Review Essay

War in the Information Age

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Kiras, James D. *Special Operations and Strategy from World War II to the War on Terrorism*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Moyar, Mark. *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009.

Rid, Thomas, and Marc Hecker. *War 2.0: Irregular Warfare in the Information Age*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2009.

The following essay captures the relevance of these three works to the prolonged irregular war against the Taliban and al Qaeda. Based on the arguments so aptly put forth in these studies, this essay posits that irregular warfare in the twenty-first century requires intuitive and creative leaders who can masterfully weave information operations, combined general-purpose operations, and special operations to undermine irregular adversaries through fully complementary lethal and nonlethal actions. The four authors bring new insight to irregular warfare strategy in general, and to the ongoing war in particular. This irregular war is a protracted struggle, one that will see persistent conflict and presence in Afghanistan and other regions for decades. It remains, however, a war without a name. The US government has not yet exhibited a great deal of coherence or consistency in describing it. The "Global War on Terrorism," "Long War," "Persistent Conflict," and "Overseas Contingency Operations" are not especially useful terms. Today's battle is an effort aimed at defeating a revolution that conflates insurgency and terrorism and reaches across regions. The enemy, comprising Taliban guerrillas, al Qaeda, and its franchises, pursues a strategy of exhaustion and erosion against the West. To use John B. Alexander's term, "World War X" is an irregular war unlimited in scope and is mainly a matter of matching ideas with actions to sustain the support of the relevant populations.

The first work reviewed is Rid and Hecker's *War 2.0.* It is topical because it analyzes the effects of media and information on the current struggle to influence the perception of the populations within and across insurgencies. In the introduction, the authors correctly state that it can be difficult for an external military force to sustain a good public image while prosecuting combat operations among a population. The authors point out that irregular fighters often find it easier to appear successful in the information environment, simply by blowing up things. The counterinsurgents, on the other hand, face the far-more difficult task of building governments and institutions. Destruction has an immediate informational impact, whereas construction projects are slow to achieve effects. Successful counterinsurgency, in other words, "is much less attention-grabbing and much more resource-consuming than effective insurgency." A corollary of irregular warfare in the information age is the advent of modern communications technology and the resurgence in insurgency. Together,

they have broken the military and the media's shared monopoly on information and elevated the salience of public perception in irregular war. *War 2.0* sees the public and the media as the highest priority, the central battlefield where information is preponderantly open source, public, and intended for external use. The traditional division of labor between political, economic, and military elements is largely absent in the new style of conflict, where modern information technology amplifies acts of violence. The book includes chapters on Israel, the United Kingdom, Hezbollah, and al Qaeda.

To better blend all three books in a relevant manner, this essay focuses on those chapters that explain the notion of information warfare in the context of Afghanistan. In such a setting, the production of information, the easy availability of consumer electronics, the Internet, and the changing culture of consumption have had a disproportionate impact on insurgent strategy. Information technology empowers the insurgent more than the counterinsurgent in irregular war because it makes political violence more complex. It opens a broader range of militant and political action. The new information domain has enhanced armed conflict, and irregular war, as a continuation of policy and political discourse.

Technology affects the information environment of irregular warfare in four ways. First, for the insurgent, technological advances generally have mitigated the tactical risks of employing media-based forms of influence. Second, the new information environment facilitates participation in media work and changes the definition of public information. Anonymous online interaction, however, can facilitate illicit offline action. Third, the recruitment pool for radical Islamist militants and insurgents is about to grow more quickly because the gap between Internet access in Africa and the Middle East, vis-à-vis the United States and Europe, is on the verge of closing. This accomplishment means a larger number of potentially disenfranchised and radicalized Muslims will have Internet access in the coming years. Last, and most saliently, modern information technology alters the influencing of popular support for both regular and irregular warriors. *War 2.0* moves beyond the Clausewitzian and Maoist perspectives regarding the population in war. Clausewitz's classic trinitarian framework was limited to traditional army-against-army wars and did not sufficiently anticipate irregular warfare among the people. Irregular warfare in the information age also questions the enduring validity of Mao's metaphor of insurgents being fish among the people, who act as the water, the terrain of people's wars.

Al Qaeda, for example, was an insurgent movement without a traditionally local popular support base following the Soviet-Afghan war. In Rid and Hecker's words, "It attracted a pan-Islamic global crop of fighters, it was financed by radical sympathizers from across the world, graduates of training camps operated worldwide, and the al Qaeda leadership planned attacks without geographical limitation." Modern information mechanisms have made it easier for global guerrillas to carry out operations, adapt, and survive, without the classical notion of popular support. Al Qaeda and its ilk, however, still require a physical, territorial sanctuary in ungoverned or state-sponsored spaces. The new virtual platform has not eliminated the need for physical safe haven, but it has made some groups less dependent on direct and traditional popular support. Two of the six paradoxes of media operations in the information age merit noting. The insurgent benefits from violence, while the counterinsurgent suffers from it; and the insurgent initiates, whereas the counterinsurgent reacts. When irregulars are able to initiate violence, even reprehensible attacks

against civilians, they create the perception that the government security forces are incapable of protecting the population.

In instances where government security forces initiate violence that inadvertently results in alleged civilian casualties, insurgents, such as the Taliban, are often quick to initiate propaganda that exaggerates or distorts the actual consequences of the event. Rid and Hecker devote a chapter to explaining how the resurgent Taliban adapted and embraced media and information operations starting in 2003. The new Taliban have readily evolved since they regrouped in Pakistan. The old Taliban banned most media, but the revived Taliban now recognize the importance of news media in determining the outcome of an irregular war of ideas. Learning from al Qaeda's success with information warfare, the authors illumine, the Taliban now rely on the media as a powerful instrument in waging psychological warfare. The Taliban global media campaign has two audiences: their supporters and potential guerrilla recruits, and the populations of their enemies. The number of Coalition-induced "civilian casualties" has become an important focus of Taliban information operations. In some instances, Taliban spokespersons have called the international media in Kabul within minutes of a NATO airstrike, getting out their message on civilian casualties ahead of the official Coalition statement, thus shaping the information environment to fit the insurgents' narrative. Regardless of whether the Taliban messages are inaccurate or exaggerated, the fact that the Coalition has accidentally hit civilian targets lends a degree of advanced credibility to the opposition's propaganda. The objective of information operations in irregular warfare is to win the competition for legitimacy in the eyes of the population. Counterinsurgent leaders have to employ media in such ways as to enhance operational action. Sustaining moral rectitude requires creative and intuitive leaders who can match actions with ideas and information.

The second book analyzes leadership as an explanatory variable for success in irregular war. *A Question of Command* posits that success in counterinsurgency depends above all on building and selecting the right people for key leadership positions, from the tactical to the strategic levels. One of author Mark Moyar's chief aims is to identify those critical characteristics of effective counterinsurgency leaders. He arrives at ten attributes: initiative, flexibility, creativity, judgment, sociability, charisma, empathy, dedication, integrity, and organization. Brevity dictates that this essay amplify the most salient of these attributes. Creativity varies between the tactical and strategic levels, but creative thinkers are essential because they improvise innovative solutions to complex problems. The author defines judgment as the use of logic and intuition to evaluate problems and make sound decisions. It allows commanders to discern which actions and methods may work against which insurgents. Dedication, or resilience, is crucial because counterinsurgency requires a grueling and dangerous operational rhythm. In a ruthlessly Darwinian place such as Afghanistan, "victory is sometimes decided by perseverance." Excellent performance in counterinsurgency requires superiority in a substantial number of the attributes but not all of them. Most of them, in part, derive from heredity. Some can be improved through self-development, but many arise from the culture in which individuals are immersed. Military culture shapes leaders because the military is a long-term, closed system. If a military culture eschews counterinsurgency as a core role, as the US Army did for the last 25 years of the last century, the development of good counterinsurgency-capable leaders is hampered.

Moyar studies nine counterinsurgencies through the lens of these leadership traits. His analysis of Vietnam provides a number of interesting explanations for the discernible improvements in the counterinsurgency methods employed after General Creighton Abrams succeeded General William Westmoreland. Westmoreland elected to devote American forces to conventional search-and-destroy operations, away from the populace, because they had superior mobility and firepower. He relied on South Vietnamese soldiers to protect the villages and fight the guerrillas because they had knowledge of and ties to local communities that the American forces lacked. The South Vietnamese government did divert many of its forces to counter the insurgents in and around the villages. These forces, however, generally performed miserably for two reasons. First, the Americans had trained and equipped the Vietnamese in their mirror image, to fight conventionally against conventional adversaries. Second, poor leadership was endemic among the Vietnamese. The results of this strategy were not at all surprising: a reluctance to pursue the enemy, the employment of inappropriate tactics, desertion, and the mistreatment of the civilian populace.

After he replaced Westmoreland, Abrams directed that American forces employ small units in the populated areas, in concert with South Vietnamese forces. Abrams opted for a one-war strategy, wherein American and South Vietnamese forces together focused on securing the population from the guerrillas. General Abrams improved the approach to the counterinsurgency in a number of ways, to include overseeing a marked improvement in South Vietnamese leadership. Moyar provides a threefold explanation for the majority of these improvements:

• The Hue massacre during the enemy's 1968 Tet offensive convinced South Vietnam's elites of the gruesome fate they faced if they were to lose.

• The reduction of American forces persuaded the South Vietnamese leaders that they had to persevere to avoid ultimate defeat.

• Also, the increased American leverage induced South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu to replace inept leaders.

Westmoreland had focused almost solely on the American forces' efforts to destroy Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units, whereas Abrams had emphasized the improvement among South Vietnamese forces as well as a substantial increase in the number and quality of the American advisers working with them. Westmoreland's inattention to the quality of South Vietnamese commanders was a critical flaw. The thing that most distinguished Abrams from his predecessor was the fact that he regularly compelled President Thieu to replace inept commanders. Westmoreland never resolved the cumbersome US and South Vietnamese command arrangements that created disunity of command, purpose, and effort. Similar problems plagued the US effort in Afghanistan for several years.

Moyar's chapter on Afghanistan notes that US forces during the first years of the resurgent insurgency arrived with little knowledge of counterinsurgency. Units were forced to adapt under fire; previously the US military had largely focused on its preferred conventional war paradigm. In addition, the author asserts, many regular Army commanders lacked creativity, flexibility, and other attributes more in demand during counterinsurgency than conventional war. The contrast between Special Forces officers, who often exhibited the desired attributes, and the regular Army officers was discernible. Special Forces leaders worked closely with

their indigenous Afghan partners, thriving on dispersed operations. Early in the war, too many commanders tended to operate out of a few large bases from which their forces would sortie for large sweeping and raiding operations, before returning to base in a week or two. These raids did inflict losses on the Taliban, and in some instances on the civilian populace, but they failed to halt the Taliban from recruiting among the population. Moyar asserts that those "commanders with creativity, flexibility, judgment, and initiative figured out quickly how to swim in the unfamiliar waters into which they had been thrown." For example, when Lieutenant General David W. Barno became the Coalition commander in Afghanistan, he shifted the focus to the counterinsurgency fundament of population protection. He assigned American commanders ownership of geographic areas and directed them to send small units into the Afghan villages to patrol relentlessly and persist among the people.

The problem was that there were never enough forces to persist among 31 million people in a rugged nation the size of Texas. The Pentagon, under Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, opted for a very small force, misconstruing the lessons of the Soviet-Afghanistan war to be that the Russians lost because they had too many forces. In reality, the Soviets lost because they had too few of the wrong kind of forces. They attempted to fight this conflict with the mechanized forces optimized for a big war in Europe, employing an entirely inappropriate scorched-earth strategy. Also, there was no apparent US plan for what to do once the Taliban were defeated. According to Moyar, the quick defeat of the Taliban in 2001 persuaded the American prophets touting a revolution in military affairs that new technologies would allow the US military to find and destroy the Taliban from the air, making a large number of ground forces unnecessary. This over-reliance on airpower ended up inflicting an inordinate number of civilian casualties. Finally, to rebuild the nation and provide security against the remnants of the Taliban and al Qaeda, the Pentagon and President Hamid Karzai forced themselves to rely on the warlords. Many of these tribal leaders were venal and vicious men, "who put personal gain before the good of the country, committed atrocities, engaged in mobster activities, and showed an inability to cooperate with others." The Coalition funded the expansion of these warlord-led Afghan militia forces to the detriment of the Afghan people. In a number of instances, the corruption and abuse the warlords wrought alienated the local populace.

The last book examined, *Special Operations and Strategy from World War II to the War on Terrorism*, provides insight from strategic theory and special operations best practices that remain relevant to the campaign in Afghanistan and generally for irregular warfare in the information age. Special operations forces fulfill a range of indirect and direct roles in countering the insurgency in Afghanistan. Author Jim Kiras provides an unorthodox perspective on attrition and on the utility of special operations in achieving reduction of the enemy's resolve at the operational and strategic levels. The essence of his study is that "the cumulative effect of a number of special operations focused on an enemy's moral and material vulnerabilities, in conjunction with conventional operations, is a more rapid and less costly dissolution of an enemy's will to fight than by conventional means alone." The collaborative and comprehensive employment of combined general-purpose and special operations forces is crucial to success in Afghanistan. Although a war of ideas among the 40 million Pashtuns who live along both sides of the Durand Line can-

not focus exclusively on attrition and destruction, Kiras's ideas regarding the use of special operations forces for strategic attrition are salient in the context of the precise and persistent elimination of enemy leadership infrastructure. The calculated and prudent targeting of Taliban leadership by special operations forces, to physically and psychologically erode key leaders and their sources of support, is one way to complement the counterinsurgency effort. Executed successfully, these steps can have operational and strategic impact. This strategy has been an enduring truth of irregular wars in Malaya, Algeria, Vietnam, Rhodesia, Iraq, and elsewhere.

These three books are all worthwhile reads. Together, they provide substance on novel ways to educate and cultivate the type of leaders who can succeed among the complexities associated with irregular warfare; topical insight regarding the challenges and opportunities engendered in irregular warfare in the information age; and an unconventional perspective on attrition and the employment of special operations forces to achieve strategic effects. Moyar's book is the most readable of the three and is primus inter pares. Rid and Hecker's *War 2.0* is clearly a must read but is not necessarily a facile read. The writing style and structure make it a bit cumbersome and dense. There is one final critique of *War 2.0* and *A Question of Command*. It lies in the use of the word "centric" as a hyphenated addendum to "population." Such a construction is fatuous and banal lexicon that is exceedingly unhelpful since any well-informed and -conceived counterinsurgency in this era would, by necessity, have to focus on protecting the indigenous population from insurgents, as well as protecting the people from the American military's propensity to over-rely on firepower. To be certain, counterinsurgency is intrinsically about the people.

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