

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

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Volume 34  
Number 2 *Parameters Summer 2004*

Article 5

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5-1-2004

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### Recommended Citation

Robert M. Cassidy, "Back to the Street without Joy: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam and Other Small Wars," *Parameters* 34, no. 2 (2004), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2199.

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# Back to the Street without Joy: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam and Other Small Wars

ROBERT M. CASSIDY

“The deplorable experience in Vietnam overshadows American thinking about guerrilla insurgency.”

— Anthony James Joes<sup>1</sup>

“Fools say they learn from experience; I prefer to learn from the experience of others.”

— Otto von Bismark<sup>2</sup>

In 1961, Bernard Fall, a scholar and practitioner of war, published a book entitled *The Street Without Joy*. The book provided a lucid account of why the French Expeditionary Corps failed to defeat the Viet Minh during the Indochina War, and the book’s title derived from the French soldiers’ sardonic moniker for Highway 1 on the coast of Indochina—“Ambush Alley,” or the “Street without Joy.” In 1967, while patrolling with US Marines on the “Street without Joy” in Vietnam, Bernard Fall was killed by an improvised explosive mine during a Viet Cong ambush. In 2003, after the fall of Baghdad and following the conventional phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom, US and Coalition forces operating in the Sunni Triangle began fighting a counter-guerrilla type war in which much of the enemy insurgent activity occurred along Highway 1, another street exhibiting little joy. Learning from the experience of other US counterinsurgencies is preferable to the alternative.

The US military has had a host of successful experiences in counter-guerrilla war, including some distinct successes with certain aspects of the Vietnam War. However, the paradox stemming from America’s unsuccessful crusade in the jungles of Vietnam is this—because the experience was per-

ceived as anathema to the mainstream American military, hard lessons learned there about fighting guerrillas were neither embedded nor preserved in the US Army's institutional memory. The American military culture's efforts to expunge the specter of Vietnam, embodied in the mantra "No More Vietnams," also prevented the US Army as an institution from really learning from those lessons. In fact, even the term "counterinsurgency" seemed to become a reviled and unwelcome word, one that the doctrinal cognoscenti of the 1980s conveniently transmogrified into "foreign internal defense." Even though many lessons exist in the US military's historical experience with small wars, the lessons from the Vietnam War were the most voluminous. Yet these lessons were most likely the least read, because the Army's intellectual rebirth after Vietnam focused almost exclusively on a big conventional war in Europe—the scenario preferred by the US military culture.<sup>3</sup>

Since the US Army and its coalition partners are currently prosecuting counter-guerrilla wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is useful to revisit the lessons from Vietnam and other counterinsurgencies because they are germane to the wars of today and tomorrow. Capturing all or many of these lessons is beyond the scope of this article and is most likely beyond the scope of a single-volume book. However, this article aims to distill some of the more relevant counterinsurgency lessons from the American military's experiences during Vietnam and before. A bigger goal of this article, however, is to highlight some salient studies for professional reading as the US Army starts to inculcate a mindset that embraces the challenges of counterinsurgency and to develop a culture that learns from past lessons in counterinsurgency. This analysis also offers a brief explanation of US military culture and the hitherto embedded cultural obstacles to learning how to fight guerrillas. To simplify and clarify at the outset, the terms counterinsurgency, counter-guerrilla warfare, small war, and asymmetric conflict are used interchangeably. It is a form of warfare in which enemies of the regime or occupying force aim to undermine the regime by employing classical guerrilla tactics.<sup>4</sup>

The US Army and the broader American military are only now, well into the second decade after the end of the Cold War, wholeheartedly trying to transform their culture, or mindset. Senior civilian and military leaders of the

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defense establishment realize that military cultural change is a precondition for innovative and adaptive approaches to meet the exigencies of a more complex security landscape, one in which our adversaries will most likely adopt unorthodox strategies and tactics to undermine our technological overmatch in the Western, orthodox, way of war. Military culture can generally be defined as the embedded beliefs and attitudes within a military organization that shape that organization's preference on when and how the military instrument should be used. Because these institutional beliefs sometimes tend to value certain roles and marginalize others, military culture can impede innovation in ways of warfare that lie outside that organization's valued, or core, roles.<sup>5</sup>

For most of the 20th century, the US military culture (notwithstanding the Marines' work in small wars) generally embraced the big conventional war paradigm and fundamentally eschewed small wars and insurgencies. Thus, instead of learning from our experiences in Vietnam, the Philippines, the Marine Corps' experience in the Banana Wars, and the Indian campaigns, the US Army for most of the last 100 years has viewed these experiences as ephemeral anomalies and aberrations—distractions from preparing to win big wars against other big powers. As a result of marginalizing the counterinsurgencies and small wars that it has spent most of its existence prosecuting, the US military's big-war cultural preferences have impeded it from fully benefiting—studying, distilling, and incorporating into doctrine—from our somewhat extensive lessons in small wars and insurgencies. This article starts by briefly examining some of the salient lessons for counterinsurgency from Vietnam and lists some of the sources for lessons from that war that have been neglected or forgotten. This article also examines some sources and lessons of counterinsurgencies and small wars predating Vietnam.

### ***Vietnam—The “Other War” and Valuable Lessons***

If and when most Americans think about Vietnam, they probably think of General William C. Westmoreland, the Americanization of the war that was engendered by the big-unit battles of attrition, and the Tet Offensive of 1968. However, there was another war—counterinsurgency and pacification—where many Special Forces, Marines, and other advisers employed small-war methods with some success. Moreover, when General Creighton Abrams became the commander of the war in Vietnam in 1968, he put an end to the two-war approach by adopting a one-war focus on pacification. Although this came too late to regain the political support for the war that was irrevocably squandered during the Westmoreland years, Abrams' unified strategy to clear and hold the countryside by pacifying and securing the population met with much success.

Abrams based his approach on a study prepared by the Army staff in 1966 that was entitled *A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Devel-*

opment of South Vietnam (PROVN Study). The experiences of the Special Forces in organizing Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG), the Marines' Combined Action Program (CAP), and Abrams' PROVN Study-based expansion of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary (later Rural) Development and Support (CORDS) pacification effort under Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) all offer some valuable lessons for current and future counterinsurgencies.<sup>6</sup>

For much of the Vietnam War, the 5th Special Forces Group trained and led CIDG mobile strike forces and reconnaissance companies that comprised ethnic minority tribes and groups from the mountain and border regions. These strike forces essentially conducted reconnaissance by means of small-unit patrols and defended their home bases in the border areas, denying them to the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regular units. What's more, during 1966-67 American field commanders increasingly employed Special Forces-led "Mike" units in long-range reconnaissance missions or as economy-of-force security elements for regular units. Other CIDG-type forces, called mobile guerrilla forces, raided enemy base areas and employed hit-and-run guerrilla tactics against regular enemy units. The Special Forces also recruited heavily among the Nung tribes for "Delta," "Sigma," and "Omega" units—Special Forces-led reconnaissance and reaction forces. To be sure, the CIDG program provided a significant contribution to the war effort. The approximately 2,500 soldiers assigned to the 5th Special Forces Group essentially raised and led an army of 50,000 tribal fighters to operate in some of the most difficult and dangerous terrain in Vietnam. The CIDG patrolling of border infiltration areas provided reliable tactical intelligence, and the units secured populations in areas that might have been otherwise conceded to the enemy.<sup>7</sup>

Another program that greatly improved the US military's capacity to secure the population and to acquire better tactical intelligence was the US Marine Corps' Combined Action Program (CAP). The CAP was a local innovation with potential strategic impact—it coupled a Marine rifle squad with a platoon of local indigenous forces and positioned this combined-action platoon in the village of those local forces. This combined Marine/indigenous platoon trained, patrolled, defended, and lived in the village together. The mission of the CAP was to destroy the Viet Cong infrastructure within the village or hamlet area of responsibility; protect public security and help maintain law and order; protect friendly infrastructure; protect bases and communications within the villages and hamlets; organize indigenous intelligence nets; participate in civic action; and conduct propaganda against the Viet Cong. Civic action played an important role in efforts to destroy the Viet Cong, as it acquired important intelligence about enemy activity from the local population. Because of the combined-action platoon's proximity to the

people and because it protected the people from reprisals, it was ideal for gaining intelligence from the locals. The Marines' emphasis on pacifying the highly populated areas prevented the guerrillas from coercing the local population into providing rice, intelligence, and sanctuary to the enemy. The Marines would clear and hold a village in this way and then expand the secured area. The CAP units accounted for 7.6 percent of the enemy killed while representing only 1.5 percent of the Marines in Vietnam. The lessons from CAP provide one model for protracted counterinsurgencies, because the program employed US troops and leadership in an economy of force while maximizing indigenous troops. A modest investment of US forces at the village level can yield major improvements in local security and intelligence.<sup>8</sup>

Although CORDS was integrated under MACV when Abrams was still the Deputy Commander in 1967, it was Abrams and William Colby, as the Director of CORDS, who expanded and invested CORDS with good people and resources. Under the one-war strategy, CORDS was established as the organization under MACV to unify and provide single oversight of the pacification effort. After 1968, Abrams and Colby made CORDS and pacification the main effort. The invigorated civil and rural development program provided increased support, advisers, and funding to the police and territorial forces (regional forces and popular forces). Essentially, this rural development allowed military and civilian US Agency for International Development advisers to work with their Vietnamese counterparts at the province and village level to improve local security and develop infrastructure. Identifying and eliminating the Viet Cong infrastructure was a critical part of the new focus on pacification, and Colby's approach—the Accelerated Pacification Campaign—included the Phuong Hoang program, or Phoenix. The purpose of Phoenix was to neutralize the Viet Cong infrastructure, and although the program received some negative attention in the instances when it was abused, its use of former Viet Cong and indigenous Provisional Reconnaissance Units to root out the enemy's shadow government was very effective. The CORDS' Accelerated Pacification Campaign focused on territorial security, neutralizing Viet Cong infrastructure, and supporting programs for self-defense and self-government at the local level.<sup>9</sup>

The Accelerated Pacification Campaign began in November 1968, and by late 1970 the government of the Republic of Vietnam controlled most of the countryside. The "other war"—pacification—had essentially been won. "Four million members of the People's Self-Defense Force, armed with some 600,000 weapons" constituted a powerful example of the commitment of the population in support of the Republic of Vietnam and in opposition to the enemy. Expanded, better advised, and better armed, the Regional Forces and Popular Forces represented the most significant improvement. Under CORDS, these forces became capable of providing close-in security for the

rural population. The Hamlet Evaluation System, though imperfect and quantitative, indicated that from 1969 to 1970, 2,600 hamlets (three million people) had been secured. Other more practical measures of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign's success were a reduction in the extortion of taxes by the Viet Cong, a reduction in recruiting by the enemy in South Vietnam, and a decrease in enemy food provisions taken from the villagers.

In addition to the MACV and CORDS pacification efforts, other factors contributed to South Vietnam's control of the countryside. First, the enemy's Tet Offensive in January 1968 and Mini-Tet in May 1968 resulted in devastating losses to Viet Cong forces in the south, allowing MACV/CORDS to intensify pacification. Second, the enemy's brutal methods (including mass murder in Hue) during Tet shocked the civilian population of South Vietnam, creating a willingness to accept the more aggressive conscription required to expand indigenous forces. Last, one can surmise that Ho Chi Minh's death in September 1969 may have had some negative effect on the quality and direction of the North Vietnamese army's leadership.<sup>10</sup>

In and of themselves, the CIDG, CAP, and CORDS programs met with success in prosecuting key aspects of the counterinsurgency in Vietnam. Each program expanded the quality and quantity of the forces conducting pacification and counterinsurgency, improved the capacity for dispersed small-unit patrolling, and consequently improved the scope and content of actionable intelligence. One can only postulate, counterfactually, how the war might have gone if both CAP and CIDG had been harmonized and unified under CORDS and MACV, with Colby and Abrams at the helm, back in 1964. Ironically, Abrams had been on the short list of those considered for the MACV command in 1964. The lessons and successes of these programs are salient today because in both Afghanistan and Iraq, improving the quantity and capabilities of indigenous forces, ensuring that there is an integrated and unified civil-military approach, and the security of the population all continue to be central goals.<sup>11</sup>

None of these Vietnam-era programs, however, was without problems. The CIDG program was plagued by two persistent flaws. First, continuous hostility between the South Vietnamese and the ethnic minority groups who comprised CIDG strike forces impeded the US efforts to have Republic of Vietnam (RVN) Special Forces take over the CIDG program. Second, partly as a consequence of that, 5th Special Forces Group failed to develop an effective indigenous counterpart organization to lead the CIDG—the RVN Special Forces proved ineffective in this role. Moreover, US Marines themselves who have written studies that generally laud the benefits of the CAP model also reveal that the combined-action platoons were not all completely effective. In some instances the effects of CAP “were transitory at best” because the villagers became dependent on the Marines for security. In other instances, espe-



cially before General Abrams ushered-in a new emphasis on training popular forces, the local militia's poor equipment and training made them miserably incapable of defending the villages without the Marines. As for CORDS, the one major problem with rural development was that until 1967 it was not integrated under MACV, which seriously undermined any prospect of actually achieving unity of effort and unity of purpose. Abrams' influence resolved this by allowing MACV to oversee CORDS as well as regular military formations.<sup>12</sup>

Three works written during or about the Vietnam era are highly relevant to fighting counterinsurgencies: *The Guerrilla and How to Fight Him*, edited by Lieutenant Colonel T. N. Greene; the US Army's 1966 PROVN Study; and Lewis Sorley's *A Better War*, published in 1999. *The Guerrilla and How to Fight Him* is a great single-volume compendium on the nature and theory of guerrilla warfare. The most germane chapter in the book is "The Theory and the Threat," which includes a primer on guerrilla warfare by Mao; an analysis of Mao, time, space, and will by Edward Katzenbach; and a section on guerrilla warfare by Peter Paret and John Shy. This book also includes two sections on why the French lost the first Indochina War, one written by Vo Nguyen Giap and the other by Bernard Fall. The PROVN Study and *A Better War* offer valuable insights on pacification and the command and control required for integrating the civil and military efforts in counterinsurgency. *A Better War* is the shorter and more readable of the two, but the executive summary, the "re-sume," and Chapter V of the PROVN Study merit reading because this analysis formed the foundation of the approach explained in *A Better War*.

### ***Lessons from Counterinsurgencies Before Vietnam***

Before Vietnam, both the Army and the Marine Corps had much experience fighting guerrilla-style opponents. The Army seemed to learn anew for each counterinsurgency, while the Marines codified their corpus of experience in the 1940 *Small Wars Manual*. In fact, the Marines' lessons from leading Nicaraguan Guardia Nacional indigenous patrols in counter-guerrilla operations against Sandino's guerrillas may very well have served as the basis from which to design their CAP model in Vietnam. Nonetheless, there are a host of good works and lessons from the Banana Wars, from the Philippine Insurrection, and from the Indian Wars. This section encapsulates some of the common lessons from these wars and recommends some key books that cover them. The Hukbullahap Rebellion in the Philippines following World War II is excluded because the US role there was essentially limited to providing money and the advice of Edward Lansdale.

From the Marines' experience in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua during the first part of the 20th century, they learned that small wars, unlike conventional wars, present no defined or linear battle area and



theater of operations. While delay in the use of force may be interpreted as weakness, the *Small Wars Manual* maintains, the brutal use of force is not appropriate either. “In small wars, tolerance, sympathy, and kindness should be the keynote to our relationship with the mass of the population.” For small wars, the manual urges US forces to employ as many indigenous troops as practical early on to confer proper responsibility on indigenous agencies for restoring law and order. Moreover, it stresses the importance of focusing on the social, economic, and political development of the people more than on simple material destruction. It also underscores the importance of aggressive patrolling, population security, and the denial of sanctuary to the insurgents. An overarching principle, though, is not to fight small wars with big-war methods—the goal is to gain results with the least application of force and minimum loss of civilian (non-combatant) life.

The 1940 *Small Wars Manual* and the draft of its 2004 addendum, *Small Wars*, are the best sources for distilling the Marines’ lessons from the Banana Wars and beyond. While the logistical and physical aspects of the 1940 manual have become obsolete, the portions that address the fundamentals and principles of small wars are still quite relevant. One indication of this manual’s continued relevance is the fact that the 2004 draft, *Small Wars*, is not intended to supplant the earlier version but to complement it by linking it to the 21st century.<sup>13</sup>

During the Philippine insurgency, the American military won a relatively bloodless but unambiguous victory in three and a half years in a way that established the basis for a future friendship between Americans and Filipinos. Anthony James Joes, a scholar on American and guerrilla warfare, succinctly explains why:

There were no screaming jets accidentally bombing helpless villages, no B-52s, no napalm, no artillery barrages, no collateral damage. Instead, the Americans conducted a decentralized war of small mobile units armed mainly with rifles and aided by native Filipinos, hunting guerrillas who were increasingly isolated both by the indifference or hostility of much of the population and by the concentration of scattered peasant groups into larger settlements.<sup>14</sup>

During the Philippine Insurrection from 1899 to 1902, the US military learned to avoid big-unit search and destroy missions because they were counterproductive; to maximize the employment of indigenous scouts and paramilitary forces to increase and sustain decentralized patrolling; to mobilize popular support by focusing on the improvement of schools, hospitals, and infrastructure; and to enhance regime legitimacy by allowing insurgents and former insurgents to organize anti-regime political parties. In *Savage Wars of Peace*, an award-winning study on America’s role in small wars, Max

Boot attributed American success in the Philippine Insurrection to a balanced and sound application of sticks and carrots: the US military used aggressive patrolling and force to pursue and crush insurgents; it generally treated captured rebels well; and it generated goodwill among the population by running schools and hospitals, and by improving sanitation. In addition to Boot's book, *America and Guerrilla Warfare* by Anthony James Joes and *America's Forgotten Wars* by Sam C. Sarkesian both offer insightful chapters on US military counterinsurgency methods in the Philippines.<sup>15</sup> Sarkesian writes:

There is a need to learn from history, analyze American involvement and the nature of low-intensity conflict, and translate these into strategy and operational doctrines. Without some sense of historical continuity, Americans are likely to relearn the lessons of history each time they are faced with a low-intensity conflict.<sup>16</sup>

When Brigadier General Jack Pershing returned to the Philippines to serve as military governor of the Moro Province between 1909 and 1913, he applied the lessons he had learned as a captain during the Philippine Insurrection to pacify the Moros. He established the Philippine Constabulary, comprising loyal Filipinos from the main islands and serving as a police force, to assist in the campaign to pacify the Moros. Pershing did not attempt to apply military force alone to suppress the Moro rebellion. "Pershing felt that an understanding of Moro customs and habits was essential in successfully dealing with them—and he went to extraordinary lengths to understand Moro society and culture." Pershing understood the imperative of having American forces involved at the grass-roots level. He also comprehended the social-political aspects and knew that military goals sometimes had to be subordinated to them. "He scattered small detachments of soldiers throughout the interior, to guarantee peaceful existence of those tribes that wanted to raise hemp, produce timber, or farm." To influence and win the people, there had to be contact between them and his soldiers. During his first tour there as a captain, he was allowed inside the "Forbidden Kingdom" and as an honor not granted to any other white man, he was made a Moro Datu.<sup>17</sup>

More removed in time and context, the Indian Wars of the 19th century nonetheless provide some lessons for counterinsurgency. These lessons also demonstrate that the overarching fundamentals for fighting small wars are indeed timeless. With little preserved institutional memory and less codified doctrine for counterinsurgency, the late-19th-century US Army had to adapt on the fly to Indian tactics. A loose body of principles emerged from the Indian Wars: to ensure the close civil-military coordination of the pacification effort, to provide firm but fair and paternalistic governance, and to reform the economic and educational spheres. Good treatment of prisoners,

attention to the Indians' grievances, and the avoidance of killing woman and children (learned by error) were also regarded as fundamental to any long-term solution. Additionally, General George Crook developed the tactic of inserting small teams from friendly Apache tribes into the sanctuaries of insurgent Apaches to neutralize them, to psychologically unhinge them, and to sap their will. This technique subsequently emerged in one form or another in the Philippines, during the Banana Wars, and during the Vietnam War.<sup>18</sup>

One of the better books on the US Army's role in counter-guerrilla warfare against the Indians is Andrew J. Birtle's *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1860-1941*. It includes some interesting and relevant sections entitled "Indian Warfare and Military Thought," "U.S. Army Counter-guerrilla Operations on the Western Frontier," and "The Army and Indian Pacification." Birtle describes one of the few manuals published during the era on how to operate on the Plains, *The Prairie Traveler*, as "perhaps the single most important work on the conduct of frontier expeditions published under the aegis of the War Department." Captain Randolph Marcy's *The Prairie Traveler* was a "how-to" manual for packing, traveling, tracking, and bivouacking on the Plains. More important, it was also a primer on fighting the Indians.

In formulating principles for pacification, Marcy looked at his own experiences on the frontier as well as the French and Turkish experiences conducting pacification operations in North Africa to arrive at three lessons: over-dispersion strips the counterinsurgent force of initiative, increases its vulnerability, and saps its morale; mobility is an imperative (mounting infantry on mules was one way of increasing mobility during that era); and the best way to counter an elusive guerrilla was to employ mobile mounted forces at night to surprise the enemy at dawn. However, *The Prairie Traveler* conveys one central message that is still salient and germane today: it urges soldiers to be adaptive by coupling conventional discipline with the self-reliance, individuality, and rapid mobility of the insurgent.<sup>19</sup>

### ***A Mindset for Winning the "War of the Flea"***

In *The War of the Flea: Guerrilla Warfare in Theory and Practice*, author Robert Taber wrote:

Analogically, the guerrilla fights the war of the flea, and his military enemy suffers the dog's disadvantages: too much to defend; too small, ubiquitous, and agile an enemy to come to grips with. If the war continues long enough—this is the theory—the dog succumbs to exhaustion and anemia without ever having found anything on which to close its jaws or to rake with its claws.<sup>20</sup>

The "war of the flea" is harder than fighting against enemies who opt, imprudently, to fight the US military according to the conventional para-

digim it has historically preferred and in which it is unequaled. Our current and future adversaries in the protracted war on terror are fighting—and will continue to fight—the “war of the flea.” Employing hit-and-run ambushes, they strive to turn Coalition lines of communication and friendly regime key roads into “streets without joy.” However, the lessons from previous US military successes in fighting the elusive guerrilla show that with the right mindset and with some knowledge of the aforementioned methods, the war of the flea is in fact winnable.

The US Army is adapting in contact, learning and capturing lessons anew for beating the guerrilla. As it transforms and develops a mindset that places much more emphasis on stability operations and counterinsurgency, the books listed in this article are ones that should appear on reading lists and in the curricula of professional schools, beginning with the basic courses.

#### NOTES

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4. For a lengthier explanation of counterinsurgency, small war, or asymmetric conflict, see Robert M. Cassidy, “Why Great Powers Fight Small Wars Badly,” *Military Review*, 82 (September-October 2002), 43. For a definition of guerrilla insurgency, see Joes, p. 333.
5. For a short discussion on military culture and big-war preferences, see Robert M. Cassidy, *Russia in Afghanistan and Chechnya: Military Strategic Culture and the Paradoxes of Asymmetric Conflict* (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), pp. 8, 54-60.
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9. Sorley, pp. 22-23, 64-67.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-67, 72-73, 217-24.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
12. Clarke, p. 207; Keith F. Kopets, “The Combined Action Program: Vietnam,” *Military Review*, 82 (July-August 2002), 78-79.
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14. Joes, pp. 120-23.
15. Max Boot, *Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 126.
16. Sam C. Sarkesian, *America’s Forgotten Wars: The Counterrevolutionary Past and Lessons for the Future* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 245.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 178-80.
18. Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1860-1941* (Washington: US Army Center of Military History, 1988), pp. 55-92.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-66.
20. Robert Taber, *The War of the Flea: Guerrilla Warfare in Theory and Practice* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1965), pp. 27-28.