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A Strategy for Irregular Warfare

Defense experts and policymakers are struggling with a critical question: What is irregular warfare and is the U.S. military truly ready to embrace it? This question is likely to undergo close examination in the forthcoming Quadrennial Defense Review¹ (QDR), due to be released in 2006, and the answer will be influenced in part by the past, present, and future of the U.S. Special Forces. This was the subject of debate for an expert panel at CSIS on November 22, 2005.

Since the last QDR, experiences with counterterrorism and counterinsurgency in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other areas of the world have shown that the United States must fundamentally reexamine its approach to fighting war, including force structure and strategy. Lessons learned since 9/11 call into question the relevance of some high-cost weapons platforms and elevate the importance of training and equipping ground troops. The 2006 QDR must institutionalize a set of best practices—from strategy to logistics to training—many of which can be derived from the experiences and missions of U.S. Special Forces over the past two decades. Defense reform based on the field-earned knowledge of the Special

The most common type of threat today comes not from standing armies of enemy states but from groups that wage war from the shadows, wearing no uniforms and claiming no state but able to wreak havoc by using the basic precepts of guerrilla warfare. These actors understand that the only way to confront a larger, stronger enemy is to use unconventional tactics that turn their weaknesses into strengths. They understand that the battlefield is a human one and that creating psychological impact is the key to victory.

—Linda Robinson, *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces*

Forces will begin with a doctrinal definition of irregular warfare, currently ill-defined by the Pentagon in terms of institutionalized strategy and terminology.

Structurally, many gaps remain in preparing the U.S. military for regular involvement in irregular warfare. Despite the considerable lip service paid to the global war on terror, current defense posture remains largely reflective of the cold war era. There is wide agreement that the U.S. military is still preparing to fight the Soviets on the steppes of Asia rather than to engage Al Qaeda in the back alley of a mega-city. Warfare in the future is likely to resemble the “Blackhawk down” episode in Mogadishu or the siege of Fallujah—but not, likely, another open battlefield confrontation such as the first Gulf War. The Department of Defense (DOD)—from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Office of the Secretary of Defense down to enlisted soldiers—must be prepared for this type of battle.

But such a call for transformation meets stiff resistance. China is the wildcard that conventional-force advocates wave in the faces of those calling for radical restructuring and re-strategizing. Commentator and strategist Thomas Barnett has argued that almost \$1.3 billion in current Pentagon spending is directly related to fighting China—a threat he does

not believe will materialize.² Surely, the U.S. military must maintain conventional forces adequate to deter potential challenges from a rising rival power; but it must do so in balance with the more pressing need to win the global war on terror.

War Without Guns

Recognition of the continued ubiquity of low-grade, protracted warfare against asymmetrical foes is the starting point from which Linda Robinson, senior writer for *U.S. News & World Report*, launched the panel discussion at CSIS. Robinson is the author of *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces*, the most definitive account to date covering the past two decades of U.S. Special Forces. Most striking about Robinson’s book—and her comments on the panel—is the stereotype-shattering picture she paints of the Special Forces. Robinson argued that Special Forces are successful at fighting irregular warfare not because of their Hollywood image as muscular, Rambo-type super-soldiers. Special Forces are successful precisely because of their ability to avoid violence, to understand the “boomerang” consequences of killing, to communicate across cultures, and to leverage indigenous forces and populations to achieve political objectives. They are the most adept at fighting irregular warfare, which is alternatively referred to as Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW), asymmetric



Linda Robinson introducing the concepts of irregular warfare and the role of the special forces at CSIS on November 22, 2005.

warfare, low-intensity conflict or insurgency/counterinsurgency.

Irregular warfare is not only about the force-multiplying effects of net-centric warfare. Fighting the wars of the future is about language skills, cultural understanding, and the ability of the U.S. military to separate the enemy from the people. Another panelist, Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Lambert (Ret.), former commander of U.S. Army Special Forces and commandant of the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, observed that the true revolution in military affairs—once envisioned as the computerization of the battlefield against the Soviets—is the inclusion of civilians as part of strategy and tactics on the battlefield. These human noncombatants or partisan soldiers are no longer simply to be avoided as “collateral damage”; they are increasingly integrated into tactical and strategic considerations and nonmilitary warfare.

Maj. Gen. Lambert suggested that militaries must first determine political objectives and work backward, executing necessary military actions to achieve those stated goals—but only when another alternative in the “soft” realm does not exist. Maj. James Gavrillis, a U.S. Army Special Forces officer currently assigned to the Joint Staff who served two tours in Iraq, agreed with these points. Maj. Gavrillis argued that the most important asset of Special Forces in Iraq—and one he hinted the conventional forces still lack—is the ability to switch seamlessly between war fighting and building Iraqi self-governance and capacity. Non-military engagement positively perceived by an indigenous populations severs the links between insurgent leaders and terrorists and the people they depend on for support. Such a mode of engagement, though, requires the equivalent of Political Science 101 for every soldier on the battlefield—a greater attention to training.

Building Coalitions at Home and Abroad

Daniel Benjamin, senior fellow in the CSIS International Security Program, commented at the event that the U.S. has over-militarized the war on terror. Policymakers have relied too heavily on “door kickers” and not enough on the host of psychological operations, civil affairs outreach, and cooperation with foreign governments that the United States

has at its disposal. Maj. Gen. Lambert echoed Benjamin's point, calling for greater sharing of intelligence across government agencies and across countries. Effective implementation of such a strategy, he argued, would also allow for prevention instead of preemption—minimizing military actions that could alienate civilians.

Clark Murdock, senior adviser in the CSIS International Security Program, observed that 90 percent of Special Forces are currently deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are, as Robinson observed, a “high-demand, low-density asset,” and the United States is fighting a global war on terror that may require them at a moment's notice in any part of the world. Even if the United States reduces its troop presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, the fact remains that conventional forces must adopt more of the methodology and approach of Special Forces. Conventional forces must learn to fight irregular warfare because that is their likely destiny. Maj. Gen. Lambert argued that what has really changed since 9/11 is the reality that this “war... is unbounded in time, tactics, and space.” The conventional military is not yet up to fighting in such a war, and their successful participation is critical to victory in the years ahead.

Transforming the military to fight and win with irregular warfare is only part of the solution, however. All of the panelists agreed



CSIS Scholars Dan Benjamin and Clark Murdock commenting on transforming current structures to address new challenges.

that a major obstacle to future victory is sufficiently educating the American people on the logic of protracted engagement and the nature of irregular warfare. Measuring and reporting political progress is significantly more difficult than reporting the number of terrorists killed or captured. The lines also blur between what the public will tolerate in terms of clandestine, covert, or overt action. Leadership and oversight on this issue will have to come as much from Congress as from the White House and DOD.

¹ The QDR is a fundamental reexamination of U.S. defense posture and the organization and operation of the Department of Defense (DOD). Most important, the QDR determines the projected budget and priority areas for U.S. defense spending.

² Thomas P.M. Barnett, “The Chinese Are Our Friends,” *Esquire*, November 1 2005, <http://www.keepmedia.com/pubs/Esquire/2005/11/01/1037812?refId=19>.



Left to right: Panel moderator, CSIS Senior Vice President, and Director of the Global Strategy Institute, Erik R. Peterson; Linda Robinson, *U.S. News and World Report*; Maj. Gen. Jeffrey Lambert (Ret.), Fmr. Commander of the U.S. Army Special Forces Command; Maj. James Gavrillis, U.S. Army Special Forces.