

Chapter X

American Strategic Culture in Small Wars

by
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That the United States has had great difficulty bringing its military establishment effectively to bear in limited conflict situations is hardly a secret. From Vietnam in the 1960's through Grenada and Lebanon in the early 1980's to El Salvador in very recent years, the track record of U.S. involvement in contingency operations as well as protracted revolutionary warfare in the less developed world is spotty at best, with serious flaws apparent even in victory. In general, the United States has reaped a disappointing return in such conflicts from what have often been major investments of its material, moral and political resources.

Clearly, a number of different factors work together to constrain the performance of the American government in low-intensity or limited warfare environments. At the most general and fundamental level is what one may conveniently call "American political culture". Not only is our nation formally a democracy; Americans are a deeply democratic people. Democratic or egalitarian attitudes, and the manners and morals that flow from them, have a great deal to do with the way Americans view governments in the less developed world and the way they interact with individuals in less developed societies. While in some respects a great strength, this has often acted as a severe limitation. But other aspects of our political culture are also of importance in this connection. Beyond democracy, America is heir to powerful traditions of political liberalism — limited government and the rule of law — and of religious enthusiasm and moralism. Finally, Americans are a pragmatic people, with a tendency to seek technical solutions to isolated problems and a preoccupation with the here and now at the expense both of the past and the future. This means, among other things, that Americans tend to lack the historical memory that is critical for understanding other cultures, as well as the future orientation and holistic thinking that are the preconditions for strategy.

American political culture affects the activities of the U.S. government in a number of ways. In the first place, it is absorbed by government officials from the various institutions of the culture — schools, universities, churches, films, television, and the press. Secondly, it acts on them through the medium of public

opinion, which tends to define the outer boundaries not only of what the government can do but often of what it can consider or discuss. Finally, it acts on them in a more direct and authoritative way through the U.S. Congress and the legislative instruments at its disposal.

The extent to which American involvement in small wars has been constrained by public opinion and congressional fiat in the years since Vietnam scarcely needs to be emphasized. The antiwar movement aroused by the American debacle in Vietnam shaped the political consciousness of a generation of Americans and ultimately dethroned two Presidents. Its effects are still palpable today in our elite cultural institutions, in spite of what would seem to be a growing acceptance in popular opinion throughout the country of the employment of American military power abroad. As for Congress, it mounted in the aftermath of Vietnam what can only be described as a systematic assault on the ability of the President and the national security bureaucracy to engage effectively in low-intensity conflict. The War Powers Act, various legislative constraints on security assistance, and congressional oversight of covert action are perhaps the most egregious results of this effort. While the Executive branch has managed to resist or ignore some of them, it certainly remains seriously encumbered with such legal and quasi-legal baggage. Nor does there seem much prospect for relief, given the continuing partisan divide between Legislative and Executive branches.

Nevertheless, it can be questioned whether these factors by themselves are as decisive as is often assumed in limiting or crippling US Government performance in the low-intensity arena. At least as important, it can be argued, are those constraints imposed by the Executive branch on itself. While they are rooted in and reflect aspects of the wider political culture, these constraints derive largely from the nature of the national security bureaucracy and of national security decision-making as they have evolved in the United States since World War II, and especially over the last three decades. Those constraints — an interrelated nexus of attitudes, habits, traditions, and standard operating procedures — form what can usefully be labelled “strategic culture.”

Strategic culture is the product of a number of very disparate influences. Foremost among them may be said to be the following: the geopolitical setting in which a nation finds itself; its international relationships; its political culture and social structure; its military culture — military history, traditions, and education; military and security organizations and their relationship to civilian authority; and weapons and technology. Strategic culture expresses itself in matters as diverse as strategic doctrine, personnel practices, command and control arrangements, and weapons procurement. Offensive orientation, reliance on firepower as distinct from maneuver, reliance on surprise and deception; such characteristics of a military establishment usually reflect its key strategic-cultural themes.

Elusive as the notion of strategic culture may seem to be, the phenomena it tries to capture are real enough, and can prove powerful and persisting in their effects. At the same time, it is important not to overstate the staying power of strategic-cultural attitudes and practices. Traumatic events — particularly military defeat — can reshape a nation's strategic culture very quickly. Organizational reform can also have a radical impact in a reasonably brief period of time. Consider, for example, the apparent impact of the (relatively modest) congressionally-mandated reform of the Organization of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1986 on the planning and conduct of America's military campaigns of the last several years. One also needs to be careful to avoid a deterministic view of the operation of strategic culture. Individuals and individual leadership really can play a decisive role in overcoming cultural patterns in organizations and, indeed, entire nations. Strong individuals at middle levels of military organizations can have a powerful influence; on occasion they are able to create identifiable and persisting subcultures (consider, for example, the case of Adm. Hyman Rickover and the nuclear Navy).

How does strategic culture affect American performance in low-intensity conflict or small wars? The fundamental problem is obvious and massive. What distinguishes low-intensity conflict from other forms of conflict is not the scale of violence as such but the fact that violence is embedded in a political context that directly shapes and constrains it. As Clausewitz teaches, all war is the continuation of politics by other means; low-intensity warfare is distinguished from other warfare by the extent to which politics dictates not merely strategy but military operations and even tactics. In low-intensity warfare, non-military instrumentalities of national power may have an equal or even greater role to play than military forces. What this means in practice is either that military forces must perform essentially non-military functions, or that special means must be devised to coordinate and integrate military forces with non-military agencies of government. Either course is apt to be culturally stressing for any military establishment, but all the more so for that of the United States. In addition to its long-standing traditions of military professionalism and civilian control of military activities, the American military (and national security establishment generally) tends to view war and peace as sharply delineated activities rather than as a continuum. The use of force tends to be seen as a last resort, a response to the failure of politics or diplomacy rather than as an instrument of politics or diplomacy.

Additionally, the American national security establishment as a whole is not structured in a way that facilitates coordination between the armed forces and other agencies of government, and moral-cultural attitudes in the civilian agencies tend to be more hostile toward the use of force than is the case in many countries. For a number of reasons relating to its constitutional and political history, the U.S. government lacks a powerful center, at least during periods of

relative peace or in the absence of a major external threat. Key agencies such as the Departments of State, Defense, and Treasury and the Central Intelligence Agency enjoy considerable autonomy. In recent years, Congress' challenge to Presidential discretion and prerogative in national security affairs has led to a further weakening of executive control, particularly of the intelligence community. All of this might be less significant if there existed in the United States a cohesive political class with traditions of service to the nation's military and security forces and an instinctive understanding of the requirements of national strategy, of the sort that ran the British and French Empires in the nineteenth century or the Soviet Empire in the twentieth. As a general rule, however, America's political elite has shown little knowledge of or interest in "imperial policing," as the British used to describe low-intensity warfare.

At senior levels of the U.S. Government, in any event, there has been little effort to develop doctrines or mechanisms that might provide a strategic framework for the conduct of small wars. In a surprising reversal of previous patterns, what interest there has been in this area has come from the Congress. The Low-Intensity Conflict Board, a subcabinet-level coordinating mechanism Congress asked to have established in the White House in its military reform legislation of 1986, remains essentially a dead letter. Although forced by Congress to accept the creation of a unified command for special operations forces and a new bureau in the Department of Defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict, the Executive branch at the highest levels has consistently opposed institutional reform or other fundamental measures to improve either its strategic competence or its operational capabilities in the low-intensity arena. This clearly reflects strong resistance from the relevant bureaucracies, particularly the Department of State, but to some degree also the defense establishment as a whole.

What problems does all this create for the strategic direction of small wars? In the first place, and probably most importantly, military contingency planning remains totally divorced from the civilian national security agencies, and subject only to very restrictive review by civilian officials within the Department of Defense. This has consistently caused difficulties in the area of U.S. dealings with the political leadership of the countries involved (notably the establishment of the Endara government in Panama; but consider also the handling of the Governor General of Grenada during Operation Urgent Fury). It has also led to consistent neglect of civil-military planning issues both during and after combat operations. The U.S. did not adequately anticipate the problem of breakdown of law and order in Panama City during Operation Just Cause, or plan for the reconstitution of Panama's security forces, political system and economy (the same failure occurred in Grenada). In the second place, U.S. intelligence capabilities are not well configured to support low-intensity warfare. This is particularly true of short-notice contingency operations (the absence of adequate maps in Grenada has been widely remarked), but remains a problem even in

protracted conflicts such as El Salvador, due to an overemphasis on sophisticated technical collection assets as opposed to the human intelligence networks that are critical to the successful conduct of revolutionary war. Third, the process of planning for security assistance to friendly governments suffers not only from congressional micromanagement, but from persistent disconnects between diplomatic and military requirements and an excess of bureaucratization.

Because low-intensity conflict (especially in the form of protracted revolutionary war) is neither peace nor war in the ordinary sense of those terms, no one is clearly in charge. Absent strong direction from the national level, there are essentially two ways of coping with such situations. The first is to put the military in charge but force it to perform many nonmilitary or non-combat functions (the French in Algeria). The second is to create *ad hoc*, hybrid civil-military structures under proconsular civilian leadership (the British in Malaya). In spite of some experimentation with the second model (the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support—CORDS—program) in Vietnam, the United States has tended toward the first alternative in practice, although as a matter of policy it has generally understated the military role and overstated the contributions of other agencies to the conduct of low-intensity operations. The first model has the advantage of simplicity and of maintaining a military discipline and spirit in an environment that too easily tolerates bureaucratic business as usual. It has the disadvantage that it asks more from soldiers than they are customarily able to perform, and threatens to distract them from their more properly military missions. Which model is chosen has much to do with the prevailing military culture of a society.

The United States military as it exists today is very largely a product of its decades-long confrontation with the Soviet Union. It is probably fair to say that the Soviet threat as seen by the U.S. military establishment was fundamentally a military threat, one posed either directly to the United States by Soviet strategic nuclear forces, or to America's allies in Europe and Asia by Soviet conventional forces. (Consider by contrast the French military, which in the 1950's came to see "revolutionary war" in the less developed world as the central threat posed by Soviet Communism and revised its military doctrine to reflect this perception.) Accordingly, the basic mission of U.S. military forces has been seen as the deterrence of, or defense against, the Soviet threat so understood; other missions, including the containment of Soviet imperial expansion, have been considered of a strictly secondary order. This may well have been an entirely proper ordering of national priorities, but it has clearly created and reinforced a military culture oriented to major weapons systems, high technology, and large (not to say apocalyptic) wars, to the neglect of the non-military dimensions of international conflict.

If this analysis is correct, it appears to follow that a dominant role for the American military in small wars is to be neither desired nor expected. Several

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other factors, however, need to be considered. Contrary to a certain popular (or more accurately, elite) stereotype, today's officer class in the United States is better and more broadly educated than at any time in the past. In terms of general understanding of the international political-military environment, it can by no means be assumed that military officers are less well-equipped than, say, foreign service officers. Moreover, the military culture has unique advantages in terms of the planning and execution of highly complex operations. Habitual attention to the relation between strategy and resources, recognition of the importance of doctrine, discipline in execution, accountability: all of these features sharply distinguish the military from civilian national security organizations and are not easily replicated outside a military organizational context.

It is undoubtedly unrealistic to expect today's military to accept full responsibility for the small wars mission. There is still a powerful current of feeling within the military, deriving principally from the Vietnam experience, which regards low-intensity warfare as a political albatross—a high-risk enterprise that typically lacks genuine national commitment and jeopardizes the institutional standing of the defense establishment as a whole. Without revisiting the historical debate over responsibility for the American defeat in Vietnam, it seems fair to say that while there is certainly justification for the view that the nation's political leadership blundered badly in that conflict, there were also serious military shortcomings that can be traced to a general failure to appreciate the nature of low-intensity warfare (which is not to say that Vietnam was typical of the genre). More recent experience—the ten year conflict in El Salvador—shows that the military has made real progress in correcting those shortcomings, even in the absence of a major national commitment or firm strategic direction from Washington; it is at least arguable that the U.S. could have achieved substantially better results by relatively modest improvements in its military (or security-related) effort on the ground. It is not unreasonable to expect the U.S. military to digest these lessons over time and take a more positive attitude toward the small wars mission. After all, the United States is very unlikely ever again to involve itself directly in a Vietnam-like counterinsurgency situation; at the same time, it is becoming increasingly difficult to justify structuring the U.S. military establishment around exclusively large-war missions. The case of Panama shows how a small war can be not only low cost but high payoff both in a strategic and a political sense. Even a protracted small war need not raise the specter of Vietnam if rules of engagement are reasonable, strategic objectives are understandable and attainable, costs are contained, and the supported government is politically palatable. Improved coordination of the military and non-military instruments of national power will remain the key to improved American performance in small wars. As suggested above, perhaps the most promising approach is simply to expand the military's responsibility in areas usually considered peripheral to its primary war-fighting mission. The most important such areas are intelligence,

information, civil administration or civil affairs, and security assistance. Experience indicates that U.S. civilian organizations are unlikely to provide adequate support for these functions in low-intensity operations; at the same time, though typically neglected by military organizations, they can and have been effectively performed by them. In its recent campaigns in Panama and the Persian Gulf, the American military turned in highly creditable performances in the areas of psychological operations and civil affairs, in spite of some problems in interagency coordination. Notwithstanding a recent failed experiment in the area of military human intelligence (HUMINT) collection, it can be argued that such a capability remains an important desideratum. As regards security assistance, there is at least a respectable case to be made for removing primary responsibility for it from the State Department and giving it to the Department of Defense.

A few remarks need to be made concerning the changing face of low-intensity warfare in the post-Soviet world. The new international situation clearly alters American requirements in this area in fundamental ways. The delinkage of small wars from Soviet global ambitions that has been taking place over the last several years means that the U.S. will be worrying less about deep involvement in protracted revolutionary warfare in the developing world. In general, the military dimensions of U.S. involvement in such conflicts will probably decrease, while other dimensions (notably law-enforcement) will become more prominent. As a consequence of this, the center of gravity of low-intensity warfare, properly speaking, will shift from insurgency/counterinsurgency to contingency operations, both violent and otherwise. This development will provide a welcome opportunity to reformulate a doctrine of low-intensity conflict that more clearly defines the operational spectrum and distinguishes and assigns bureaucratic roles and missions. And it may well favor the approach suggested here of expanding military responsibility for key political-military missions.

The world we are now entering holds many question marks, and is plainly going to force a rethinking of many of the most cherished assumptions underpinning American national security policy. This kind of world is bound to have a corroding effect on our strategic culture — and thereby offers a unique opportunity to free ourselves from some of its shackles.

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