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William S. Lind

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An Operational Doctrine for Intervention

WILLIAM S. LIND

C urrent discussions of how the United States should respond to hostile insurgencies stir up a painful sense of déjà vu. Too often, they reflect the enthusiasm for counterinsurgency so prevalent in the early 1960s. It sometimes seems as if the Vietnam War had never happened.

In fact, there are at least four salient lessons from Vietnam that we ignore at our peril:

- First, we cannot sustain the long-term commitment counterinsurgency usually requires. The political pressure will become too great for any administration to bear as the body bags keep coming home and the blood and the grief are spread through the living rooms of America by television news. Prolonged counterinsurgency with US forces is not a viable option.

- Second, we have not been very good at training and equipping foreign armies. Our equipment is too fragile, complex, and expensive for peasant forces. Our tactics are often outdated (e.g. line rather than light infantry tactics), rely on expensive equipment like helicopters and on massive fire support local forces cannot provide, and are frequently unsuited to local circumstances.

- Third, it is not possible to go into another country and change its culture to conform with our ideas of human rights, good government, military efficiency, or anything else. Culture is the basis for everything, some cultures work better than others, and all are remarkably impervious to change, especially change promoted by outsiders.

- Fourth, war is not won on the tactical level. In the narrow sense of holding the terrain, we won all the big battles in Vietnam (though we lost many small ones), but we were decisively beaten on the operational level.

Lacking at the time even the concept of the operational art, we had no way of using tactical events to reach strategic goals, which is what the operational level of war is all about.

If we are to succeed in future interventions, we must move beyond past errors. We need an operational doctrine for intervention, one that accords with actual circumstances, especially our inability to carry on a sustained conflict. Since its adoption of the 1982 edition of FM 100-5, *Operations*, the Army has recognized the operational art. The present task is to see how that art relates to the intervention mission.

How might we start? First, we should reconsider the conventional wisdom that says an insurgency is easiest to defeat while it is still at the guerrilla stage. This belief leads us into the briar patch with the tar baby. We either try to train and advise the local army in antiguerrilla operations, with dubious results, or commit US troops to a drawn-out counterinsurgency war, with disastrous consequences at home.

What if instead we allowed the insurgency to succeed to the point where it took over the nation in question and institutionalized itself? At that point, it will have a structure we can attack. It will have a visible government located in a capital city and regular, organized military forces that can be brought to conventional battle. Further, if our timing is right, it will have disillusioned many of its own followers with governmental policies and social and economic results very different from what they expected.

Instead of preventing a hostile insurgency from growing, we would prevent it from succeeding in its final goal of becoming an enduring government. In effect, letting the insurgents become the government before we strike would shift us from an operational linear defense, where we try to hold the line against all enemy gains, to the maneuver warfare approach of letting the enemy penetrate, then counterattacking.

Another basic concept in a new doctrine should be the rejection of gradualism, of responding with a tit-for-tat "proportional response" to enemy actions, as we did in Vietnam. Gradualism insures a drawn-out conflict, plays to the opponent's political strengths, and allows him to mobilize for total war against what will obviously be a limited effort on our part.

Once we decide to intervene, we must act so as to get decisive results as quickly as possible. General Heinz Guderian's motto for his

William S. Lind is director of The Institute for Cultural Conservatism, in Washington, D.C., and president of the Military Reform Institute. He was a defense advisor to former Senator Gary Hart and coauthored with him *America Can Win: The Case for Military Reform*. He is also the author of the *Maneuver Warfare Handbook*.

panzers should be our guide: *klotzen, nicht kleckern*—smash them, don't spatter them. As part of this change, we should drop the meaningless and misleading term "low-intensity conflict." The object is to have a very intense, very short conflict, with decisive results.

Rejection of gradualism would help avoid the "endless quagmire" syndrome. So would adoption of a "3-3-3" rule for operational planning. From the outset, planning should specify what we would accomplish in three days, in three weeks, and within three months. No plan would be adopted if it could not credibly promise decisive results against elements of the enemy's system in each period, *with a complete decision attained in three months*. Naturally, once the fighting starts, some things will turn out differently than expected. But planning in the 3-3-3 framework would impose both a planning discipline and a high tempo of operations.

What doctrine might we envision within this operational framework—a framework based on intervention only after the enemy had become the new government, substitution of a decisive blow for gradualism, and the 3-3-3 time frame?

- In three days, we would carry out a *coup de main* against the hostile government, seizing (preferably not killing) its leaders and taking control of its institutions: the governmental offices, the radio station, the military headquarters, and so on. The goal would be to decapitate the existing order. Depending on circumstances, we might immediately install a new, friendly government.

- In three weeks, we would bring the hostile armed forces to action and crush them. The operational goal would be to encircle them before they could disperse to become guerrillas. This would require what might be called a "light infantry blitzkrieg," with fast-moving light infantry pocketing enemy units the way German panzers pocketed Russian armies in 1941. Such tactics save lives, including enemy lives—most enemy casualties would be prisoners—which may be important politically in an intervention.

A light-infantry blitzkrieg is possible only if we develop a true light infantry, one that can sustain movement of at least 40 kilometers per day on foot, and that uses "Jaeger" (hunter) tactics. It cannot be done by our current slow-moving, largely road-bound line infantry, with its set-piece tactics, grossly overloaded soldiers, and centralized control. If the Army's new light-infantry divisions become genuine light infantry, we will have the forces we need for this second phase of an intervention.¹ If not, we can't do the job. Helicopter-borne line infantry cannot be substituted. As we saw repeatedly in Vietnam, reliance on the helicopter divorces the infantry from the ground, blinding it to what the enemy is doing and enabling the enemy to slip around and through it.

- Within three months, two tasks would be accomplished. First, a framework for pacification would be established by integrating the

Combined Action Program (CAP) the Marines used so successfully in I Corps in Vietnam with mobile operational reserves. CAP units would stay in local villages, organizing the local defense and, more importantly, making a commitment to the villagers by being there full time. The CAP teams would be supported by a strong operational reserve of light infantry *carried only to the site of combat* by helicopter, then seeking to encircle or, if that fails, to pursue any enemy units that attack a village. Again, this infantry must be true light infantry, and once brought to the site of an attack, it must stay on the ground. As soon as it boards helicopters again, the enemy will slip through and past it. The operational goal of this CAP/mobile reserve system would be to prevent the enemy from making a comeback within the three-month period.

The second task in this period would be to establish an effective national police force to sustain the new government. This force should be thought of as police, not an army to fight battles, although a more directly military mobile operational reserve to support the police may also be required. In establishing this force, our focus should not be on training—we are not likely to do that well, in part because our training is likely to reflect our culture rather than the local culture—but on recruiting from indigenous groups that have a strong personal stake in preventing a return of the ousted regime. Nothing else will produce a force that will be aggressive enough to maintain the new government.

At the end of the three months, we leave. The deposed leaders are in the custody of the new government or in exile. The previous government's military forces have been destroyed. And an infrastructure that will aggressively support the new government has been established in the countryside.

The objection will immediately be raised, "What if it seems we need to stay longer? What if our calculations show the new government will have a much better chance of sustaining itself if we stay a few more months?"

No hard and fast rule can be set that we never stay longer, because every situation is different. But two powerful objections must be posed to any extension. The first is the probable political situation at home. If any

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administration that approves an intervention ends up paying for it with its political life, we will very seldom intervene anywhere, regardless of what interests we have at stake. Politicians are quick learners where holding onto office is concerned. Prolonged interventions, with the steady dribble of casualties they invariably involve, have very high political costs.

The second objection relates to the country where we have intervened. We live in a world in which the nationalism that arose in Europe in response to the French Revolution has spread almost universally. Any foreign presence rubs this nationalism the wrong way. The longer we stay, the more we assist our opponents in preaching the case for a national war. If they succeed in that, we will be defeated. It is relatively easy, in much of the developing world, to defeat a government and its army. It is extraordinarily difficult to defeat a people. One of the main concepts of the proposed operational doctrine—waiting until the enemy has transformed himself from a guerrilla force into a government—is based on avoiding a people's war. That concept must guide the end of our involvement as well as its beginning. The micro-level advantage to be gained from prolonging our stay will seldom outweigh the macro-level disadvantage.

Still, the question must be faced: what if our enemy comes back once we leave? What if he once again succeeds in establishing himself as the government?

Our natural tendency is to try to solve this problem tactically, by staying longer to prevent his return. Instead, we need an operational answer. Operationally, if we stay, we jump right into the briar patch we tried to avoid in the first place, fighting a counterinsurgency war. Our operational answer should be: if he comes back, so can we.

What we did once, our opponent knows we can do again. This will be a powerful suggestion to him that if he does return to power, he must not do the things that forced us to intervene the first time around. After all, it is his actions against our interests we are responding to by intervening. If the regime we expelled returns but behaves differently, what is it to us? It is not a name and a flag that concern us. If he persists in his old behavior, back we come for another decapitation. Decapitation, if not invariably fatal to a political movement, is certainly tiresome for those who are losing their heads.

To be implemented successfully, the foregoing operational doctrine should be coupled with three tenets. First, we must understand what we can do and what we cannot. We can eliminate hostile governments in some developing countries—seize their leaders, take control of their institutions, and turn the levers of power over to their opponents. We can destroy the regular armed forces in those countries, if our own forces can move fast enough to encircle them before they disperse. Once the armed forces are



173d Abn Bde, Long Khanh Province, 1966

Public support wanes as the bodies return home. Above, a classic photo by PFC L. Paul Epley.

destroyed, we can stabilize the countryside for a certain period of time. In short, we can carry out what might be called an extended *coup de main*.

But we cannot carry on a prolonged counterinsurgency war. We cannot prevail if an entire people actively and resolutely takes arms against us, countering our limited war with total war. We cannot stay long in another country without turning the forces of nationalism against us, thus laying the basis for our own defeat. We cannot turn botched cultures into little Switzerlands, happy, prosperous Edens full of human rights and other good things. We can make others respect us; we cannot make them love us.

Second, the senior military leadership must insist that the operational doctrine be followed. If the political leadership orders departures from it—if, for example, it directs a gradualist approach—the military leadership must be prepared to resign in protest.

Third, we must realize that most interventions will bring a strong negative domestic political reaction. Instead of denying this will happen or bemoaning the fact, we should use the domestic reaction as a tool to keep us

on our schedule for withdrawal. As soon as we have begun an intervention, pressure may build inside the defense establishment to prolong it. The discipline imposed by growing political demands for withdrawal can be a useful counter to this pressure.

Beyond these three tenets, two caveats are necessary. First, the proposed operational doctrine does not guarantee success. No doctrine can do that. It does offer a higher probability of success than the usual American way of countering revolutionary war, a way characterized by slow tempo, entry at the peripheries followed by a lengthy logistical buildup before decisive action is sought, and reliance on massive firepower to batter the enemy into submission. We must not have B-52 strikes, sieges of enemy capitals, and heavy tolls of enemy dead and wounded if we are to succeed on the political level. But intervention remains a tricky business. Even with the proposed doctrine, it will still be a risky affair with a substantial probability of failure.

Second, nothing in this article indicates whether or where we should intervene. That is not an operational but a strategic and policy decision. There can be no formula for making it, only a clue: beware of confronting local nationalism head-on, even in what seems to be a small, weak country. Very seldom will the potential gains outweigh the certain high costs. A people is a very difficult thing to fight.

Afghanistan offers an example. The Soviets staged an effective *coup de main*, replacing the existing government with one of their own making. They took control of, rather than defeating, the local army, which at least in part accepted the new government. They did not attempt to take control of the countryside at the outset, which may have been an operational mistake. But the decisive factor that dragged them into a quagmire was local nationalism. Almost from the outset, its force was unleashed against them. They quickly found themselves fighting the Afghan people, and, with all the might of the Soviet Union behind them, they have been unable to prevail. Ten years ago, few lent credence to an effective Afghan resistance. Yet, with a high proportion of its citizenry engaged in a people's war, Afghanistan has fought a superpower to a standstill.

Just as tactical victories cannot outweigh operational defeats, so a sound operational doctrine cannot make up for errors in strategy and policy. The spread of nationalism has made the world an ever less friendly place for intervention. A sound operational doctrine for intervention is a *sine qua non*, but it cannot reverse broad underlying forces in the international environment.

NOTE

1. This presumes close terrain. In open terrain, we would need light (hence strategically mobile) mechanized forces. The Army's 9th Infantry Division (Motorized) could evolve into our first such force. On a smaller scale, Marine Corps battalions equipped with light armored vehicles could have performed this role had the Corps not canceled plans for an assault gun variant.