan that saw the almost complete collapse of the Iraqi military, Robert Leonhard offered a cautionary note: "We may find opponents who are altogether unwilling to allow such a conventional contest, for which we are so well prepared and trained."[104]  He goes on to describe the nature of potential threats, seemingly foreshadowing the future: "They are far more likely to aim insurgencies and other low-intensity threats at U.S. interests in an attempt to dislocate our strengths."[105]  In fact, the Gulf War notwithstanding, American military doctrine was facing a crisis.  The fall of the Berlin Wall literally crushed America's strategy in Europe, and although reorientation toward the Middle East occurred, major changes in doctrine did not immediately follow.

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[103] Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife…*, 207.
[104] Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver…,* 263.
[105] *Ibid.*

The 1990s brought a host of new challenges that influenced military and political strategists. Although the Clinton administration was dogged by its failed intervention in Somalia, it readily sent the military on peacekeeping missions in mostly permissive environments with success. With the end of the Cold War, America found itself in a unipolar world and unsure of the exact nature of future security threats. While the 1990s became an instructive decade that saw further rejuvenation of SOF and a greater willingness to conduct stability operations, the emphasis for the Army was still on overwhelming firepower and technological superiority over any opponents. The difference though, became precision technology rather than mass. Under President George W. Bush and his Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, a transformation was underway to leverage information technology and precision munitions that would make the military more agile, and more lethal. In this way, the U.S. military was to, "become faster and more agile, able to intervene more often and more effectively, not by massing unwieldy military formations but through the creative exploitation of information-age capabilities."[106] While the U.S. military was successful in becoming more mobile and responsive, it still did not fully appreciate the manoeuvrist theory of attacking weaknesses, or the political nature of certain types of conflict. Not every adversary would, or could, by tamed through technology. The Army would have done well to heed the complexity in the forecast of future conflict from USMC Commandant, General Charles Karluk in 1999: "The threat in the early years of the next century will not be the 'son of Desert Storm'—it will be the 'stepchild of Chechnya'."[107]

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[106] David Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the US Military for Modern War* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 53.

[107] Charles C. Karluk, "Operational Maneuver From The Sea," *Joint Force Quarterly* 21 (Spring 1999), 79.

The final aspect of the period between Vietnam and the Iraq War that is worthy of reflection is not related to institutional learning itself, but rather the processes that were developed to enable learning. Defense analysis Janine Davidson determined that a training revolution occurred following Vietnam. Reasoning that while the U.S. Army pursued a 'big war' strategy, in doing so it also established the means through which rapid learning could take place, from the point at which problems and solutions are identified, to the institutionalization of the lesson into training. Taking a page from the successful flight training programs that had already been developed in U.S. Navy and Air Force, the Army introduced Combat Training Centres (CTC) that allowed for units and formations to collectively practice against an enemy force. Of greatest importance in this process was the after action review (AAR) that consisted of a formal debrief immediately after a particular exercise event, which helped solidify learning and inculcate key lessons throughout the ranks of the formation being assessed.[108] To avoid repeated errors by successive formations, the Centre for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) was established in 1984, consisting of experts and analysts that were responsible for capturing, analysing and disseminating lessons throughout the Army. By the 1990s, CALL was credited with having, "generated an Army-wide cultural mindset focused on learning from experience."[109] While the jewel in the CTC crown, the National Training Centre (NTC), concentrated all effort on the force-on-force tank battle, there was growing recognition that the U.S. had conducted very few of these battles since the end of World War II, a number that could be counted in single digits of actual combat days.[110] From this, the Joint Readiness Training Centre (JRTC) was born in 1987

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[108] Davidson, *Lifting the Fog of Peace…*, 102.
[109] *Ibid.,* 105.
[110] *Ibid.,* 114.

for SOF and Light Infantry collective training.  The JRTC continued to grow in importance throughout the 1990s as missions such as those to the Balkans proved to be longer and more complex than expected.  Thus it is through these training centres and their ability to capture, analyze and disseminate lessons that allowed the U.S. Army to start learning how to learn.

In the time period between the end of the Vietnam War and the terrorist attacks against the U.S. on 9/11, several important global events had occurred, most notably the end of the Cold War.  While the U.S. Army became a much more professional and lethal army during these years, it maintained a dependence on overwhelming firepower and battlefield mobility.  These advantages proved decisive in the 1991 Gulf War, but they taught false lessons on the future of warfare.  Thus the U.S. military learned from its Vietnam experience, but the primary lesson was not how to fight an irregular war, but rather that America should always avoid irregular conflicts. No consensus was ever reached regarding the root causes of the Army's failure in Vietnam, so the institutional learning cycle was blocked.  The years of war had only produced a reflexive retrenchment into the 'big war' strategies that the Army was so comfortable with after World War II.  Yet in its attempts to professionalize and become the most formidable army in the world, the U.S. Army succeeded in developing a learning mindset that would play a critical role in the post-9/11 years.

**SECTION 4 - LEARNING IN CONTACT DURING IRAQ**

While opinion concerning the reasons for the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 remains sharply divided, there is significantly more unanimity regarding the U.S. military's unpreparedness to fight an insurgency in the months and years immediately succeeding the fall of Saddam Hussein's ruling Ba'ath Party.  Not only did the military have to contend with the insurgents, it was also the only agency with the capacity to conduct simultaneous stability operations, a task that it felt was a civilian responsibility.  Instead of a short victory and the gratitude of the Iraqi people for overthrowing their dictator, America was plunged into a protracted, messy war that it struggled to comprehend, and from which it could not easily disengage.  Yet by 2007, the tide of the war seemed to shift in favour of the U.S; violence was quelled, a civil war was avoided, and security improved.  By 2011, the U.S. military was officially withdrawn.  While it is far too soon to categorically proclaim that Iraq will succeed as a secure independent country, in direct comparison to Vietnam the US military in Iraq managed to achieve considerably greater success.  This portion of the paper will examine how the U.S. military adapted over the course of the Iraq War and will show that institutional learning took place.

In hindsight, the intelligence on which evidence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) was based seemed incomplete at best.  Yet so concerned was the U.S. about Saddam Hussein's motives and his ability to use WMD that the decision to invade Iraq was made unilaterally by the U.S. without a United Nations mandate.  A handful of like-minded allies joined in the mission, and so on 19 March 2003 the ground invasion of Iraq began under the title

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).  Within weeks, Iraqi resistance had melted away and the central

government had fallen.  While the U.S. military had anticipated a generally supportive Iraqi

population happy to be free of their dictatorial leader, they were unprepared for the violent

insurgency that emerged between the disparate Muslim factions within Iraq coupled with the

opportunism of Islamic terrorists groups, namely Al Qaeda.  Despite President Bush's assurances

that the combat mission was over, violence increased steadily over the next three years; the U.S.

found itself in the middle of a full insurgency and unable to conduct stability operations until

some form of security was reinstated.  Senator John McCain aptly characterized the U.S.

military's frantic search for insurgents as a giant game of "whack a mole."[111]  Shortly after these

comments, a gloomy 2006 report by a senior intelligence officer was covered in the media; it

confirmed insurgent control in of entire provinces of Iraq.  "The military implications….seemed

clear: after three years in the field, the U.S. Army and Maine Corps had not mastered the art of

counterinsurgency and confronted institutional failure."[112]


     What had gone wrong between 2003 and the precarious position that the US found

themselves in by 2006?  The U.S. military was unprepared for two things; first, it had not

anticipated the counterinsurgency that erupted in the absence of a credible security force, and

second, it had not planned for the desired political endstate for Iraq, but rather put unbalanced

effort into the end of combat operations, arguably a tactical endstate.  Simply put, the U.S.

military failed to forecast the extent to which it would have to take primary responsibility for

stability operations in the wake of the overthrow of the central government.  These two errors

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[111] Senator John McCain, speech, NBC Meet the Press, New York, 20 August 2006, transcript accessed on 6
April 2013, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/14390980/#.UXQWPnCdEyE.

[112] James A. Russell, *Innovation, Transformation, and War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and
Ninewa Provinces, Iraq, 2005-2007* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011), 56.

were intrinsically interconnected. The optimistic assumptions that Iraqi civil and security agencies would remain operational and that the stability phase would be primarily civilian-led, created the conditions for serious civil unrest and allowed time for an insurgency to gain momentum.[113] The results are summed up rather well in a *Military Review* article by authors Caldwell and Leonard:

> In the wake of *shock and awe* we faced disenfranchised populations neither shocked nor awed by our presence…Our inability to exploit time effectively ceded the initiative to a course of events already spinning out of control. We won the war, but were quickly losing the peace.[114]

In an analysis of small wars since Vietnam, author Michael Gambone noted that, "…immediately after coalition units stood down from combat, Iraq suffered a widespread breakdown in law and order."[115] Part of the reason was the quick demobilization of the Iraqi Army by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). Falsely believing that the Iraqi police could be relied on to keep the peace, the country entered a state of chaos that lasted for months; long enough for insurgents, criminals and terrorists to gain a significant foothold, and thus the initiative.[116] Another contributing factor in the breakdown of Iraqi society was the tendency to use military force as a first, and sometimes only, resort: "We [the U.S. military] failed them [the Iraqi people] in many ways, and much of our focus remained on applying the lethal and destructive aspects of our military might rather than the nonlethal, constructive capabilities so

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[113] Nora Beneshel, *et al.*, *After Saddam: Prewar Planning and the Occupation of Iraq.* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2008), xvii.

[114] William B. Caldwell and Steven M. Leonard, "Field Manual 3-07, Stability Operations: Upshifting The Engine of Change," *Military Review* 88, no. 4 (July-August 2008), 2.

[115] Michael D. Gambone, *Small Wars: Low-Intensity Threats and the American Response Since Vietnam* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2012), 250.

[116] Gambone, *Small Wars…,* 251.

vital to success in operations conducted among the people."[117]  Finally, in an assessment of the

planning and occupation of Iraq, a RAND report reiterated the criticality of planning beyond

combat operations: "military planning must start with a view of the desired outcome of the

war—not the outcome of major conflict, but the creation of the desired political circumstances

that signal the true end of the war."[118]  Similar to the conditions that were found in Vietnam, the

U.S. military became the only organization that was manned, equipped and capable enough to

affect any form of stability in the non-permissive environment that Iraq had become.  Yet it

chose to lead with an iron fist rather than a velvet glove.


  As violence steadily increased in several parts of Iraq from 2003 through to 2006, the

U.S. military fought back with the methods it knew and understood.  Massive U.S. operations

leveraging overwhelming technological superiority to defeat the enemy became the norm and

were centered on major population centres deemed hotbeds of local sectarian militia, terrorist

and insurgent activity.  The fighting was perhaps most ferocious in the Iraqi town of Fallujah

where the U.S. Marines launched Operation Phantom Fury in late 2004.  Using conventional

forces and tactics, and supported by tactical airpower and artillery, the Marines, "retook Fallujah

one block at a time."[119]  So successful was this massive operation that Fallujah was declared

secure by the end of December.[120]  Yet according to Gambone, Phantom Fury did not address

long-term stability in the area, and "while operations like the one in Fallujah certainly disrupted

insurgent and terrorist activity in Iraq, they failed to address sectarian violence, which

[117] Caldwell and Leonard, "Field Manual 3-07…," 2.
[118] Beneshel, *After Saddam…,* xvii.
[119] Gambone, *Small Wars…,* 252.
[120] Michael Peck, "Marines Share Hard-Earned Knowledge," *National Defence* 90 (July 2005), 30.

significantly worsened by 2006."[121]  Moreover, by 2006 the U.S. military had collapsed into large, heavily fortified operating bases centered on Baghdad with heavy restrictions on movement.  However, it was in this morass of violence that the seeds of bottom-up innovation materialized.

Following the rout in Fallujah, many insurgents escaped farther westward into Anbar Province and northward into Ninewa Province, attracted to the traditional smuggling routes between Syria and Iraq.[122]  This influx added to the already chaotic environment in the province, one that had a limited U.S. military footprint and insufficient local security forces.  However, various bottom up tactical changes were credited with positively changing the operating environment in both Anbar and Ninewa by early 2007.  In his 2011 book focused on operations in these provinces, researcher James Russell provides an excellent analysis of how tactical adaptations resulted in not only battlefield success, but also in overall institutional learning and innovation.  Using case studies of select units that successfully employed counterinsurgency, he paints a picture of a realization at the lowest levels that the way America was waging war in Iraq was deeply flawed, and that progress would have to be found outside of the doctrine upon which their training was based.  According to Russell, the influx of new doctrine and political policy that would culminate in a troop surge in 2007, did not adequately explain why U.S. Army and Marine units had become increasingly proficient in the towns and villages of Iraq.  Instead, Russell points to U.S. tactical innovation as the basis for the 'tactical momentum' that wrestled the initiative back from the insurgents.[123]

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[121] Gambone, *Small Wars…,* 252.
[122] Russell, *Innovation, Transformation, and War…,* 59.
[123] *Ibid.,* 3.

This tactical momentum was most clearly demonstrated in two areas; the Anbar boarder region with Syria and the city of Ramadi. Along the border region, the local Marine commander shifted away from the centralized bases he had inherited and opted to decentralize the Marines into various forward operating bases, despite significant enemy opposition. Eventually platoon-sized elements were dispersed in combat outposts (COPs) and co-located with Iraqi military and police forces. Foot patrolling replaced heavily armoured convoys, and Iraqis began to take the lead from their U.S. counterparts. As patrolling expanded, intelligence gathering and dissemination became more comprehensive, to the point that a census program was completed.[124] As security was re-established and violence decreased, the emphasis on civil affairs and reconstruction increased. According to Russell, the combination of these operations had a "symbiotic effect."[125] The resulting "free flow of information up and down the command would be repeated elsewhere by other units in their COIN operations."[126]

In a similar shift toward population-centric counterinsurgency and stability operations, the city of Ramadi saw an astounding transformation from insurgent stronghold in 2005 to a relatively stable urban centre in 2007. Faced with some of the worst rates of attack against U.S forces in Iraq, U.S. Army units began to shift focus away from the enemy and toward protecting the population starting in 2006, instilling a "first do no harm" policy on all operations.[127] In contrast to the operations conducted in Fallujah two years prior, the fight for control of Ramadi was supported by a significant numbers of local leaders and purposely minimized the use of

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[124] *Ibid.,* 69, 71-72.
[125] *Ibid.,* 72.
[126] *Ibid.*
[127] Russell, *Innovation, Transformation, and War…,* 109.

close air support and artillery.[128]  This local backing was a critical aspect of the new operational

design for Ramadi; vital to winning the support were key leadership engagements aimed at

building relations with the traditional power elite in the area and obtaining help for police

recruiting.  Eventually growing tired of the violence and instability, the local leaders broke ties

with the extremists operating in the city and turned to the U.S. for security.  This local transition,

dubbed the 'Anbar awakening' would come to be part of a larger national movement called the

'Sunni awakening'.[129]  The final key component in the fight for control of Ramadi was the

flexibility afforded the local American commander. "Higher headquarters had freely delegated

authority down to its executing units and made little attempt to micromanage the battle from

afar."[130]  This last element was an important aspect of how Ramadi became a success story that

contributed to U.S. military institutional innovation and learning.  Strong tactical leaders with a

clear vision of what worked on the ground eventually drove adaptation.  According to author

Chad Serena in his analysis of military adaptation in Iraq, "the tail had to wag the dog for

adaptation to occur and for strategic objectives to be achieved."[131]


The cases presented by Russell contain trends that were common themes throughout

many of the successful counterinsurgency campaigns that emerged starting in 2005.  These

include the balanced and combined use of kinetic and non-kinetic operations, detailed

intelligence gathering, analysis and rapid dissemination, key leader engagements, and stability

operations that included, amongst other initiatives, infrastructure development.  Moreover, while

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[128] *Ibid.,* 113.
[129] *Ibid.,* 115.  The Sunnis represented one of two major Muslim sects within Iraq, the other being the Shias. Political and religious differences between these two groups resulted in extreme violence once Hussein was removed from power.  The violence was intensified against U.S. troops as a result of Al Queda networks operating in Iraq.
[130] *Ibid.,* 114.
[131] Chad Serena, *A Revolution in Military Adaptation: The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*.  (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 70.

this approach was not taught to any extent in the conventionally focused U.S. military prior to, or during, the early years of the Iraq War, this type of bottom up adaptation did not happen in complete isolation or by chance. There were a number of factors that assisted in the adaptation and the transmission of lessons. Two specific factors contributed: experience in peace support operations in the 1990s and the rapid transmission of knowledge through communities of practice.

The first factor addresses the adaptation of leader skillsets. Numerous officers and senior non-commissioned officers in Iraq had spent substantial time conducting peace support operations during the 1990s. Although they were primarily schooled in kinetic operations, they actually executed far more non-kinetic operations in places like the Balkans. This is not to say that the U.S. military learned how to properly conduct complex counterinsurgency and stability operations from their experience of the 1990s; rather they started to acknowledge and make progress in the conduct of low-intensity conflict, demonstrated through such initiatives as the establishment of the Combat Mission Training Centre (CMTC) in Germany. CMTC prepared units for their missions in the Balkans through simulations involving a range of diverse ethnic and religious factions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).[132] It is in this environment that many of the battalion and brigade commanders and senior non-commissions officers spent their junior years.

Janine Davidson aptly describes a second factor in the learning that took place in Iraq; *communities of practice* existed throughout the officer corps, and were increasingly accessible

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[132] Gambone, *Small Wars…,* 163.

through cyberspace. Lessons learned were informally transmitted through peer-to-peer interaction, and increasingly via the Internet. One such community of practice emerged in 2000 in the form of the website CompanyCommander.com. Started by a group of West Point students, it eventually was funded by the DoD and served as a professional forum that, "enabled company commanders to gain access to each other and thereby tap into the collective knowledge of the members."[133] These types of forums were very helpful at the junior officer level in Iraq as they served as a means to quickly debate and disseminate lessons. That DoD supported CompanyCommander.com could be considered a continuation of the, "cultural orientation toward the value of…bottom-up learning."[134] In fact, this professional forum complimented the learning environment and processes that had been cultivated post-Vietnam.

Interestingly, new joint U.S. Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency doctrine had actually been published at the end of 2006, indicating a degree of learning that was occurring top-down at the same time as bottom-up adaptation was occurring on the battlefield. Driven by a handful of senior military and civilian leaders, *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency* emerged as the playbook through which the next chapter of the Iraq War would be fought. While certain critics, such as authors Serena and Russell, point out that adaptation in Iraq was almost exclusively bottom-up, this is an incomplete analysis as it neglects the considerable shift ongoing at the strategic and political levels. Both the timing and content of this new doctrine symbolized a convergence of bottom-up *and* top-down learning. The institutionalization of how to conduct a counterinsurgency was exactly what was occurring on the ground. In fact the Ramadi campaign,

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[133] Nancy M. Dixon et al., *Companycommand: Unleashing the Power of the Army Professions* (West Point, New York: Centre for the Advancement of Leader Development and Organizational Learning, 2005), 2.
[134] Davison, *Lifting the Fog of Peace…*, 125.

considered the model for counterinsurgency in Iraq, bore striking similarities to the contents of *FM 3-24*. In March 2007 the outgoing U.S. military commander in Ramadi was asked whether he had read the doctrine that had been published only three months earlier. He responded no, "but they told me I didn't really need to read [it] since I had already done much of what the document said I was suppose to do."[135]

The public emergence of top-down innovation could be traced back to a political statement in the fall of 2005. U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, made reference to a strategy of "clear, hold and build" in testimony she gave to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.[136] Although the remark could have been taken as simply a sound bite, 'clear, hold and build'[137] gained momentum and became the one of the three counterinsurgency approaches within *FM 3-24*. The actual manual was the result of a handpicked group of military and civilian counterinsurgency experts, working under the authority of General David Petraeus. It was Petraeus who used his position as the Commandant of the Combined Arms Center to provide the necessary momentum for the new doctrine. A scholar in counterinsurgency, a veteran of the peace support missions of the 1990s, and a successful division commander in Mosul during the first year of the Iraq War, Petraeus had previously published his own lessons learned in counterinsurgency. His article, "Learning Counterinsurgency: Observations From Soldiering In Iraq" appeared in the *Military Review* early in 2006, resonated with a growing segment of the

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[135] Colonel MacFarland, quoted in an interview with author Russell, *Innovation, Transformation, and War…*, 133.

[136] Associated Press, "Rice Won't Rule out Troops in Iraq in 10 Years", 19 October 2005, last accessed 29 March 2013, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/9750947/#.UVc26XD2syE.

[137] It should be noted that there is differing military and academic opinion on whether 'clear-hold-build' is actually a variation on Galula's ink spot strategy, or a unique U.S. approach. An analysis of this can be found in LCol Grimshaw's paper "Two Sides of the Same Coin? An Evaluation And Comparison of The Clear, Hold, Build and the Ink Spot Counterinsurgency Approaches", Joint Command and Staff College Course 35, Canadian Forces College Student Paper.

military that understood that there was a better, smarter way to fight in Iraq. The article

espoused fourteen observations, including 'intelligence is the key to success' and 'everyone must

do nation-building'.[138] The latter was closely linked to the concept of 'unity of effort', which

became a complete chapter in *FM 3-24*. Unity of effort referred to the necessity of integrating

both military and civilian efforts in order to produce "comprehensive strategy employing all

instruments of national power."[139] Petraeus' point also related closely to DoD Directive

3000.05 *Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition and Reconstruction (SSTR)*

*Operations* that proclaimed, "stability operations are a core U.S. military mission that the

Department of Defense shall be prepared to conduct and support."[140] While in a tactical sense,

'everyone must do nation-building' meant that all ranks and units had a responsibility for

stability operations, the strategic corollary was that it was insufficient to assume civilians would

conduct stability operations; the military had a pivotal role to play particularly in non-permissive

environments. Overall, Petraeus' lessons were representative of the collective U.S. military

experiences in Iraq since 2003 and set the stage for the production of FM 3-24. According to

author David Ucko, "the manual represented the end product of three years of conceptual

learning."[141]


In addition to doctrine, political leaders were looking for a way to transform what

increasingly appeared to be a losing war in Iraq. Two camps formed; those that believed that the

U.S. military presence in Iraq was simply fanning the flames of unrest, and those that believed

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[138] David H. Petraeus, "Learning Counterinsurgency: Observations From Soldiering in Iraq," *Military Review* 86, no. 1 (January-February 2006), 6-7.

[139] Department of Defense, *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency…*, 2-1.

[140] Department of Defense, *Directive 3000.05 Military Support Security, Stability, Transition and Reconstruction Operations* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 25 November 2005), 2.

[141] Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era…*, 109.

that it was only through an increase of troop levels that civil war could be avoided and Iraq stabilized. The latter won out. General Petraeus was promoted and appointed commander Multinational Force-Iraq (MNF-I), and an additional five Army brigades and four thousand Marines were sent to Iraq starting February 2007 at a rate of one per month.[142] As much a litmus test for the new counterinsurgency doctrine as it was a political test of the Bush Administration, the troop increase, dubbed 'the surge' by the media, eventually proved successful in quelling violence amongst the Iraqi factions and reducing troop casualties. However, to suggest that the troop surge was decisive onto itself was false. One particular factor, the spread of the Sunni Awakening, complimented and advanced the surge, creating the conditions for a period of decreased violence. According to author Fred Kaplan the counterinsurgency campaign and the accompanying surge were simply a means to an end: "the point of it all was to give Iraq's factions some 'breathing space' so that they could focus in peace on hammering out their differences and forming a cohesive government with widespread legitimacy."[143]

The success of the surge "added momentum to the ongoing process of institutional learning at the Pentagon, as manifested in a stream of plans, official publications and field manuals."[144] Several prominent doctrine manuals were published closely on the heels of *FM 3-24*. First, the Army implemented the direction provided in *DoD Directive 3000.05 SSTR Operations* and produced *FM 3-07 Stability Operations* in October 2008. Citing the elevation of stability operations on equal footing as other Army operations and the official rejection of awkward categories of military operations outside of conventional war, author Jennifer Taw

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[142] Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 267.

[143] *Ibid.,* 269.

[144] Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era…*, 132.

went so far as to say, "unlike *FM 3-24*, *FM 3-07* [was] truly revolutionary."[145]  While *FM 3-24* prescribed guidance on how to conduct a particular type of conflict, *FM 3-07* fundamentally augmented the Army's core purpose to include stability operations.  This was a considerable departure from the previous practice of combining all non-conventional operations under the poorly understood and much maligned term 'military operations other than war'. In this doctrine, stability and counterinsurgency operations had finally found their way into not only the military lexicon, but had also become critical concepts within the spectrum of U.S. Army and Marine operations.

The combination of bottom-up tactical learning and top-down institutional learning was readily demonstrated in the aforementioned changes to U.S. military tactics in the field, the strategic drive to find a better way of war, and in the resultant doctrine that emerged starting in 2006.  For many, the success that was achieved in Iraq through the implementation of a unified counterinsurgency effort and the commitment of 20,000 additional troops was the embodiment of how the U.S. military learned in contact.  Yet some remain skeptical of the root causes of the reduction in violence in Iraq and whether the U.S. military should embrace counterinsurgency and stability operations at all.  In their *Defense Studies* journal article, authors David Dunn and Andrew Futter dissect the causes of the rapid de-escalation of violence in Iraq in 2007 onward. While they contend that signs of normalcy returned to Iraq in the wake of the surge, it was as much, if not more, to do with the split between moderate nationalist and the most extreme

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[145] Jennifer Morrison Taw, *Mission Revolution: The U.S. Military and Stability Operations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 61.

terrorist elements operating in Iraq.[146]  Without the Sunni Awakening, the change in U.S.

strategy would have had little effect.  While the effects of the surge may have been overplayed,

the surge complimented the Sunni Awakening and the two worked in conjunction to bring about

space for the Iraqi government to function in something other than a crisis mode.  While not

perfect, there is little doubt that a radical shift in thinking had occurred, which translated into

learning.  In David Ucko's words,  "although the manner in which the new strategy was

implemented was in some ways flawed, this official shift in the U.S. military's mode of

operations was nonetheless a testament to a radically changed mindset and understanding"[147]


The second argument against U.S. military learning is captured in the application of *FM

3-24* to Afghanistan, and the failure of a troop surge to bring about a similar decline in attacks

against the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).  Here, the argument is simply that the

U.S. did not learn the right lessons, and that in trying to apply the same script to Afghanistan that

had worked in Iraq, the U.S. military failed to understand the battlespace and the population.

While a description of the circumstances in Afghanistan is beyond the scope of this paper, it is

widely acknowledged that the operating environment differs considerably from Iraq.  Moreover,

while a positive outcome in a conflict may give the impression of learning, this is not always the

case.  History is replete with examples of victors who were not adaptive or innovative, and losers

who showed tremendous capacity for learning.  The German blitzkrieg in World War II is a

worthy argument for the latter.  It is also widely acknowledged that irregular warfare, and in

particularly counterinsurgency operations, can be particularly messy, protracted and political in

[146] David Hastings Dunn and Andrew Futter, "Short-Term Tactical Gains and Long-Term Strategic Problems: The Paradox of the US Troop Surge in Iraq," *Defence Studies* 10, no. 1–2 (March–June 2010), 196.
[147] Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era…*, 104

nature. Military success in these cases is closely tied to the political will; no amount of adaptation, innovation and learning can overcome some political deficiencies. Finally, even *FM 3-24* acknowledges the challenges of conducting counterinsurgency stating that, "COIN is an extremely complex form of warfare", and that, "there is no 'silver bullet' set of COIN procedures."[148]

The extent to which the U.S. military learned in contact during the Iraq War was both remarkable in its evolution, and in many ways surprising given the orientation of the U.S. military pre-9/11. While a gradual process, the U.S. military demonstrated the capacity to learn conceptually and operationally. A bottom-up approach to learning was evidenced in the tactical-level adaptation amongst various units deployed to Iraq from 2005 to 2007 that achieved localized successes. While several political and strategic mistakes were made at the beginning of the Iraq campaign, top-down learning did occur when a handful of senior leaders drove the process. The resultant doctrine not only helped change the course of the war in Iraq, it also altered how the U.S. military viewed its core mission set. No longer were counterinsurgency and stability operations relegated to the sidelines. The hard lessons of these operations were becoming institutionalized within the U.S. military.

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[148] Department of Defense, *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency…*, 1-28.

## SECTION 5 - INSTITUTIONALIZING LEARNING AFTER IRAQ

Only a few short years have passed since the U.S. military conducted its withdraw from Iraq. There is no doubt that the country is still treading on fragile ground, attempting to balance its relationships with America and its regional neighbours, in particular Iran, while trying to maintain internal stability. Those seeking signs of success would point to a few key facts. Since 2004, Iraq has managed to produce and ratify a constitution, conduct elections, and establish a relatively peaceful parliamentary process.[149] Though in no way textbook, it is a far cry from the previous authoritarian regimes that gained power through violent coups. An improving judiciary is also a sign of development within Iraq. Expert in Iraqi affairs, Abbas Kadhim, stated in a recent article that, "even Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, often accused of manipulating the judiciary, has suffered some significant defeats in court."[150] Yet outbreaks of sectarian violence still plague parts of Iraq, and AQI has capitalized on these splits attempting a resurgence throughout 2012. The future of Iraq as an independent, secure, democratic nation is replete with challenges, so the success of the U.S. military as a measure of strategic outcome in Iraq is as yet unknown, and will take years to determine. Therefore, an analysis of whether the U.S. military has been able to institutionalize much of the learning that took place in contact from 2005 to their withdraw in 2011, needs to be based on the latter portions of the war up to the present.

Beyond the future success of Iraq as an indicator, which arguably is reflective of the nation-building approach taken by the whole of the U.S. government and not just the military, a

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[149] Abbas Kadhim, "A Decade of Democratic Transition in Iraq", Foreign Policy, 25 March 2013. Last accessed 28 March 2013, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/25/a_decade_of_democratic_transition_in_iraq.
[150] *Ibid.*

more fundamental methodology of assessing learning is required. Returning to Downie's organizational cycle of learning is a practical starting point. The cycle is very simplistically summarized as: problem identification, solution seeking through consensus, dissemination of the accepted solution throughout the organization, and finally, behaviour adaptation.[151] Accordingly, one of the best indicators of the institutional learning is doctrine, which demonstrates the formal diffusion of lessons. As previously discussed, the adaptation shown by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps in contact was accepted and disseminated through *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency* in 2006 and in *FM 3-07 Stability Operations* in 2008. The military went several steps farther near the end of U.S. military involvement in the Iraq War: capstone joint doctrine, *Joint Publication 3-24 Counterinsurgency Operations* (*JP 3-24*) was published in 2009, while *Joint Publication 3-0 Operations* (*JP 3-0*) was published in August and *Joint Publication 3-07 Stability Operations* (*JP 3-07*) followed in September of 2011. As joint, capstone doctrine manuals, they became the ultimate authority on operations within the U.S. military. As the overarching doctrine on operations, *JP 3-0* includes both stability and counterinsurgency as individual and distinct operations within the full range of U.S. military operations, while the *JP 3-07* and *JP 3-24* are the joint extensions of what the Army had previously produced.

Following Downie's line of reasoning that doctrine is a key indicator of institutional learning, it would seem evident that the U.S. military had indeed internalized the lessons of over a decade in conflict. Yet it is worthwhile to examine other indicators of learning, and perhaps more importantly, the barriers that still exist that may prevent the full adoption of all of the lessons from Iraq. Ultimately though, military adaptation must be put into context; the reality of

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[151] Downie, *Learning From Conflict…*, 34-35.

America today is one of fiscal restraint with no public or political appetite for the generational

long war.  Yet budget cuts at DoD do not have to translate into a failure to institutionalize the

lessons of Iraq.  A review of current U.S. defense policy is useful in determining if learning

barriers exist at the strategic level.  In the 2012 policy statement entitled *Sustaining U.S. Global*

*Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* the U.S. does not discard the requirement to

conduct irregular warfare, stability or counterinsurgency operations.[152]  Yet all of these are

tempered with the requirement to work within financial constraints, and thus there is a clear

message that hard choices will have to be made.


While the priorities cover the range of operations anticipated within the spectrum of

conflict, some are of specific interest to this paper.  In line with the U.S. goal of defeating Al

Qaeda, the first of the ten priorities is *Counter Terrorism and Irregular Warfare*, where the

stated military effort is encapsulated in the following:

> As U.S. forces draw down in Afghanistan, our global counter terrorism efforts
> will become more widely distributed and will be characterized by a mix of direct
> action and security force assistance.  Reflecting lessons learned of the past
> decade, we will continue to build and sustain tailored capabilities appropriate for
> counter terrorism and irregular warfare.[153]

This indicates that those capabilities, namely special operations forces, will continue to be a

primary capability within the arsenal of U.S. military power.  It is also indicative of an

orientation around building security partner capacity as a preventative, rather than reactive,

means of combating terrorism.  This line of thinking is carried through in the next priority,

*Conduct Stability and Counterinsurgency Operations*.  There is a pragmatic understanding of the

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[152] Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities For 21st Century Defense*
(Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, January 2012), 3.
[153] *Ibid.*

cost and utility of these operations, particularly when they are U.S.-led.  While there is a clear

emphasis on "non-military means and military-to-military cooperation to address instability"[154],

there is also an understanding that these operations may nevertheless occur in the future and that

the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan cannot be squandered.  In this vein, the policy goes on to set

specific limits on these types of operations:

> U.S. forces will nevertheless be ready to conduct limited counterinsurgency and
> other stability operations if required, operating alongside coalition forces
> wherever possible. Accordingly, U.S. forces will retain and continue to refine the
> lessons learned, expertise, and specialized capabilities that have been developed
> over the past ten years of counterinsurgency and stability operations in Iraq and
> Afghanistan. However, U.S. forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-
> scale, prolonged stability operations.[155]

   The rejection of large-scale stability operations, or simply the prospect of being able to

conduct only limited U.S.-led counterinsurgency operations, may seem like the start of a

downward slope for the institutionalization of hard-fought lessons, or the acceptance of the

argument advocating a complete return to the core, more conventional, warfighting capabilities

that have been the basis of the U.S. Army since World War II.  Army officer and historian

Colonel Gian Gentile is perhaps the most vocal supporter of the latter course of action.  Gentile

argues that as a result of the long insurgency wars, the U.S. Army has, "shifted away from

fighting as its organizing principle."[156] and that if a "rifle company commander reads the Army's

high-profile doctrine manuals, he learns to be an occupier, a policeman, and an administrator –

but not a fighter."[157]  Citing the instability in the world and the possibility of U.S. involvement in

high intensity warfare in places like North Korea, Gentile laments the atrophied state of

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[154] *Ibid.*, 4.
[155] *Ibid.*
[156] Gian Gentile, "Let's Build an Army to Win All Wars," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 52 (1st Quarter 2009), 28.
[157] *Ibid.*

combined arms skills, such as artillery firing en masse against an armed enemy.[158] Gentile is, of course, correct in his assertion that these more conventional skills have eroded. Yet his assertion that fighting is no longer at the core of the Army's raison d'etre is debatable; the fighting has just come in the form of small unit and sub-unit actions and has necessarily been mixed with other skill sets necessary to live, fight and work amongst a population.

John Nagl, who readily points out that America "engages in ambiguous counterinsurgency and nation-building missions far more often than it faces full-scale war,"[159] holds the opposite view. He contends that irregular and counterinsurgency warfare waged by both state and non-state actors is the most likely threat scenario that will be faced in the near future. He points out that Al Qaeda has not disappeared, but continues to pose a threat to the U.S., and that, "the U.S. military's role in irregular warfare cannot be wished or willed away."[160] While Nagl does not dispute the role for conventional forces able to defeat a high intensity threat, he does call for the expansion of the Army to include new specialized capabilities necessary to conduct advisory, stability, irregular, and counterinsurgency missions. Senior officers, such as General H.R. McMaster, seem to combining both arguments by maintaining that the Army must be capable of conducting operations from stability to conventional warfare. Debunking the line of thinking that suggests that, "wars can be waged efficiently with the minimal approach to the commitment of forces and other resources,"[161] McMaster argues for preparing for the actual threat, not the war that military would simply *like* to fight. He too, calls for a large ground force based on the likelihood of future conflicts necessitating not only

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[158] *Ibid.*, 31.
[159] Nagl, "Let's Win the Wars We're In," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 52 (1st Quarter 2009), 24.
[160] *Ibid.*, 25.
[161] H.R. McMaster, "On War: Lessons to be Learned", *Survival* 50, no.1 (February-March 2008), 27.

expertise in conventional maneouvre, but also manoeuvre through complex human terrain that includes political, psychological and cultural dimensions. The question remains though – how does the U.S. military institutionalize the lessons of Iraq, address the erosion of its core combat capabilities, and prepare for the future in a fiscally austere, resource tight environment?

Certainly the Army has appeared to be taking great strides in reorienting itself toward the ability to conduct both conventional and stability operations. Far from retracting its controversial elevation of stability operations on the same level as offensive and defensive operations in 2008, the Army has reiterated this trinity in its 2011 *Army Doctrine Publication 3-0 Unified Land Operations* (*ADP 3-0*). Yet this document underscores the building block of all operations – lethality. To critics, this seemingly giant departure from the balance between lethal and non-lethal means would seem to contradict learning that has taken place in the last decade. The idea espoused in *ADP 3-0* that lethality, or the capacity for physical destruction, "is fundamental to all other military capabilities and the most basic building block for military operations"[162] appears to be a signal that the Army has reverted to an organization only focused on combat operations. It certainly is an acknowledgement that "a lethal capability is necessary, *a priori*, to accomplishing all Army missions – combat and otherwise – [and] is a sharp departure from earlier Army doctrine."[163] Yet a closer examination of this actually speaks to the type of situations where the Army should be used for stability operations. Ultimately civil reconstruction and development efforts remain primarily a civilian area of expertise, yet it was only the military that could affect these operations in places like Iraq during the most violent

[162] Department of Defense, *Army Doctrine Publication 3-0 Unified Land Operations (*Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 10 October 2011), 7.

[163] Bill Benson, "Unified Land Operations: The Evolution of Army Doctrine for Success in the 21st Century," *Military Review* 92, no. 2 (March-April 2012), 48.

periods of the conflict. Author Colonel Craig Collier amplifies this by stating, "the U.S. Army's capability and capacity to apply lethal force provide it with the credibility and skills for success in all types of operations and distinguishes it from other government departments and even from other armies in the world."[164]  It is likely that the Army will continue to be called on to conduct stability operations in the future, and it is the legal authority of the Army to project lethal force that makes it a unique and vital tool in U.S. government foreign policy.

From doctrine flow priorities for training.  In its 2012 Army Training Strategy, the U.S. Army not only addresses the atrophy of combined arms capability, but also outlines how it will train for the diverse range of future threats.  Ambitious in its goals, the strategy is also grounded in the realities of the current security and fiscal environment.  Even the sub-title, *Training in a time of transition, uncertainty, complexity, and austerity*, alludes to the enormous challenges faced by the Army.  While the strategy calls for commanders to train for conventional force on force operations, this is tempered with the requirement to integrate aspects the complex human terrain found in counterinsurgency and stability operations.  Perhaps the most striking element of the strategy involves creating 'operational adaptability'.  In other words, "the Army is transitioning to regionally aligned forces characterized by operational adaptability; an agile, responsive, tailorable force capable of responding to any mission, anytime, anywhere."[165]  One obvious interpretation of this statement is that the security threats on the horizon are numerous, overlapping, and hard to define.  Unlike the end of the Vietnam War where the Soviets presented a clear point of focus for military strategy, the end of the Iraq War sees a myriad of unpredictable

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[164] Craig Collier, "Now That We Are Leaving, What Did We Learn?" *Military Review* 90, no.5 (September-October 2010), 89.

[165] Department of Defense, *U.S. Army Training Strategy: Training in a Time of Transition, Uncertainty, Complexity and Austerity* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 3 October 2012), 4.

regimes, failed and failing states, international criminal and terrorist elements, and an increasing cyber threat. In short, the U.S. military will likely face a hybrid threat in the future. In this type of environment, adaptability is not just desirable, but essential. A slightly different, but equally important, interpretation of operational adaptability is that the U.S. Army has truly learned from its experience in Iraq. Initially oriented toward primarily swift, lethal strikes, the military has realized that it can only shape and control the battlefield so much; the enemy is unlikely to fight in the manner desired or anticipated. Of this preference for the ultimate technological solution in the 1990s, H.R. McMaster observed, "the search for magic bullets – and a related neglect of the human and intangible dimension of warfare – persist[ed]."[166] While technology is still an American strength, the military has come a long way since the 1990s and shows tangible signs of combining conventional methods with recognition of the impacts of human terrain. In fact, March 2012 marked the first Decisive Action Training Environment (DATE) rotation through the National Training Centre (NTC), where scenarios were based on a hybrid threat consisting of conventional, paramilitary and insurgency forces.[167]

While collective training provides a tangible sign of the institutionalization of learning, there are other clear indicators found in cultural initiatives, command structure, and the fundamental approach to command and leadership. The first of these markers of learning is found in preparing soldiers for operating within populations. The current Army Chief of Staff, General Ray Odierno observed, " the biggest takeaway from Iraq and Afghanistan is the

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[166] H.R. McMaster, "The Human Element: When Gagetry Becomes Strategy," *World Affairs* 171, no. 3 (Winter 2009), 39.

[167] Karl A. Morton and John Perrine, "Lessons Learned in Civil-Military Operations in a Decisive Action Training Environment", *Center For Army Lessons Learned Newsletter 12-19: NTC Decisive Action Training Environment*, (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, September 2012), 57.

importance of understanding the prevailing culture and values."[168]  On this vein, Odierno

recently announced an initiative to align brigades with various regions around the world, with the

aim of building brigades that are better equipped to operation in these areas.[169]  This initiative

builds on the recent inclusion of cultural training and education in doctrine, strategic guidance

and in training centres.  According to authors Allison Abbe and Melissa Gouge, this represents

an important advance over the post-Vietnam era: "by incorporating culture into doctrine, the

Department of Defense has greatly improved the odds that the cultural training programs

implemented in recent years will survive beyond the conflicts that promoted them."[170]


Another lesson that was learned in Iraq that has been put into practice elsewhere revolves

around the whole of government approach to operations.  Leveraging the comprehensive

approach to generate unity of effort, U.S Africa Command (USAFRICOM) was established in

2007 and follows a model that is similar to CORDS during the Vietnam War.  With the goal of

building partner capacity in Africa, USAFRICOM is military-led, but is supported by elements

of the departments of State, Energy, Agriculture, Justice and Homeland Security, Commerce,

and well as the U.S. Agency for International Development and the intelligence community.[171]

Considered by some to have, "become the gold standard in collaboration,"[172] the headquarters

has two deputy commanders; one for military operations and a civilian from the State

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[168] Michelle Cohan, "Smart power: Army making cultural training a priority," CNN Online, 12 January 2013. Last accessed on 1 April 2013, http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/12/us/troops-cultural-training. Quote from General Odierno.

[169] *Ibid.*

[170] Allison Abbe and Melissa Gouge, "Cultural Training for Military Personnel: Revisiting the Vietnam Era", *Military Review* 92, no.4 (July-August 2012), 16.

[171] Miles, Donna.  "AFRICOM's Makeup Promotes 'Whole-of-Government' Approaches", U.S. Department of Defense Website, last modified 3 July 2012, http://www.africom.mil/Newsroom/Article/9059/africoms-makeup-promotes-whole-of-government-appro.

[172] *Ibid.*

Department who oversees civil-military activities and hold ambassador status.[173]  Although no

permanent forces are assigned to AFRICOM, they have used small teams from across the

services with good results.  According to one senior officer in the command, "Building the

capacity of our willing and important partners is not a strategic indulgence but rather an enduring

strategic imperative" [174]


All of these initiatives are underpinned by perhaps the most important realization to come

out of the Iraq War; the importance of mission command in complex threat environments.

Whereas the Vietnam War was the stimulus required to develop a process for capturing and

disseminating lessons, the Iraq War inspired a renewed appreciation for flexibility in command.

Author Russell described how this flexibility enabled success on operations:

> The apportionment and dispersal of authority throughout the organizations flowed
> from what military officers might describe as a 'command atmosphere' that
> allowed and even encouraged lower level adaptation and initiative in searching for
> solutions to the complex problems confronting the units on the battlefield.[175]

While U.S. military personnel had been educated and trained for operations that differed

significantly from the counterinsurgency and stability operations they were actually conducting,

it was their ability to rapidly adapt and apply lessons quickly that created the conditions for

progress.  This was only possible in a less rigid structure where commanders were entrusted with

greater freedom of action.  *ADP 3-0 Unified Land Operations* defines the philosophy of mission

command as, "the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to

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[173] *Ibid.*

[174] Charles W. Hooper, "Going Farther by Going Together: Building Partner Capacity in Africa," Joint Force *Quarterly* 67 (4th Quarter 2012), 9.

[175] Russell, *Innovation, Transformation, and War…,* 200-201.

enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent [that] guides leaders in the execution

of unified land operations."[176] While mission command has been in the lexicon of the U.S.

military for some time, *ADP 3-0* marks the formalization of mission command as part of an

operating concept. Together with initiative, another core tenet of the new *Unified Land

Operations* doctrine, mission command is symbolic of how the U.S. military envisages its future

leaders facing the ever-increasing range and diversity of security threats. The ability of leaders

to adapt, fight and learn in contact is perhaps best expressed by doctrine itself:

> The ability of Army forces to combine its core competencies into a fluid mix of
> offensive, defensive, and stability operations depends on a philosophy of
> command that emphasizes broad mission-type orders, individual initiative within
> the commander's intent, and leaders who can anticipate and adapt quickly to
> changing conditions.[177]

While there is striking evidence of the U.S. military's ability to adapt and learn while in

contact in Iraq, its desire and capability to institutionalize these lessons is perhaps less

straightforward. Detractors will readily point to the swift return to more conventional training,

the concept of lethality as the basis for all operations, and the lack of significant changes to the

basic force structure as signs that the U.S. military, especially the U.S. Army, is simply slipping

back into its comfort zone of big war strategy and tactics. With respect to the future of

counterinsurgency, author David Ucko considers the fundamental problem in America one of,

"confusing avoidance with simply the undesirability of the mission."[178] Yet woven into the

strategic guidance from the Pentagon and emanating throughout new Army doctrine and training

is a rethink of not only the future threats facing the West, but also a reconceptualization of how

counterinsurgency and stability operations should be approached. Recognizing that the large-

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[176] Department of Defense, *ADP 3-0…*, 5.
[177] *Ibid.,* 6.
[178] Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era…*, 291.

scale, direct participation of the U.S. in Iraq was costly and manpower intensive, the U.S. has

opted for a DoD template that will seen greater use of indirect approaches in future

counterinsurgencies.[179]  Unlike the post-Vietnam era that rejected the lessons of

counterinsurgency, the post-Iraq era is closely examining its lessons.  Of particular note is the

recognition that "counterinsurgency is not a strategy, but merely one possible way in the ends-

way-means concept of strategy."[180]  While the population-centric tenets of *FM 3-24* were

effective in Iraq, these same best practices did not translate as well in Afghanistan.  The outcome

appears to be not a wholesale abandonment of this method of war, but rather an acceptance that

there is more than one way to fight and that the strategy must be adapted for each conflict, even

if the tactics appear similar.  This open self-reflection that is occurring within DoD is nothing

short of learning from the experience in Iraq.  It should also be remembered that there is no

attempt to remove stability and counterinsurgency at the present time.  They are not only

captured in doctrine, but continue to be taught in training.  Additionally, the lessons born out of

Iraq have translated into cultural training and regional alignment, the comprehensive approach in

AFRICOM, and a greater emphasis on leadership and mission command.  These all constitute

positive signs of institutional learning.

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[179] T.X. Hammes, "Counterinsurgency: Not a Strategy, But a Necessary Capability", *Joint Force Quarterly* 65 (2nd Quarter 2012), 51.
[180] *Ibid.,* 49.

## SECTION 6 - A COMPARISON OF LEARNING

By 2005 the U.S. was fighting a fully-fledged insurgency in Iraq. The U.S. belief in the effectiveness of lethal, precision weapons and their supremacy in large-scale, conventional methods had allowed them to take Baghdad in only three short weeks, yet within months an insurgency took root, casualties began to rise, and hope of a swift handover to civilian authorities dwindled. Media reports were rife with dire predictions of the outcome, causing many to conclude that Iraq was Vietnam all over again. In just one example, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman indicated that, "what we're seeing there seems like the jihadist equivalent of the Tet offensive,"[181] referring to the rising tide of violence in the lead up to Iraqi elections in 2006. This comparison was ominous; the Tet Offensive was considered the turning point in U.S. public support of the Vietnam War. Yet despite some similarities, the differences between the conflicts were actually far more profound. This is particularly true of how the U.S. military learned in contact in both wars, and what they did with those lessons in the aftermath.

To fully appreciate how and why the U.S. military was able to learn, it is useful to understand the differences in the political and strategic military environments. Unlike Vietnam that was largely motivated by a U.S. fear of the spread of communism, the Iraq War could be considered a result of a fear of terrorism and the use of WMD. Iraq was billed as a continuation of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), which in turn was a response to a direct attack against the U.S. Unlike the bipolar world that emerged post-World War II in which the Soviet Union was

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[181] Thomas L Friedman, "Barney and Baghdad", New York Times, last modified 18 October 2006, http://topics.nytimes.com/top/opinion/editorialsandoped/oped/columnists/thomaslfriedman/index.html?inline=nyt-per.

the focal point of U.S. military strategy and Vietnam was effectively a secondary effort, the main effort of the post 9/11 world was combatting the multiple threats posed by unstable governments, failing states and international terror organizations.  Afghanistan, and then Iraq, became important symbols of direct threats to the U.S.; the former as a terrorist training ground and the latter as a producer of WMD.  Interestingly, while U.S. public opinion of government policy waned in direct correlation with the length of the conflict and the number of causalities, support for the military itself remained largely positive throughout the Iraq War, in marked contrast to Vietnam.[182]  While the exact reasons for this difference are multifaceted, the professional, educated, all-volunteer U.S. military that emerged after Vietnam has no doubt played a critical role in the transformation into a learning institution.  The re-build of the U.S. Army following Vietnam was successful in professionalizing the force with a renewed focus on training and capturing the right lessons.  According to Janine Davidson, this had an effect on the entire culture of the military: "The military that crossed the line in Baghdad in 2003 was simply not the same military that had failed to learn in Vietnam, and this hard-won shift in organizational culture is the critical factor that enabled the military to adapt."[183]

Despite having gained extensive combat experience in World War II, the U.S. military was unable to completely adapt to the irregular war it fought in Vietnam.  Successful initiatives did emerge, namely CAP, CIDG and CORDS, but this was not enough to change the course of the war, nor was it sufficient to force a complete reformulation of the overall conventionally

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[182] Jodie T. Allen, Nilanthi Samaranayake, and James Albrittain Jr.  "Iraq and Vietnam: A Crucial Difference in Opinion," PEW Research Centre, last modified on 22 March 2007, http://www.pewresearch.org/2007/03/22/iraq-and-vietnam-a-crucial-difference-in-opinion/.  Source indicates a consistently positive public opinion of the military that remained largely unchanged from 2002 through to 2007, where as many of 84% indicated a favourable impression.  In contrast, confidence in military leadership hit a low of 32% by 1973 at the end of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

[183] Davidson, *Lifting the Fog of Peace…*, 189.

based strategy.  Here the barriers to learning within the U.S. military institution were twofold; first, there was no effective means to capture and disseminate lessons that had been learned in contact, and second there was no consensus amongst senior military leadership as to the best strategy for waging war.  Without effective consensus or a means of collecting and transmitting lessons across the force, the military was unable to adapt quicker than the enemy and therefore never gained the initiative.  Similarly, the Iraq War started as a primarily conventional war, yet as the insurgency developed, so too did the tactical adaptation to counter it.  The shift away from destruction of the enemy and toward the protection of the population occurred in a bottom-up, decentralized fashion in places like Ramadi and the Syrian border region of Anbar Province.  Unlike Vietnam, the technical ability of U.S. Forces to rapidly gather and disseminate intelligence over an all-informed network existed and became a critical enabler.  The freedom of action afforded tactical level leaders in Iraq, largely through a mission command mentality, also permitted this adjustment toward counterinsurgency tactics.

Perhaps the most important differences between the learning in Vietnam and Iraq was that senior military commanders came to realize and agree that a strategic shift was necessary to change the course of the war in Iraq, thus promoting not only bottom-up learning but also top-down adaptation.  While a change in strategy did occur in Vietnam, particularly once General Abrams took command, it was not as complete shift to a counterinsurgency campaign, not everyone supported it, and it occurred too late.  In Iraq a much greater consensus on the adoption of a complete counterinsurgency effort occurred between senior military and political leaders.  This led to a more mutually supportive political-military front to the campaign.  Finally, the military seemed considerably more open to critique throughout the Iraq campaign, a testament to

the strength of its leaders and its willingness to learn.  In early 2006 a conference to review the

newly proposed counterinsurgency field manual was held at Fort Leavenworth.  A large number

of military and civilian experts, from human rights activists through to the State Department,

were invited to attend and critique the concepts.  In journalist Fred Kaplan's opinion, "no one in

the Army had ever gathered such an eclectic crew in one place for any purpose, certainly not to

vet a field manual."[184]  This collaborative process was in sharp contrast to advisory assistance in

Vietnam where the U.S. sought out expert opinion, but failed to take advantage of the advice

offered.  In fact a British advisory team existed in Vietnam for over three years, led by Sir Robert

Thompson who had extensive experience in counterinsurgency throughout the British Malayan

campaign.  According to Nagl, "Thompson was unable to prevail with his view that the

American focus on firepower and military solutions to political problems was counterproductive

and than population control strategies such as those that had worked in Malaya would be more

effective."[185]


The contrast between learning in contact in Vietnam and Iraq are dramatic, however the

military's ability to institutionalize the lessons of these respective campaigns is perhaps less

conclusive, largely due to the short period of time that has passed since the end of the Iraq War.

Nevertheless, there are several recent indicators that point to the retention of key lessons.  While

government action at the end of the Iraq War mirrored that of Vietnam in terms of immediate

fiscal reductions, the critical difference was in assessments of future threats.  The post-Vietnam

era threat was evident; the Soviet Union offered the most credible and dangerous risk to U.S.

national security, thus it was not only easy to cast aside the irregular warfare lessons of Vietnam,

[184] Kaplan, *The Insurgents…*, 11.
[185] Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife…*, 130.

it was completely justifiable in the eyes of politicians and senior military officers alike.
However, the post-Iraq security environment is far less straightforward.  The future is uncertain
and experts tend to advocate 'hybrid warfare' as the most dangerous emerging threat confronting
the U.S.  The hybrid adversary, "combine[s] the strengths of an irregular fighting force with
various capabilities of an advanced state military."[186]  The ability for this adversary to "transition
between irregular or guerrilla, and highly conventional warfare in company-or larger-sized
formations at will"[187] presents significant challenges to the U.S. military and means that it is
difficult to ignore the lessons of irregular warfare.

The retention of the expertise gained in Iraq may seem unlikely to some, particularly in
the context of a National Security Strategy that rules out future large-scale counterinsurgency
operations and an Army that has returned to more conventional training.  In fact retaining these
lessons is made more difficult in the current era of fiscal restraint.  However, the National
Security Strategy goes to great lengths to highlight that irregular warfare remains a top priority
and that the ability to conduct limited counterinsurgency and stability operations will still be
maintained.  Other initiatives, including a focus on cultural training, inclusion of stability and
counterinsurgency tactics alongside conventional tactics during collective training, and command
structures that incorporate the whole of government approach, are reflective of a military that is
committed to preserving the knowledge gained in Iraq.  It is also indicative of a military that has
come a very long way since Vietnam.  Whereas there was a rejection of the lessons of irregular
warfare following Vietnam, there is an acceptance in the post-Iraq era that strategic shocks can
and will occur and that the future security environment may involve simultaneous conventional

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[186] Christopher O. Bowers, "Identifying Emerging Hybrid Adversaries." *Parameters* 43 (Spring 2012), 39.
[187] *Ibid.,* 40.

and irregular warfare.  Although the post-conflict tones of avoidance are similar, there is no

immediate evidence of outright rejection of the lessons learned in Iraq.


The differences in how lessons were learned in contact and have been institutionalized in

the post-war period can be explained using several of the theories of organizational learning.

Posen's argument that failure can force a change within the military can explain the adoption of a

new strategy within Iraq.  With failure appearing increasingly likely in 2005 and 2006, key

civilian and military leaders drove the process for change that led to the 2007 strategic shift.

However, this top-down approach happened simultaneously to the bottom-up adaptation that was

occurring in Iraq where a rapid learning cycle was taking place; lessons were being accepted,

disseminated and put into practice at the tactical level.  This also happened in Vietnam, however

the cycle was blocked at the operational and strategic levels so adaptation was limited in scope.

In this sense, learning in contact occurred in both Vietnam and Iraq.  However, the extent to

which learning took place in Iraq was far greater given the enhanced ability to rapidly

disseminate lessons, increased freedom of action vested in lower level leaders, and the consensus

that was reached at the strategic level that incorporated the lessons learned in contact.


Post-war learning analysis is best observed through the lens of culture.  Halperin's

'essence' can be equated to the culture of an organization.  The military culture will always be

influenced by the ability and necessity to use lethal force, however there is an acceptance that

while lethality underpins all operations; the execution does not always include the application of

lethal force.  Interestingly, the elevation of stability operations doctrine is concrete evidence of

this shift in mindset.  Finally, it is easy to dismiss the post-Vietnam years as being devoid of

learning, but this is only true in the context of the lessons of Vietnam.  In fact, the U.S. military reinvented itself post-Vietnam and although it turned away from its expertise in irregular warfare, it did develop into an institution with a far greater capacity for learning.  The end result was that the U.S. military was fundamentally unprepared for the type of war that developed in Iraq, but it was fully prepared to rapidly learn in contact and to institutionalize those lessons.  In a sense, failure in Vietnam helped to create an institution better able to view itself critically, adapt rapidly in contact, and capture the lessons of war in doctrine.  As Janine Davidson indicates, "Ironically, the post-Vietnam training systems designed to prepare the U.S. Army for a large land war against a Soviet enemy planted the seeds that are allowing the military to adapt for COIN and stability operations today."[188]

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[188] Davidson, *Lifting the Fog of Peace…*,126.

**CONCLUSION**

      The U.S. military went to war in Vietnam to combat what was perceived as the growing threat of communism.  Originally an advisory mission, the U.S. role in Vietnam gradually grew into an extensive combat operation pitting the weak government forces of South Vietnam and the might of the U.S. military against the communist North Vietnamese quietly supported by the Soviet Union.  The U.S. military campaign was primarily based on big war, conventional tactics. It was also necessarily limited by U.S. diplomatic concerns over the potential Chinese and Russian response.  Post-war analysis, such as that posed by Andrew Krepinevich, contends that the U.S. military's inability to win the war in Vietnam was a result of its failure to adapt to an irregular war characterized by a concerted insurgency effort.  There is some evidence of learning in contact, but these initiatives were never fully embraced as an alternate to fighting the enemy with overwhelming firepower.  Thus while some adaptation did take place, most notably in the form of the civil-military pacification program CORDS, and population protection programs such as CAP and CIDG led by the U.S. Marines and Special Forces respectively, these were the exceptions rather than the rule throughout the conflict.  Wholesale campaign innovation was blocked by senior leaders who clung to the belief that they were fighting a conventional force, despite evidence that pointed toward insurgent methodologies.  Ultimately, the U.S. military failed to seize the initiative in Vietnam because it lacked the ability to learn.  In so doing, it lost the support of the American people.

      The stigma of failure in Vietnam remained with the U.S. military for decades, and was one of reasons for its turn away from irregular warfare capabilities choosing instead to focus on

its core strengths, conventional battles against state militaries.  Several iterations of doctrine following Vietnam attempted to determine how to defeat the Soviet Union, with increasing faith put in high-tech, high-lethality weapon systems.  In an attempt to further avoid another Vietnam scenario, the U.S. attempted to established criteria for when it would use military force summed up in the Weinberger doctrine.  Yet it was in the 1990s, following the fall of the Soviet Union, that efforts were made to employ the military in roles outside of its conventional offensive and defensive mission set.  The expected peace resulting from the end of the Cold War simply did not materialize, and America found itself pulled into regional conflicts and multiple 'operations other than war'.  With the exception of the Gulf War in 1990, stability operations increasingly became the typical operation performed by the U.S. military, and in particular the Army.  Although the irregular warfare lessons of Vietnam were long since forgotten by the military institution, the operations of the 1990s forced the military to adapt to the new security environment.  The establishment of the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) and various communities of practice aided the learning process through the capture, dissemination and institutionalize of lessons learned in training and in conflict.

The U.S. military was ill prepared for the irregular war is encountered in Iraq, however it did have a strong basis for learning already established.  This proved to be the vital ingredient for the strategic shift that occurred in Iraq.  Rapid tactical level learning of irregular warfare occurred in a decentralized fashion from 2005 onward, yet this alone was not enough to change the course of the war.  Doctrine for fighting counterinsurgency and conducting stability operations was produced and it proponents were entrusted with its execution in Iraq.  This change in both tactics and strategy in Iraq was accompanied by other factors, such as the Sunni

Awakening, that helped to propel Iraq out of the depths of violence that it had experienced since 2003. Thus the adoption of a new, population-centric strategy backed up by the judicial use if firepower contributed to the stabilization of the country and was symbolic of how the U.S. military could rapidly learn in contact. Now in the post-Iraq period there exists a desire to avoid messy, manpower intensive insurgencies. Yet the fundamental difference between now and the post-Vietnam period is the realization that avoidance many simply not be possible, and that preparation for all forms of conventional and irregular conflicts is necessary. Rather than shelve the lessons of the last war, the U.S. military has opted to capture these lessons in training and in doctrine. As the U.S. military pulls away from Iraq, it is determined to use the experience to become more agile and adaptive in the future security environment. A focus on technology and conventional warfare necessarily persists, but this is tempered with a pragmatic emphasis on countering irregular threats. The contrasts with Vietnam are evident, and most notable in the U.S. military as a learning organization. It was actually the inability to adapt in Vietnam that spurred a learning evolution within the U.S. military in the post-war years. In turn, this evolution created the necessary changes in institutional culture that paved the way for the learning that occurred in Iraq and that continues today. In the future this ability to learn and adapt is perhaps the singular most important characteristic for the U.S. military. Failure to learn not only has dire consequences for the institution itself, but for entire societies.

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