

**THE STRATEGIC LESSONS UNLEARNED FROM VIETNAM, IRAQ,
AND AFGHANISTAN:
WHY THE AFGHAN NATIONAL SECURITY FORCES WILL NOT HOLD,
AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. ARMY IN AFGHANISTAN**

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Anyone wanting to commit American ground forces to the mainland of Asia should have his head examined.

Douglas MacArthur, 1961¹

Any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia . . . should have his head examined.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, 2011²

The wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan were all fought after General Douglas MacArthur's admonition in 1961 to President John Kennedy not to commit land forces to a war in Asia. Three times in 40 years, the United States committed large numbers of U.S. ground forces to land wars in Asia anyway and lost all three of them, not on the battlefield, but at the strategic level of war. As of December 2014, 65,069 Americans have died in those wars. So far, no one has had their head examined. This book seeks to conduct that examination on a national strategic level, and to lay out for senior military leaders the explicit lessons of Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan that remain unlearned and which would have prevented every single one of those deaths.

This book is written in three parts. It builds from the tactical to the operational to the strategic level of war. The purpose of Part I is to explain why the security forces of Afghanistan cannot hold back the Taliban in the southern half of the

country, based on analysis using comparisons with the military and political situations at the time of U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and Iraq. Part II will examine, at the operational level of war, what will happen in Afghanistan year by year over the next 5 years, from 2015 to 2019, the concept of "nation-building," and the resulting operational lessons from the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Part III synthesizes Parts I and II, examines obstacles to strategic judgment when faced with this kind of information, and provides a strategic guide for evaluating all international military engagements from the point of view of land warfare. These strategic lessons from Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan should form the foundation of consideration and strategic thought for all future potential land warfare.

From the American perspective, all three conflicts were counterinsurgencies, but this is not a book about counterinsurgency, or to what extent the future Army should train and be equipped for counterinsurgency, or even if counterinsurgency doctrine itself is sound. Counterinsurgency works if the people living inside the insurgency want it to work, and it fails if they do not. Foreigners can build architecture, but they cannot build a nation. Extensive empirical data shows conclusively that there was no increase in local community support for the Afghan government, for example, after the delivery of schools, roads, clinics, and so on, by the counterinsurgents.³ We built it, and they did not come. Furthermore, this data was avail-

able before the tactic of “clear, hold, and build” was widely implemented at enormous cost in blood and treasure. The intent of this book is not to criticize at any level the military participants in these conflicts. With rare exceptions, the U.S. military fought honorably and capably in all three conflicts, and achieved outcomes in each case that were, in grand strategic terms, about the best that could have been achieved. No disrespect to the men and women who went overseas and did the best jobs they could in complex environments under difficult conditions should be inferred in the pages of this book. There are no counterhistorical arguments about how these conflicts might have been better conducted with different tactics, operations, and strategies, if, indeed, there were any strategies, or any hypothetical alternative outcomes.

There are also neither impracticable “recommendations” for how to fix Afghanistan with the vague, and grandiose “musts” and “shoulds” that usually accompany analyses of this type, nor any trivial rearranging of deck chairs such as twiddling on the margins of force size and so on. Americans are a practical people restlessly in search of solutions; but some problems have no solutions, and Afghanistan is one of them. There are no silver bullets, and anything that could help salvage the situation is politically impossible. American officers are trained to find a way to win, but sometimes forces beyond the battlefield make negative outcomes inevitable. Instead, the intent of this book is to break up the ice of conventional thinking which has calcified the discussion of these issues into such predictable patterns, and to demonstrate that the outcomes in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan were, in fact, predetermined by immutable political and cultural imperatives before the first shots were fired. This book will show that these tragedies were avoidable, and will define these immutable political and cultural imperatives as strategic litmus tests for the security policy apparatus of the United

States. They are especially critical to the Joint Chiefs of Staff as part of their processes for determining when, where, and how to engage U.S. military power.

ENDNOTES

1. James Douglas, *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008, p. 102.

2. “Gates’s Warning: Avoid Land War in Asia, Middle East, and Africa,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 26, 2011, available from www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2011/0226/Gates-s-warning-Avoid-land-war-in-Asia-Middle-East-and-Africa.

3. Dr. Jennifer Brick, “The Political Economy of Customary Village Organizations in Rural Afghanistan,” Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008.

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