

## Pentagon Studying War Errors

Contributed by Bryan Bender  
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 Analysts assess tactics in Iraq, Afghanistan  
 By Bryan Bender, Globe Staff | August 16, 2006

WASHINGTON -- The US military establishment has quietly undertaken a wholesale reassessment of its war strategy with a goal of identifying the mistakes made in Iraq and Afghanistan -- and remedying them before the next conflict.

This summer, high-level Pentagon officials ordered a pair of secret studies to pinpoint the military's failures in the two conflicts, and, according to one of the authors, "the results won't be pretty" when the findings are produced this fall. Last week, the Defense Department invited about 50 of the nation's top counter insurgency specialists to a closed-door meeting outside Washington to critique recent operations and chart a way forward.

The studies, according to several Pentagon officials involved, have found serious deficiencies across the board. For example, US troops in Iraq have often used too much force when conducting operations in civilian areas, unnecessarily alienating local populations. They cite US commanders as being too slow to establish working relationships with local allies, and note that providing security and safety for the Iraqi people wasn't an early priority.

The military's continuing shortcomings in gathering accurate intelligence about insurgents has particularly hampered its missions: "We know relatively little about insurgent motivation and morale, leadership, and recruitment," according to an unpublished study produced in June by the government-funded RAND Corporation.

"This is a struggle for the soul of the Army," said Colonel Peter Mansoor, a former battalion commander in Iraq who now heads the newly established Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center in Fort Leavenworth, Kan. "A lot of work needs to be done to change the mind-set of the force. For decades, we focused on high-intensity combat. We are trying to shift the culture of the force and balance it better."

Top officers are literally re writing the book on how to conduct counterinsurgency operations -- a skill that has atrophied in the three decades since the Vietnam War but has become painfully relevant in Iraq and Afghanistan, where winning hearts and minds has proved far more difficult than killing enemy forces.

After preparing for generations to fight "big wars" against large conventional armies, the military is absorbing its toughest lesson of the post- Sept. 11 world: It isn't prepared to wage small-scale, guerrilla wars that have become the hallmark of Islamic extremists and their allies in Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

In classrooms, on training bases, and even on the battlefield, military scholars and combat veterans are struggling to teach the world's most lethal military force how to calibrate its immense firepower and avoid the kind of heavy-handed tactics and cultural insensitivity that have engendered so much ill will and helped fuel insurgencies in Afghanistan and, especially, Iraq.

At the Army War College in Carlisle, Pa., nearly half the curriculum this fall is focused on guerrilla warfare and tactics to counter it, marking the biggest academic overhaul in decades, according to military officials. A heavy emphasis is being placed on the foreign cultures where analysts believe US forces may find themselves operating in the coming years: failed states in Africa, the Middle East, and central Asia that may become breeding grounds for terrorists.

"We totally revamped the curriculum for 2006," said William Johnsen, dean of the war college, where hundreds of lieutenant colonels and colonels spend a year training to become top leaders. "We have adjusted the courses to look a lot more at stability and counterinsurgency operations so we can turn a conventional military victory into a larger one."

The Pentagon will also participate in a State Department conference on counterinsurgency later this year, the first step toward crafting a government-wide plan to remedy the mistakes of Iraq and Afghanistan and avoid them in future guerrilla conflicts.

But it is among the senior officer corps, which includes many veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, where the soul-searching is most pronounced.

Mansoor, who is also author of a history of infantry divisions in World War II, is helping fine-tune a draft of the Army-Marine Corps field manual on counterinsurgency, which will become a 250-page bible for field commanders.

The document is designed to fill what generals acknowledge is a major gap in American military doctrine.

“It has been 20 years since the US Army published a manual devoted to counterinsurgency operations, and 25 years since the Marine Corps published its last such manual,” write Army Lieutenant General David Petraeus and Marine Lieutenant General James Mattis in a draft of the document. “With our soldiers and Marines fighting insurgents in both Afghanistan and Iraq, it is thus essential that we give them a manual that provides principles and guidelines for counterinsurgency operations.”

The first draft of the manual combines a heavy dose of military science and basic soldiering with history and politics. Drawing on lessons of the past two centuries, it provides a blueprint for how to run a foreign occupation where the central government is either weak or nonexistent and well-armed insurgents are launching hit-and-run attacks from within civilian areas.

It outlines ways to understand local culture, locate interpreters, train a local police force and army to help provide security, bolster the nascent government, effectively handle detainees, gather intelligence about enemy forces from friendly citizens, and link combat operations with humanitarian and other aid to rebuild the war-torn country -- and peel the local population away from the insurgents to cut off the enemy's source of support.

“The challenge is to train the force not what to think but how to think,” Mansoor said in an interview, saying that troops must get inside the minds of the insurgents as well as those of the citizenry. “Counterinsurgency is a thinking soldier's war. It is graduate-level stuff. There is public relations, civil affairs, information operations. It is not easy.”

Although the US military establishment has focused largely on fighting a conventional foe such as the former Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites, the armed forces have fought far more counterinsurgencies than armies throughout US history -- from the Barbary Wars of the early 1800s to Vietnam and conflicts in Central America, Somalia, and Bosnia.

But the military as an institution -- backed by a powerful arms maker -- has nevertheless clung to the theory that its forces must be prepared almost exclusively to fight large-scale conflicts with multibillion-dollar weapon systems, specialists said.

“The military culture has been about the big war,” said Andrew Krepinevich, a retired Army officer and counterinsurgency specialist who advises Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld. “That's been the case for a long time. West Point studied the Napoleonic wars while fighting the Indians after the American Civil War. These irregular wars were viewed as exceptions to the rule. They thought if you could fight a big war you could fight a little war.”

But getting the military to apply the lessons of the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan is proving to be a battle in itself.

“It is like if you had told General Motors to stop building autos in 1975 and then told them to start building cars again now, but build 2006 models,” Krepinevich said. “It is not much of an exaggeration to say that is where the military is right now.” Bryan Bender can be reached at [bender@globe.com](mailto:bender@globe.com). The Boston Globe © Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company