

Bridging the Gap: Why Conventional Forces Need Irregular Warfare Training

Description

The Army is undergoing a major transition as it refocuses toward its pacing threat and modernizes for Large Scale Combat Operations (LSCO) against a near-peer adversary. In preparing for this future possibility, it should not forget the lessons of the past 20 years nor fall into the post-Vietnam trap of forswearing irregular warfare (IW) and solely focusing on conventional warfare. Historically, the Army has struggled to institutionalize lessons learned from IW operations which resulted in an organization that was reactive to irregular threats and often failed to achieve strategic objectives. The Army has an opportunity to avoid these past mistakes and take a more holistic approach to how it operates in current and future environments. To proactively compete against the United States' adversaries, Army conventional forces need to understand IW and break the reactive cycle by institutionalizing IW throughout the Army's Professional Military Education (PME) system.

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Doctrinal Framework and Definitional Ambiguity

To understand the Army's role in Irregular Warfare we must start with doctrine, which provides the framework to understand how the Army supports the joint force and prepares for and deters conventional and irregular war. Doctrine recognizes the importance of conventional deterrence, and the resources required to do so, but also the significant contribution the Army provides to the joint force throughout the competition continuum as outlined in Figure 1 below. The Army's doctrinal foundation, ADP-1, *The Army*, states "The primary responsibility of our Army is to conduct prompt and sustained land combat as part of the joint force." Furthermore, "[when not engaged in direct conflict, the Army focuses its efforts on conducting operations to prepare for and deter war.](#)" It is easy to interpret this section as simply deterrence through modernization and training; however, doctrine codifies two categories of war, conventional and irregular, so what does the Army do to prepare for and deter an irregular war?

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Doctrine does not provide an exact answer, but it does provide broad missions that are irregular in nature for which Army forces should prepare. FM 3-0, *Operations*, lists the four strategic roles the Army has when supporting the joint force: [Army forces shape operational environments, counter aggression on land during crisis, prevail during large-scale ground combat, and consolidate gains. The Army fulfills its strategic roles by providing forces for joint campaigns that enable integrated deterrence of adversaries outside of conflict and the defeat of enemies during conflict or war \(emphasis added\).](#) This highlights the need for Army conventional forces to maintain proficiency in tasks other than LSCO to effectively support the joint force, most of which the Army is already conducting.

Lessons from Vietnam

Irregular Warfare is often assumed to be the sole responsibility of Special Operations Forces (SOF) who are specifically organized and trained to conduct such missions. However, conventional forces have been and will continue to be involved to varying degrees. During the Vietnam War, for example, US military involvement evolved from an IW approach to LSCO. In this conflict, irregular warfare was carried out by conventional and special operations forces. Although not yet in the Army's lexicon in 1962, General Paul Harkins, commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), was tasked with what is now termed Foreign Internal Defense (FID), which is defined as a "whole-of-government approach to strengthen a foreign government against ongoing or potential internal threats." Throughout the war, the Army employed most of the FID tools outlined in Figure 2 to defeat the enemy. The United States military involvement began with advising and assisting the South Vietnamese Army and evolved to LSCO against a uniformed North Vietnamese army. There was not a clean transition where one form of warfare stopped and another started, rather it was a simultaneous mix of conventional and irregular warfare to varying degrees based on the operational environment.

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Failing to learn

Following the evacuation of all United States forces from Vietnam, the Army quickly shifted its focus to countering a Soviet invasion in Eastern Europe. Unfortunately, most lessons from the war were quickly forgotten, and doctrine, Professional Military Education (PME), and training focused exclusively on LSCO. [Only SOF retained some institutional knowledge on IW while the rest of the Army wanted to move past the perceived failures in Vietnam.](#) The Army would be forced to relearn those lessons 25 years later in Iraq.

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) provides a contemporary example of conventional forces conducting IW. In contrast to Vietnam, OIF began with LSCO and then transitioned to IW. After achieving a decisive victory over the Iraqi Army and removing Saddam Hussein from power, the Army began stability operations (an IW operation) to transition the [responsibility for security and governance to legitimate authorities other than US forces](#). A growing insurgency quickly rendered stability operations ineffective, and the Army was asked to conduct a mission it was wholly unprepared for: counterinsurgency (COIN) operations.

An Army trained and organized to fight a conventional war had to shift its focus to conducting COIN operations with no institutional knowledge or current doctrine. The former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, General Jack Keane, later noted that the Army did not [have any doctrine, nor was it educated and trained, to deal with an insurgency](#). After the Vietnam War, we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war. In hindsight, that was a bad decision. The lack of doctrine and training resulted in limited success against a well-resourced and growing insurgency. It was not until 2007 when the new COIN manual was published and instituted by General Petraeus, that [violence decreased and the Army regained the initiative](#). Significant resources, both blood and treasure, were expended unnecessarily because the Army at that time was trained, equipped, and organized almost exclusively for LSCO.

In addition to COIN operations, another mission along the IW spectrum the Army received that it was unprepared for, was to train and equip the newly reconstituted Iraqi Army to fight an insurgency, known today as Security Force Assistance (SFA). Unfortunately, the majority of conventional forces were not trained, prepared, or resourced to conduct SFA. There was not even a doctrinal definition of SFA until 2006 which [made it difficult for US combat units to effectively train a partner force for COIN operations](#). The result was a [slow and inconsistent SFA effort](#) requiring the United States Army to maintain the lead in most combat operations. Having failed to codify lessons from Vietnam, conventional units were largely ineffective in preparing Iraqi forces to take ownership of their security. Following this early failure, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates correctly assessed the importance of conventional force proficiency in SFA when he stated [the standing up and mentoring of indigenous armies and police](#) once the province of Special Forces is now a key mission for the military as a whole. Conventional forces, regardless of their perceptions of warfare, yet again were conducting IW through SFA in Iraq.

The Vietnam War and OIF demonstrate conventional forces' critical and enduring role in IW and how the Army continues to modernize and train for the fight it wants, not the fight it will likely face. Change is difficult in large organizations and [the only thing harder than getting a new idea into the military mind is to get an old one out](#). IW is not a new idea and changing the belief that LSCO

should be the Army's near-exclusive focus will be challenging.

Recommendations for Improvement

There are several actions the Army can take to mitigate the risk of failing to learn from previous conflicts. The most important steps occur within the Army's Professional Military Education (PME) system. The first step in breaking the reactive cycle of, and attitude towards, IW is to institutionalize lessons learned into Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) and officer PME. Army leaders of all ranks will continue to misunderstand IW and their role in it unless they are provided the tools to do so. America's adversaries do not want to fight the United States in a conventional war [so they rely on irregular warfare to achieve their objectives](#). The Army must adapt or risk being unprepared in future conflicts.

This includes incorporating the definition of IW, its activities and operations, and case studies of conventional forces employment throughout PME curriculum, rather than during a single block of instruction taught exclusively by SOF professionals. Although SOF leaders provide a unique perspective and likely have a depth of experience to share, having IW taught by SOF only reinforces the misperception that IW is exclusively a SOF mission. It is important for conventional force leaders to understand doctrine and how they support the joint force through IW. PME mostly omits any discussion regarding IW and when mentioned, is quickly overshadowed by the concern with LSCO. This approach results in an NCO and officer corps that are ill equipped to analyze and solve the complex problems that await them in their next assignment.

Repetitions are key as well. In addition to formal instruction, PME schools should incorporate an IW component in planning exercises where students can be challenged to think creatively and critically. Give leaders the training repetitions in a classroom environment, with experienced cadre, where they can ask questions and understand how the adversary may react when faced with an irregular threat. Instructors can challenge students to find the best possible outcome, which likely won't result in a decisive victory. Students will quickly realize there is not a single correct answer, and ambiguity is inherent in every IW operation.

Furthermore, exposure to the aspects of IW must happen early and often by implementing these PME updates as early as the Advanced Leader Course and Captains Career Course. Between Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB) deployments, State Partnership Program (SPP) engagements, COIN operations, CT operations, and multinational exercises around the globe, the actions of tactical-level leaders can impact the operational and strategic levels. Company-level leaders should understand how their efforts support their operational-level headquarters' mission and often

Department of State objectives as well. Understanding how all these activities work towards a common goal will likely shape these leaders' mindsets as they plan for and conduct partner-nation engagements and operations.

Making these changes is not a zero-sum equation. IW instruction should not replace anything in the existing curriculum, rather it should be woven into existing courses that already discuss these topics. Including IW elements into planning exercises may change how they are conducted but does not degrade their effectiveness nor prolong their execution. Army uniformed and civilian instructors have the knowledge and skill to make these changes, enabling students to tackle the challenges they will likely face.

Conclusion

The Army must stand ready to defeat our adversaries in ground combat, but as history has shown, it must also be ready and able to effectively wage IW to support the joint force. Conventional forces in particular must expand their understanding and appreciation for their role in IW. This is not a SOF problem; it is an Army problem. Disregarding the lessons learned from Vietnam, and again after OIF, perpetuates a reactive IW readiness cycle leaving the Army wholly unprepared for the next irregular fight. It must institutionalize this hard-fought knowledge in PME to better conduct IW now and prepare for the irregular war it is likely to fight, not just the war it wants to fight.

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The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

Main Image: U.S. Army Lt. Gen. David Petraeus enjoys a cup of tea with a group of local Afghans (U.S. Army Photo by Pfc. Leslie Angulo)

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