

## Four Years of Growth and Impact: The Irregular Warfare Initiative

### Description

*Editor's Note: Today marks four years since the launch of the Irregular Warfare Podcast. What started as a small project by three military graduate students has grown into the Irregular Warfare Initiative, an influential platform for scholars and practitioners to share ideas on topics ranging from information warfare and counterterrorism to security assistance and cyber operations. While conventional and nuclear threats from China and Russia dominate attention, the initiative highlights the continued relevance of irregular warfare globally. Our team's history remains largely unknown despite its success in bringing together scholars and practitioners. This article tells the story of the Irregular Warfare Initiative and its impact.*

## The Idea

*I wish I had known this when I was downrange.*

During a break from their "International Policy Responses to State Fragility" graduate class at Princeton in the Fall of 2019, Kyle Atwell and Nick Lopez picked back up a conversation they'd had all semester. As US Army Special Forces officers at the university's School of Public and International Affairs, Kyle and Nick found themselves repeating the same thing over and over to each other, "I wish I had known this when I was downrange."

For Nick and Kyle, downrange meant training and advising foreign military forces in countries with weak governance, conducting intelligence and counter-terrorism operations, and engaging in other activities known as irregular warfare. Blown away by their Princeton courses, Nick and Kyle found many ideas and models that would have helped them during their deployments to Latin America, Africa, and Afghanistan.

Determined to find a way to bring these lessons to other soldiers, one of them—neither can remember who—suggested a podcast. This seemed like an odd choice; neither listened to podcasts much then. "We landed on a podcast because I like having a beer and talking to people, so I thought maybe we can do that," Nick recalled, "But we didn't want to be the center of attention, so it had to be focused on the guests."

Even if they had listened to podcasts regularly, there were no examples of what they wanted to do. Podcasts by former special operators discussed selection into the teams, tactical gear, and workouts. University and think-tank podcasts sometimes covered irregular warfare topics but only as dry recordings of lectures and discussions. However, Kyle and Nick found no podcasts that turned relevant social science research into engaging conversations for irregular warfare practitioners to digest during their commute or a run. Undeterred, their idea for the Irregular Warfare Podcast began to take root in their minds.

They met for months, huddling around whiteboards in Princeton classrooms, figuring out “how do we get this impenetrable academic research to the practitioner?” Kyle explained. Gallons of coffee and dozens of dry-erase markers later, they finally came up with the podcast’s slogan: “Bridging the gap between scholars and practitioners,” which has stuck ever since.

## The Convert

*I was skeptical at first. I had never even listened to a podcast.*

While Nick and Kyle worked on the podcast’s format and began to line up guests, they realized they needed more help. In April 2020, one of their faculty advisors, Jake Shapiro, the director of Princeton’s Empirical Studies of Conflict program, introduced them to Shawna Sinnott, a US Marine Corps officer, who was set to begin her graduate studies at Stanford later that year. Shawna’s background as a human intelligence officer with special operations units would round out the team.

As it turns out, Nick and Kyle weren’t the only ones new to podcasts. “I was skeptical at first. I had never even listened to a podcast,” she said. With a newborn baby, a working spouse, and an upcoming coast-to-coast move, Shawna had all the extra-curricular activities she could handle. When asked why she joined the project, Shawna replied, “Kyle is very engaging and persuasive, and he convinced me. The idea of giving back to our military peers the academic insights we were gaining through our unique graduate school opportunity was very appealing.”

In hindsight, their inexperience with podcasts turned out to be an advantage. If they had known each episode would take 30-60 hours to produce, they might have quit before starting. Admittedly, their inexperience and the bare-bones editing tools available in 2020 were partly to blame for the long hours.

Most of their time went into culling “umms” and “errs,” editing out rambling answers, and rearranging parts of the recording to make the conversation flow logically. They knew how their audience would want the podcast—no off-topic tangents and no witty banter—because they were their audience. “We were critical of each other in a healthy way. We would rip each other apart with editing. I knew they wouldn’t let me put garbage out, and I wasn’t going to let them put trash out either,” Shawna said.

Even with their meticulous approach, they had no idea how people would react to the podcast. Kyle was uneasy. “This is baseline personality stuff, things you can’t control, right? It turns out I need approval. I do. We were nervous about the podcast’s success. We were nervous about the fact that we were supposed to be quiet professionals and how the community would look at us. And we were just nervous about, “Is this adding any value?” which is probably the only thing we should have been nervous about.”

## The Leap

*I remember calling Kyle and saying, “Hey man, I’m sorry. I let you down,” and I talked to Jake and said, “Hey, I’m sorry that this thing sucks.”*

The Irregular Warfare Podcast’s first episode, titled [What Are Small Wars?](#), was released on May 21, 2020, and featured their mentor Jake Shapiro, the Princeton scholar, and Pat Howell, the Army practitioner. Centering around Jake’s book, [Small Wars, Big Data](#), and his quantitative approach to studying irregular wars, the episode opened with a somber instrumental by electronic music artist Ketsa, quotes from each guest, and a brief introduction by the co-hosts, Nick and Kyle, who then take turns pitching scripted questions like softballs. The thirty-minute episode ends with another downtempo song from Ketsa and a few announcements.

Afterward, Nick thought they had failed spectacularly. “I remember calling Kyle and saying, “Hey man, I’m sorry. I let you down,” and I talked to Jake and said, “Hey, I’m sorry that this thing sucks.”

Nick was wrong, but then again, who could have guessed that the Irregular Warfare Podcast would encounter a strong tailwind by launching at the beginning of the pandemic? People were stuck at home with extra time on their hands, and podcast listening reached an all-time high. “Within the first couple of months, we were getting over 4,000 downloads, which was crazy,” Kyle said.

Comments started trickling and then streaming in and from different audiences. “As we moved into the fall, we started hearing from within the Pentagon that people were listening, and the podcast was influencing some of the ways they were looking at irregular warfare and the [Irregular Warfare Annex to the US National Defense Strategy](#),” Shawna remarked. All three expressed the same idea; the metrics were interesting, but the messages from listeners meant more. According to Kyle, “When you hear from some random dude saying ‘I don’t know how you have the balls to call General Petraeus David’ but the podcast is awesome, it makes a bigger difference.”

In addition to well-known military officers like James Stavridis and Stanley McChrystal, the team recruited leading figures in politics, media, and academia, which helped grow the platform’s audience. Guests included policymakers Michele Flournoy and Mike Vickers, journalists Wesley Morgan and Jessica Donati, and professors Taylor Fravel and Eli Berman. The podcast also featured international guests from the Philippines, Colombia, France, Australia, and the UK.

Remarkably, the podcast today retains its distinct format, which has changed very little over the years. More than one hundred episodes into the project, the podcast pairs two guests, a scholar and a practitioner, and focuses the discussion on a book or an academic article, opening and closing with the same Ketsa music.

“You have to come up with a consistent structure and stick with it because your audience will punish you if you mix it up on them,” Kyle remarked. “We’ve had good ideas over the years, but my response has always been let’s start a second podcast.” However, the one thing that has changed over the years is who hosts the podcast. None of the original three still produce the Irregular Warfare Podcast.

In the beginning, listeners could recognize the consistent voices of Kyle, Shawna, and Nick. Since then, more than a dozen people have facilitated the conversation and produced the podcast. The interviewers have become indistinguishable by design, Kyle noted, and it’s a strength of the podcast.

“It’s not the Kyle Atwell show,” he insists, “It’s the Irregular Warfare Podcast. We can provide something valuable to the community if we make ourselves as anonymous as humanly possible. To the point where our guests would often mention our backgrounds in episodes, ‘Oh, you know, you’re Special Forces.’ We edit that out.” Shawna agreed, adding, “Our role was to guide the conversation rather than be the center of attention. Listeners are coming to hear what the guests have to say, not us.”

## The Call

*Everyone who's joined has a lot of initiative; otherwise, they wouldn't have volunteered. It's not a hangout club; it's a do-stuff club.*

Nick, Kyle, and Shawna realized that the podcast's growing popularity meant two things: it had momentum that wouldn't die down on its own, and they needed more help. In late 2020, they put out a call for co-hosts, hoping to add two more teammates. When over 70 people volunteered, Kyle realized they had something much bigger than they originally imagined.

“Before we knew the podcast would work out, we were talking about building a community. That was always the goal. We knew we wanted to build an organization. Before we could do that, we needed the validation that the podcast worked,” he remarked. The wave of volunteers from all corners of national security was the sign they were looking for.

Pressing their advantage, the team rebranded itself as the Irregular Warfare Initiative and, in March 2021, expanded to publish online commentary and analysis on irregular warfare topics. Submissions and volunteers flowed in immediately. When they announced a year-long fellowship for twenty scholars, practitioners, and policymakers in 2022, over 200 people applied. “We were reaching people, and it was not just that they wanted to listen, they wanted to get involved. I thought, why don't we just put them to work?” Kyle said.

According to Kyle, tapping into this energy has been one of the biggest reasons for the Irregular Warfare Initiative's success. “What really brings people together is not the abstractness of irregular warfare; it's a product that gives us a reason to have meetings. It gives introverts like me a reason to make a phone call and meet people.”

Rather than become a vague online community of interest, the core group of Kyle, Nick, and Shawna has grown to sixty active members who produce podcasts, write and edit articles, host events, and run the fellowship program in their spare time. They also manage social media, finances, human resources, and fundraising. “Everyone who's joined has a lot of initiative; otherwise, they wouldn't have volunteered. It's not a hangout club; it's a do-stuff club,” Shawna remarked. Today, the organization has more than 100 alumni and a 30-deep waitlist to volunteer.

## The Impact

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*There are not a lot of organizations focusing on this form of conflict. Weâ??re ringing the cowbell that irregular warfare happens, and it doesnâ??t involve submarines or F-35s.*

Today, the Irregular Warfare Initiative has 30,000 social media followers and 4,000 newsletter subscribers whoâ??ve read the teamâ??s 166 published articles and attended its 20 live and virtual events. Each month, listeners download its podcast episodes over 40,000 times, putting it in the top 1% of the most popular podcasts, according to Ben Jebb, the current podcast director. Forty percent of the audience is international, coming from 123 different countries. In total, the podcastâ??s 105 episodes have been downloaded 1.2 million times. What has surprised the team most, though, is not the numbers but who engages with the content.

Although the team envisioned the podcast and the Irregular Warfare Initiative as a bridge from the classroom to the team roomâ??a one-way streetâ??they discovered that the traffic flowed in several directions. It wasnâ??t just the military, but think-tank and university researchers, as well as policymakers and their staffs, that found their efforts valuable. â??Itâ??s much more multi-dimensional now in a way that I donâ??t think we fully grasped at the time,â?• Shawna reflected.

That the Irregular Warfare Initiative was attractive to researchers was no surprise to Jake Shapiro, who noted, â??You need to be able to put the data into context to understand what was actually happening on the ground. Unless you get out and talk with people who did the planning and were involved in military and policy decisions, you canâ??t correctly interpret the data.â?• The Irregular Warfare Initiative helps connect security and defense leaders back to the academic world.

Policymakers benefit too, added John Nagl, former president of the Center for a New American Security and counterinsurgency expert at the US Army War College. Layers of bureaucracyâ??â?• antibodies,â?• John calls themâ??at the Pentagon, State Department, Congress, and federal government filter out unwelcome ideas and information. â??The Irregular Warfare Initiative has the ability to tell truth to power in a way that would be more difficult if all the folks were inside the Pentagon,â?• he said.

Providing that outside voice is all the more necessary as the idea of strategic competition takes hold in US national security thinking. At its most extreme, proponents of strategic competition argue that the US should narrow its focus to deterring Russian and Chinese conventional and nuclear forces, viewing irregular warfare as a diversion or distraction. While conventional and nuclear war is undeniably more dangerous, irregular war is far more likely.

David Ucko, a professor at National Defense University, thinks the Irregular Warfare Initiative can balance out the conversation. â??It hasnâ??t shied away from discussing the lessons from

Afghanistan, like partnering with local forces and establishing winning narratives. These issues remain crucial in the era of strategic competition, yet we are discouraged from speaking about what irregular warfare really is—this struggle for legitimacy. That’s why I’m a little bit defensive. I have a bit of a siege mentality. And I want to make sure that we don’t lose this moment because it is so important.

Perhaps the most critical gap the Irregular Warfare Initiative can help bridge is the chasm between past mistakes in irregular conflicts and future wars. Will the US learn from its failures in Iraq and Afghanistan and avoid repeating them? John Nagl speculated, “The Irregular Warfare Initiative may help prevent the US from repeating the mistakes made after Vietnam when we literally burned the books on counterinsurgency and irregular warfare. Keeping these ideas alive and fermenting and passing the knowledge on to the next generation means we don’t have to start from scratch when facing irregular warfare challenges, which are happening right now.”

As the Irregular Warfare Initiative continues to evolve, its mission remains more important than ever. The US is still engaged in irregular conflicts, from supporting Ukraine against Russia’s invasion and countering Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific to combating Iranian-supported proxies in the Middle East and containing the spread of jihadist groups in the African Sahel. The initiative provides valuable insights into these security challenges. Although still committed to bridging the scholar-practitioner gap, Kyle worries that the US national security bureaucracy is sleepwalking into this type of warfare. “There are not a lot of organizations focusing on this form of conflict. We’re ringing the cowbell that irregular warfare happens, and it doesn’t involve submarines or F-35s.”

Thanks to the dedication of its volunteers and the support of a growing community of experts, the Irregular Warfare Initiative maintains a focus on irregular warfare in an era of strategic competition—a message that policymakers and practitioners cannot afford to ignore and one that the initiative will continue to champion in the years to come.

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*Views expressed in this article solely reflect those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, the Center for a New American Security, Princeton University’s Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.*

*Main Image: The U.S. Army and Romanian Armed Forces coordinate to cross the Danube River on June 20, 2019 in Bordusani, Romania. (Samantha Hall via [DVIDS](#))*

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