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Douglas V. Johnson Dr.

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REAL CHANGE OR RETRENCHMENT?

Douglas V. Johnson II

It is frequently asserted in our 0930 daily kaffe klatsch that as soon as the insurgency phenomenon in Iraq and Afghanistan is suppressed, the Army reflexively will return to its fixation on the kinetic approach to major combat. It is also popular to hold up the post-Vietnam era as a demonstration of that phenomenon with occasional references to similar reactions following the suppression of the Philippine Insurrection. These facile analyses are adduced to support the American Army's distaste for counterinsurgency work. To be honest, standing professional armies do not like counterinsurgency work under the very best of conditions. Such undertakings are almost as much, if not more, political-social-economic activities than military, and, if ever there were a "clash of civilizations," it would be here. But it all requires some deeper consideration.

Following the suppression of the Philippine Insurrection, the final phase of the Spanish-American War, the American Army went through several phase changes. It could not wholly ignore counterinsurgency thinking because, however pacified the Philippines appeared, residual rebellious groups were always smoldering on the more remote islands. Cuba was administered by the Army for only a mercifully short period, and Puerto Rico posed no problems. The next activity into which the Army was drawn had little or nothing to do with insurgency, and this is always what matters most in terms of orientation. The Russo-Japanese War burst upon the scene, and the results thereof frightened West Coast residents to the point that the president had to go to California to calm matters. One might well argue that the Boer War should have been enough to keep the lessons alive, but that was not an insurgency of the kind that fit the present mold—it was bodies of civilized white men fighting a semi-conventional war in such a remote part of the world that the consequences could hardly have any effect upon America. What mattered was that the previously pressing Philippine insurgency had been suppressed, and a new war had broken out—a new war that saw the revival of late American Civil War-like entrenchments augmented by that other American invention, barbed-wire. If that were not enough, machine guns made their first significant appearances along with rapid-fire artillery.

The Balkan Wars of the 1910s seem to have made no particular impression on anyone in the United States although they, too, showed off the employment of more modern weaponry. But who cared about “some damn thing in the Balkans”?

When Pancho Villa raided the American border, it was as part of a civil war among multiple parties in Mexico, but again nothing particularly resembling an insurgency that mattered to the United States. For the American Army, Villa’s raids were little more than a return to the Indian fighting days not so long gone.

In short, the evident trend in warfare was away from insurgency and toward a new form of what we might call semi-modern warfare.

Following the Vietnam War, the U.S. Army avoided internal collapse partly by refocusing its energies on recovering the ground lost in Europe during that decade. Taking the nuclear-colored threat in Europe as its focal point, the Army underwent a training revolution, produced two complete revisions of its operational doctrine, and reequipped itself for offensive combat on the plains and among the towns of central-western Europe—principally Germany. No time, money, or space was available for something that posed no threat comparable to that of the tank and nuke-heavy Warsaw Pact hordes. Yes, the soldiers of the Special Operations Forces kept counterinsurgency doctrine alive, if barely so, because conceptually that was their bread and butter, but not in the principal theater—central Europe.

Some day the war in Iraq will end. If matters progress according to proper form, the “lessons” of this war will be captured. They may or may not be “learned.” They may or may not be taught because the next conflict will call for the attention of the profession far too often charged with attempting to “refight the last war.” The charge that the Army will automatically revert to the study of “tank armies on the plains of central somewhere” is too facile. The direction of professional study and leader development will have more to do with two simple things: the first will be shape of the next challenge—will it be another insurgency, a nuclear-rattling Russia aggressing against its southern former substates, a post-Olympics challenge to the United States over Taiwan? Second, and arguably most important, will be the promotion lists. The last list was touted as demonstrating the influence of the “Petreaus school.” If subsequent lists repeat that phenomenon, heavy maneuver advocates, while rightly reminding us that theirs is an essential skill for an Expeditionary Army whose destination and foe remain unidentified, will lose their previous dominance. Promotion lists have been the most effective tool available to establish and maintain professional direction in the past and will most certainly work in the future. Joint service was a meaningless waste of time, or worse, until that form of service was established as a pathway to professional advancement by instructions to promotion boards.

Another factor may well inhibit a return to the principally kinetic school. The cost of attempting to revive all the worn out equipment that emerged to underwrite the possibility of meaningful defense of central Europe in the mid to late 1980s defies full measurement. To attempt to restore the old would cripple progress toward a balanced force approaching the kind of broad spectrum capability the unknowable future will require. The momentum of the Future Combat System, a true system of systems and not

a platform-centric program, will provide support to the middle ground that is most likely to dominate. The present momentum behind that program, coupled with the obviously destructive effect of attempting to recover past capabilities of less certain relevance, may act to reinforce development of new capabilities.

It is easy to argue that nobody likes doing counterinsurgency because it is so messy. For the really cynical, counterinsurgencies produce few “heroic” figures in the news, although in truth they produce many quiet heroes at least as worthy of emulation as the Audie Murphys of conventional war. But it isn’t about what the profession “likes,” it is about what the threat requires and what senior professionals value.

What will really matter in the long run will be whether the services, the Army in particular, will be able to maintain momentum toward effective interagency work. The motivations in the civilian departments of government may or may not be sufficient to maintain the impetus to work together toward a common end and will inevitably react to budgetary competition. But this work will be necessary regardless of the dominant Army doctrinal school.

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