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Shaping the Future of Counterinsurgency Warfare: A Strategic Approach

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I have mixed feelings as I approach the subject of counterinsurgency today. I have now been involved in this field professionally for more than 30 years and I cannot discuss any of the issues involved without a feeling of déjà-vu and some discouragement. We seem to find it far harder to learn from the past than we should, and we repeat it whether we remember it or not.

The Lessons of Complexity, Uncertainty, and Risk

This brings me to the first point I would like raise about counterinsurgency. Time after time, I have seen people approach the subject of counterinsurgency by trying to oversimplify the situation, underestimate the risks, and exaggerate the level of control they can achieve over the course and ultimate strategic outcome of the war. They try to deny its complexity, and the full range of issues that must be dealt with.

In doing so, many try to borrow from past wars or historical examples, and they talk about “lessons,” as if a few simple lessons from one conflict could be transferred easily to another. The end result is that -- far too often -- we end up rediscovering the same old failed slogans and over simplifications and trot out all the same old case histories without really examining how valid they are.

I cannot tell you how gallopingly irrelevant are many aspects of the other counterinsurgency campaigns I have lived through today. We focus once again on Mao, Malaysia, Vietnam, Northern Ireland, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We try bring back the same old tactical and technical solutions, without remembering past failures. “Oil spots,” “hearts and minds,” “Special Forces,” walls and barriers, and sensor nets are just a few examples of such efforts.

For example, some talk about the use of sensors, UAV, and IS&R in Iraq as if they were “magic bullets.” I inherited the unattended ground sensor program in Vietnam at DARPA, and became all too aware of all its failures. Decades later, I was briefed by senior Israeli official on why a new system of such sensors and UAVs was going to work in Southern Lebanon, and he provided remarkable amount of statistical evidence and technicals to indicate that this time a more modern

approach *would* work. The fact that the briefer was killed in Lebanon months later, and Israel was effectively defeated, is a warning about the relevance of what he was saying. It is also a warning about choosing any other over-simplified approach to counterinsurgency based on either technology or past wars.

Things become much worse when you fail to be ruthlessly objective about the present. There is no way to avoid the fog of war, but there is no reason to make it a self-inflicted wound. Counterinsurgency cannot be fought on the basis of political slogans, official doctrine, ideology, and efforts to spin the situation in the most favorable terms. Unless warfighters and policymakers honestly address the complexity, unique characteristics, and risks and costs a given conflict, they inevitably come up with solutions which, as the old joke states, are “simple, quick and wrong.” History shows all too clearly that this “simple, quick and wrong” approach is how we have created far too many of our past problems in foreign policy, and that it is a disastrous recipe for war. In retrospect, fewer of our failures occurred because we lacked foresight, than because we sought simplicity at the expense of reality

To use another old joke, Americans also treat counterinsurgency as if were a third marriage, “a triumph of hope over experience.” We began by underestimating the scale of the problems we really have to face and just how many resources, how much time, and how expensive in dollars and blood the cost will be. We can’t plan for hope and best cases if we want to win. We have to examine all of the variables, prioritize, and be very careful about the importance of any issues we dismiss. We have to be ready for failure in unanticipated areas.

The reality is that counterinsurgency warfare is almost always a “worst case” or we would not become involved in it in the first place. We become involved in counterinsurgency because an ally has failed, because a friendly nation has failed. We become involved because diplomacy and foreign policy have failed. Almost by definition, we become involved because things have gone seriously wrong.

We ignore the fact that the course and outcome of counterinsurgency wars inevitably is affected by law of unintended consequences. Risk analysis is remarkably difficult, because risk analysis

based on what we think we know going in, and that set of perceptions almost invariably proves to be seriously wrong over time. Both allies and enemies evolve in unpredictable ways. Political, social and economic conditions change inside the zone of conflict in ways we cannot anticipate.

Wars broaden in terms of the political impact on regions and our global posture. Conflict termination proves to be difficult to impossible, or the real-world outcome over time becomes very different from the outcome negotiators thought would happen at the time. The reality proves far more dynamic and uncertain than is predicted going in; the fight requires far more time and resources necessary to accomplish anything than operators plan for.

We need to understand that we cannot develop ways to eliminate all such uncertainties, and we need to recognize that mistakes will inevitably be made that go far beyond the ones that are the result of political bias or ideology. There are some who would believe that if only planners and analysts could work without political bias or interference, this would solve most of our problems. Well quite frankly, even the best planners and analysts will face major problems regardless of their political and military leadership. The scale of ignorance and uncertainty will inevitably be too great when we enter most counterinsurgency contingencies. We have to accept that as the price of going to war.

This does not mean, however, that politics and ideology are not an important source of self-inflicted wounds. It is an open question to me which is proving worse, the infantile expectations of the neocons going into the Iraq war, or the equally infantile expectations of the neoliberals, at least at the civilian level, going into Vietnam.

I have gradually concluded that the Kennedy administration was worse than the Bush administration on the grounds of sheer hypocrisy. The Bush administration officials seem to have been sustained true believers in the justice of their cause. All too early in Vietnam, Rostow, the Bundies, and Hilsman already knew that they were on the edge of failure. On the other hand, when I look at who was the less capable Secretary of Defense—McNamara or Rumsfeld—I have to choose Rumsfeld. In Rumsfeld's case, we had already been through Vietnam, Lebanon, and

Somalia. Rumsfeld, and those around him, had far more of a past to learn from and they should have done so.

But I'm not sure that war fighters and analysts are all that much better. It is frightening to look back at the almost endless reams of analyses, plans, and solutions that people advanced in war colleges and in think tanks and universities during Vietnam War, El Salvador and Lebanon. Vietnam may have represented the nadir of American analysis, planning, and objectivity. However, Somalia, the Dayton accords, and Iraq also represented a failure to analyze the situation properly. Even when we analyzed well, we failed to translate this analysis into effective plans and operational capability within the interagency process.

Moreover, time and again, we drift into a focus on trying to win in tactical terms rather than focusing on whether we could use a war to achieve the desired national, regional, and grand strategy outcome. We forget that it is the end that counts, and not the means. We also forget that slogans and rhetoric kill, ideology kills, and a failure to fully survey and assess kills.

The Lesson of Strategic Indifference; Of Knowing When Not to Play the Game

The second point I would like touch upon is a lesson we seem to repeatedly learn at the end of counterinsurgency campaigns but then perpetually forget in entering into the next conflict. Not every game is worth playing, and sometimes the best way to win is not to play at all.

When we talk about the risks of counterinsurgency, it is far too easy to mischaracterize the situation by seeing the intervention as too easy and the need for action as too great. It is far too easy to exaggerate the threat. I still remember distinctly the first time I ever attended a session of the British parliament. It was to hear Duncan Sandys denounce an African leader for leading the entire continent into the ways of darkness and death. That particular leader was Jomo Kenyatta. Seven years later, he was the Western symbol of stabilization in Africa.

It is equally easy to both exaggerate the ability of a counterinsurgency campaign to achieve a desired strategic outcome and ignore the fact that history is often perfectly capable of solving a

problem if we do not intervene. A few years ago, I toured Vietnam, and saw from the Vietnamese side their vision of what had happened in the war. There were many tactical and political lessons I drew from that experience, one of which was how thoroughly we ignored what was happening to Buddhist perceptions and support at the political level while we concentrated on the tactical situation and the politics of Saigon.

The lesson I found most striking, however, was seeing the grand strategic outcome of the war as measured by even the most trivial metrics. I bought a bottle of mineral water in Hanoi airport and discovering that on the front label it said "USA Water," while its back label stated that it had been processed through a 14-step process developed by NASA. When I looked at the toy counter, I saw that the bulk of toys consisted of US fighters or fighters with US marking. When I walked over to the news counter, I saw the "Investor's Journal" in Vietnamese and English. This was after being told repeatedly how glad the Vietnamese were that we stayed in Asia as a deterrent to China. We were right in many ways about the domino theory, we just forgot that dominos can fall in two directions.

Is Counterinsurgency the Right Means to the End?

This brings me to my third point. Even if the game is worth playing, counterinsurgency may not be the way to play it. Robert Osgood made the point a long time ago that you engage in limited war, you do it for limited purposes. If you cannot keep the war and the purposes limited, you should not engage. It is amazing how easy it is to forget this. There are times when a counterinsurgency campaign is necessary or is forced on the US from the outside, but there are many times when we have a choice and can choose options other than counterinsurgency.

Containment is one such option. I'm not going to ask for hands, but if you had known when we went into Iraq what you know today, would you still have rejected containment as the option? If you have to think about military involvement in Iran or Syria, is containment quite that bad a choice versus expanding a limited war or regime change -- at least by force?

If you cannot use containment, should we take advantage of military options where we have a decisive set of advantages: the ability to carry out selective strikes with limited cost. Placing US forces on the ground where they must conduct a major counterinsurgency or counterterrorism campaign is far more costly and risk-oriented than using limited amounts of force in precision strikes or other carefully limited forms. Sanctions and sustained political pressure often have severe limits, but they too can sometimes achieve the desired result in ways that are and less costly than counterinsurgency.

Even when a counterinsurgency or counterterrorism campaign is necessary, using US forces may not be the answer. It is true that the US will normally only consider engaging in counterinsurgency because the nation it is going to fight is weak or divided. Far too often, however, we seem to commit our forces to combat. In many cases, it will still be better to rely on the local ally and build up their forces, even if this means a higher risk of losing in what is, after all, a limited war.

The right answer may never be clear, easy to choose, or be the same for different crises and problems. I would also like to emphasize, that I am not for a moment saying we should not use counterinsurgency techniques. What I am saying is that we should only engage directly in counterinsurgency after we assess the costs, risks, ability to achieve the desired end objective, *and the alternatives* honestly.

Conflict Termination Does Not always Mean Winning

My fourth point goes firmly against the American grain, but it is a natural corollary of limited war. If we cannot achieve the desired grand strategic outcome, we need to accept the fact that the US must find ways to terminate a counterinsurgency war. Defeat, withdrawal, and acceptance of an outcome less than victory is always acceptable in limited war. For all the arguments about prestige, trust, and deterrence, there is no point in pursuing a limited conflict when it becomes more costly than the objective is worth or when the probability of achieving that objective becomes too low.

This is a lesson that goes against our culture. The whole idea that we can be defeated is no more desirable for Americans than for anyone else, in fact, almost certainly less so. But when we fail in Haiti, we fail in Haiti. We live with it, and in fact, it almost does not matter. Nobody truly notices. Exiting Somalia was not without consequences, but they were not critical. And I've already mentioned the consequences of Vietnam.

That does not mean that we should not stay in Iraq as long as we have a good chance of achieving acceptable objectives at an acceptable cost. But, it does mean that we can afford to lose in Iraq, particularly for reasons that are frankly beyond our control and which the world will recognize as such. There is no point in "staying the course" through a major civil war, a catastrophic breakdown of the political process, or a government coming to power that simply asks us to leave. In all three cases, it isn't a matter of winning or losing, but instead, facing a situation in which there is no real condition for staying.

In the future, we need to say that it is a limited war if it is a limited war. We need to explain fully what the limits are and develop a strategy for implementing, communicating and exploiting these limits. One mistake is to tell the host government, or the people you are fighting with, that your commitment is open-ended and that you can never leave; the incentive for responsibility vanishes with it.

Similarly, if you tell the world that a marginal strategic interest is vital, the world will sooner or later believe it, which is very dangerous if you have to leave or lose. You are better off saying you may lose, setting limits, and then winning, than claiming that you can't lose, having no limits, and then losing. And this should not be a massive, innovative lesson, but it is one we simply do not seem prepared to learn.

If We Must Fight a Counterinsurgency Campaign, We Must Focus Firmly on the Strategic, Political, and Allied Dimension of the Fighting

My fifth point is that focusing on the military dimension is an almost certain path to grand strategic defeat in a serious conflict. If we must engage in counterinsurgency warfare, and

sometimes we must, then we need to plan for both complexity and cost. We have to prepare for the risk of long-term engagement and escalation, which will require more forces and resources, or otherwise set very clear limits and act upon them regardless of short-term humanitarian costs.

We need to prepare for, and execute, a full spectrum of conflict. That means doing much more than seeking to win a war militarily. We need to have the ability to commit ourselves in ideological and political terms. We must find ways of winning broad local and regional support; stability operations and nation building are the price of any meaningful counterinsurgency campaign.

We Cannot Win Unless We Create an Ally and Partner Who Can Govern and Secure the Place Where We Are Fighting.

Sixth, successful counterinsurgency means having or creating a local partner that can take over from US forces and that can govern. What strikes me as most consistent between Vietnam and Iraq is that both cases show we cannot win an important counterinsurgency campaign alone. We will always be dependent on the people in the host country, and usually on local and regional allies. And to some extent at least, we will be dependent on the UN, traditional allies and diplomacy. If we can't figure out a way to have or create such an ally, the conflict is probably not worth fighting.

This means doing far more than creating effective allied forces. In most cases, we will have to find a way to reshape the process of politics and governments to create some structure in the country that can actually act in areas we liberate. Pacification is the classic example. If we can't deploy allied police forces and government presence, we often end up with a place on the map where no one in his right mind would go at night.

We have to be prepared to use aid and civic action dollars as well as bullets, and I think the US military has done far better in this area in Iraq than it has in the past. I wish I could say the same for AID in Washington, or for any aspect of the economic planning effort under the CPA. I can't. We ignored the economic realities going into Iraq and we ignore the economic realities now.

Every independent assessment of our aid effort warns us just how bad our performance is in these areas -- even in critical areas like the oil industry. We now have spent or committed our way through nearly \$20 billion, and we have virtually no self-sustained structural economic change to show for it. Most aid projects spend more money on overhead, contractors, and security than gets to Iraqis in the field. We can't protect most of our aid projects, economic growth comes largely from US waste and wartime profiteering.

Our self-congratulatory measures of achievement are mindless. Who cares how much money we spend or how many buildings we create, unless it goes to the right place and has a lasting impact. The number of school buildings completed is relevant unless there are books, teachers, furniture, students and security, and the buildings go to troubled areas as well as secure ones. Bad or empty buildings leave a legacy of hostility, not success. Empty or low capacity clinics don't win hearts and minds. Increasing peak power capacity is meaningless unless the right people actually get it.

Honestly Winning the Support of the American People

Seventh, it is critical that we honestly prepare the American people, the Congress and our allies for the real nature of the war to be fought and prepare them to sustain the expense and sacrifice through truth, not spin. I suggested to several senior US officers that the first step in wartime is to shoot the PAOs you have in peacetime. That is unfair to the PAOs; like diplomats, they are paid to lie, in this case, for the campaign, rather than for the country. But there is only so much shallow spin that the American people or Congress will take. It isn't a matter of a cynical media or a people who oppose the war; rubbish is rubbish. By the time we finish "spinning," we deprive ourselves of credibility, domestically and internationally.

Planning for Realistic Durations

I would normally have mentioned my eighth point earlier, but it is so closely linked to winning the support of the American people that I am mentioning it now. Serious counterinsurgency campaigns take five to fifteen years. They don't end conveniently with an assistant secretary or a

President's term in office. Again and again we deny the sheer length of serious counterinsurgencies.

Planners, executers, and anyone who explains and justifies such wars, all need to be far more honest about the timescales involved, just how long we may have to stay, and that even when an insurgency is largely over, there may be years of aid and advisory efforts.

Implications for War Fighting

My final points about counterinsurgency focus on war-fighting, and I should stress that my concerns are not with the details of military strategy and tactics, but rather with broader lessons I believe I have learned over the more than 40 years from Vietnam to Iraq.

- **First, I cannot stress often enough that we need to focus relentlessly on the desired outcome of the war and not the battle or overall military situation.** It doesn't matter how well we did last month; it doesn't matter how we're doing tactically. The real question is, are we actually moving toward a strategic outcome that serves our interests? If we don't know, why are we there spending the lives of American men and women in the first place?

We have to teach at every level that stability operations and conflict termination are the responsibility of every field-grade officer. And, for that matter, every civilian. We need to act on the principle that every tactical operation must have a political context and set of goals. We need to tie our overall campaign plan to a detailed plan for the use of economic aid at every level, from simple bribery to actually seeking major changes in the economy of a given country.

- **Second, we need to understand, as Gen. Rupert Smith has pointed out, that the enemy will continue to try win counterinsurgency conflicts by finding ways to operate below or above our threshold of conventional superiority.** It is stupid, as some in the military have done, to call our enemies cowards or terrorists because they

will not fight on our terms. The same remarkably stupid attitudes appeared in 19th century colonial wars and often cost those foolish enough to have them the battle. The Madhils victories in the Sudan are a good case example.

We have to be able to fight in ways that defeat insurgents and terrorists regardless of how they fight. They're not cowards for fighting us in any way that does so at the highest cost to us and the least cost to them. If they can fight below our threshold of conventional superiority, then technology is at best a limited supplement to our human skills, military professionalism, and above all, our ability to find ways to strengthen local allies.

It is far more important, for example to have effective local forces than more technology. Net-centric is not a substitute for human-centric, and for that matter, human-centric isn't a substitute for competent people down at the battalion level. Systems don't win. Technology doesn't win.

Third, we need to acknowledge that enemies can fight above the threshold of our conventional ability, not just beneath it. I have never understood why Americans think *they* can win an ideological struggle over Islam. Our Muslim allies can; *if* we work with them.

Our public diplomacy and political actions can have a major impact. But, when we talk about many of the wars we are now fighting, the local, cultural, ethnic, religious, and political issues have to be fought out largely by our ally on the ground and other Islamic states. We can help, but we alone are not going to win, or even successfully dominate, the battle for hearts and minds. Only regional allies with the right religion, culture, and legitimacy can cope with the growing ability of our ideologically-driven opponents to find the fault lines that can divide us from our allies by creating increased ethnic and sectarian tensions.

- **Fourth, we do need to improve our counterinsurgency technology, but we cannot win with “toys.”** I mentioned the Israeli failure in Lebanon earlier largely because American audiences have some familiarity with our own history of failures of this kind. This was a case where I listened to an hour and half of interesting technological ideas as to why Israel would win in Southern Lebanon, which looked almost exactly like some of the briefings we used to give at DARPA during Vietnam.

Israeli technology failed in Lebanon as ours did in Vietnam, and some of the same IED systems that helped defeat Israel have now emerged in Iraq: those twin IR sensors, the shaped charges, the radio-controlled devices, the foam painted to look like rocks. Like Israel, we can defeat most IEDs, but not enough. Moreover, I suspect that you could take the cost of every insurgent IED to date, and it would still be cheaper than one AH1S that went down over Iraq.

- **Fifth, our best “force multiplier” will be effective allies, and interoperability with a true partner.** We can win most counterinsurgency campaigns if we can create strong allies. We do win if we have troops that can operate against insurgents in the field, but carry out nation building and civil action activities at the same time. We win if we can find ways to match the military, political, economic, and governance dimension.

Creating a real partnership with allies means respect; it doesn't mean creating proxies or tools. It also means recognizing that creating the conditions for effective governance and police are as important as the military. So is the creation of effective ministries. In this kind of warfare if you focus on the ministry of defense and ignore the ministry of the interior, and even more difficult if you ignore the ministry of finance, this just doesn't work.

In most places, the actual counterinsurgency battle is local and as dependent on police and effective governance as effective military forces. In hyper-urbanized areas, which represent many of the places where we fight, the city is the key, at least as much as the national government. And, incidentally, Iraq has already shown time after time that it is

difficult to sustain any victory without a lasting presence by local police and government offices

We also need to recognize something about regional allies that goes against our present emphasis on “democracy.” In most of the world, “legitimacy” has little to do with governments being elected, and a great deal to do with governments being popular. By all means, hold elections. They won’t do much harm in most cases. Sometimes, they can even do some good.

But, elections in wartime are only the answer if they help us win. In many cases, elections may bring people to power who are more of a problem than a solution. This is particularly true if elections come without the preconditions of mature political parties, economic stability a firm rule of law, and checks and balances. In most cases, we will need to worry about the people who don’t win—people, ethnicities, and sects who will not have human rights protection. (If any of you think there is a correlation between democracy and human rights, congratulations, you got through college without ever reading Thucydides. The Melian dialogue is the rule, not the exception.)

- **Fifth, we need to have a functional interagency process and partner our military with effective civilian counterparts.** We cannot afford to bypass the system or to have civilian agencies that do not do their part from the outset. We need to begin by deciding on the team we go to war, and then make that team work. It is one of the oddities historically that Robert McNamara got his largest increase in US troops deployed to Vietnam by bypassing the interagency process. The Bush Administration began by going through an interagency process before the war, but largely chose to ignore it after January of 2003.

This is the wrong approach. Counterinsurgency wars are as much political and economic as military. They require political action, aid in governance, economic development and attention to the ideological and political dimension. The US can only succeed here if the interagency process can work.

At another level, we need civilian risk-takers. We need a counterpart to the military in the field. Frankly I don't support the staffing of more interagency coordination bodies in Washington unless their primary function is to put serious resources into the field. We're not going to win anything by having better interagency coordination, and more meetings, unless the end result is to put the right mix of people and resources out in the countryside and where the fighting takes place.

One suggestion I would make is that we put a firm end to the kind of mentality that overstaffs the State Department and intelligence community in Washington, and doesn't require career civilians to take risks in the field. Foreign Service officers should not be promoted, in fact should be selected out, unless they are willing to take risks. Believe me, having been a FSR, and having taught international relations for years, we can get all of the risk takers we want. There already is a flood of applications from qualified people. We can also ensure continuity and expertise by drawing on the brave group of people already in Iraq and Afghanistan -- a remarkable number of whom are already contract employees -- and giving them career status.

We also need to "civilianize" some aspects of our military. We need to improve both their area and language skills, create the added specialized forces we need for stability and nation building operations, and rethink tour length for military who work in critical positions and with allied forces. Personal relationships are absolutely critical in the countries where we are most likely to fight counterinsurgency wars. So is area expertise and continuity in intelligence.

I am not particularly impressed with the idea that you can't get our military and civilians to accept 18 month to 24 month tours in key slots. I find there are plenty of people willing to do this. The problem today is often that the selection system presents problems. People who take additional risks should be paid for it and have different leave policies and promotion incentives. The fact is that a man who is only a battalion commander is only a battalion commander. Other officers need to be there who have skills that go

beyond that level. Those officers need to have more diverse skills, and deal adequately with the broader dimension of war, and stay long enough to be fully effective.

The last point I would like to raise today concerns intelligence. There are a lot of people here who have worked in the intelligence community and I know many are going to disagree with what I am about to say. Nevertheless, I don't believe HUMINT is the panacea many promise. Good analysis is critical. Having allied countries, or allied forces, or allied elements, develop effective HUMINT is absolutely critical.

Far too often, we will have to go into counterinsurgency campaigns without being able to put qualified Americans in the field quickly enough to recruit effective agents and develop effective HUMINT on our own. Does that mean HUMINT isn't important? No, of course it doesn't; it is a useful tool. So is technical intelligence. But to create effective abilities to deal with security issues, you must have a local partner in most serious cases.

With that, ladies and gentlemen, I'll quit and take your comments and questions.