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W. Alexander Vacca

Mark Davidson

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The Regularity of Irregular Warfare

W. Alexander Vacca and Mark Davidson
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> "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world"
>
> —Ludwig Wittgenstein

The US military and our allies are currently facing challenges from adversaries employing a wide range of tactics and pursuing uncertain objectives. Policy makers, analysts, and practitioners are grappling for terms and concepts to apply to these challenges that convey the unique tactical and strategic aspects of these conflicts. With these terms and concepts they formulate and evaluate options for conducting operations, procuring equipment, and organizing the defense establishment. Given the great importance of these choices, the utmost care must be used in choosing accurate terms. The widespread use of the term "irregular warfare" in official and unofficial documents is an unhelpful and dangerous trend. This article argues that something as seemingly innocuous as poor terminology can have serious consequences.

Confronted with tactics radically different from our own standard tactics, analysts created a new category, "irregular warfare," to describe the security challenge we face. In creating a new category, they created more conceptual mischief than they resolved. "Irregular warfare" as a term conflates tactical asymmetry with strategic difference. While the tactics employed by the belligerents may be different, the strategic objective is the same. Suggesting otherwise is both ahistorical and misleading.

By maintaining that wars that pit sides with vastly different tactical systems and resources against one another is "irregular," analysts run the risk of making deductive and inductive errors. Deductively, analysts will fail to apply generalized lessons and analytical frameworks to the specifics of the strategic challenge at hand. Inductively, analysts will fail to draw generalized lessons and place the conflict into the broader concept of warfare. Incidents of irregular warfare throughout history thus become analytical orphans, of interest to

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Mark Davidson (Captain, US Navy, Retired) is currently the Director of Strategy for Northrop Grumman and previously served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Navy (Reserve Affairs) and as a member of the Secretary of Defense Reserve Forces Policy Board. He holds a BA from the University of California and an MBA from the University of Southern California.

W. Alexander Vacca is the Director of Business Assessment for Northrop Grumman, earned his Ph.D. in Political Science from Rutgers University, an MA from the University of Kentucky, and a BA from the Miami University of Ohio.

military history buffs but unfairly excluded from the scientific accumulation of knowledge in strategic studies. This simultaneously weakens and limits theories of warfare, while leaving strategists conceptually disarmed when confronted with strategic challenges that do not fit neatly in a specific model.

Tactical asymmetries are an enduring characteristic of warfare across three centuries. The French Republican experience with the counterrevolution in the Vendée in the 1790s displayed many of the characteristics of what today some would call an irregular war, and was fought concurrently with the traditional and proto-Napoleonic Wars of the Coalitions on France's eastern borders. The second phase of the Franco-Prussian War pitted Gambetta's civilian Government of the National Defense against Molke's occupying armies and was very different from the set-piece battles of Gravelotte and Sedan in the first phase. In the second Boer War the British had to overcome two very different phases of Boer resistance, and develop a tactical synthesis within their army.

Strategic thinkers, even those as formidable as Moltke the Elder, were frustrated by the apparent failure of these wars to follow the logic of warfare. Without generalized models or concepts to draw on, strategists struggled to formulate effective responses. Once the wars were finished, the historical and tactical lessons of these wars were separated from the broader theoretical and analytic study of warfare, degrading later military efforts to confront similar challenges. As the United States military prepares to reflect on the history of the previous decade of conflict, it is imperative that these lessons not be isolated as an "irregular" historical curiosity, but are instead fully integrated into a broad and flexible tactical and strategic understanding of warfare.

The Enduring Characteristic of Warfare

Clausewitz offers a blunt definition of warfare as "an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will."[1] In his general theory chapters, he does not discuss tactics, he does not specify that war involves uniformed combatants, close order drill, or movement through bounded overwatch. While Clausewitz does discuss elements of tactics in the book, these chapters have been superseded and are now read only by Clausewitz completists. The general chapters remain on the reading lists of staff colleges and security studies programs throughout the world.[2]

While civilian analysts are comfortable discussing military strategy, tactics have become the domain of the specialist.[3] Tactics represent an important intervening step between the components of raw power and military outcomes. The components of raw power, which can include population, level of industrialization, technological prowess, and other attributes normally considered by macro-level projects such as the Correlates of War, are insufficient to explain military outcomes.[4] Tactical systems change the way that military power is generated from the same resource base.[5] Therefore, it makes sense that adversaries would attempt to gain advantages through adoption of tactical systems to offset any shortfall in the raw components of military power.

The warfare of today is irregular only because the tactics adopted by the adversary are not identical to our own. Yet the tactics do involve the use of lethal and nonlethal force on the soldiers and civilians of the United States and our allies to achieve one or more political outcomes. If the adversary could defeat allied forces in Afghanistan by using 1880 cavalry tactics, they would use those tactics.

The Regularity of Irregular Warfare

Tactical asymmetries go back to the beginning of time. In the Bible, David beat Goliath by using a sling-launched projectile rather than engage in physical contact. This section provides a short overview of three wars that displayed tactical asymmetries that frustrated the side with both a more advanced tactical system and greater resources, specifically the counterrevolution in the Vendée, the second phase of the Franco-Prussian War, and the second Boer War. Despite their importance and common themes, these wars have been excluded from the contemporary canon of military theory.

The French Revolution would give birth to Napoleonic warfare and precipitate the writing of the enduring strategic treatises of Jomini and Clausewitz. Yet within the chaos of the Revolution is a forgotten military operation prompted by a counter revolt in the Vendée. What has been written on the Vendée is primarily sociological, and the tactics and operations of the revolt have been given almost no attention.[6]

As the Revolution widened its political goals to include a complete refashioning of the French State, the very institution of the Catholic Church came under violent attack. The civilians of the Vendée revolted in 1793 against this expansion of Revolutionary goals, and took up arms in defense of the Church, and later of the monarchy. To put down this revolt, the Republican government sent in an army of almost 50,000. In a series of battles, detached columns of this army were overwhelmed and destroyed by the Vendéan forces.

The Vendéans were civilians with light armament, led by some Royalist officers and gifted amateurs. They fought dispersed in the countryside, and would only concentrate to destroy isolated detachments of the Republican Army. With a whole region to cover, the Republicans were continually dividing their forces to seek out the Vendéan armies in battle.[7] Paddy Griffith, in the most complete English language treatment of the military aspects of the Vendée, argues:

> There was no specific fortress to storm, no real army to capture, and no significant economic resources upon which the Republic could seize . . . . In this theatre the sophisticated military education of the Revolution's generals was found to be largely irrelevant, in a way that was not true elsewhere.[8]

The momentum of the operation only shifted when the Vendéan army changed their strategy and attempted to lay siege to the Republican city of Nantes. Denied their normal advantages of cover, dispersion, and surprise, they exhausted themselves and depleted their number in the siege.

The second Republican campaign later in the year was fought very differently. Rather than attempt to engage the now weakened Vendéan forces, the Republicans remained concentrated and methodically burned villages, destroyed crops, and executed civilians.[9] Modern historians estimate that anywhere from a quarter to half of the Vendéan population was killed by the Republicans.[10] Three years after it began, the uprising was put down in 1796. Yet even then the Vendée would occasionally flare up and would require a Republican (and later Imperial) garrison through 1815.[11]

The French later faced a better resourced partisan campaign on the Iberian Peninsula, and apparently drew no links to their experience in the Vendée. In the Peninsula War, which gave birth to the term "guerilla war," the Spanish partisans supported by English regulars slowly depleted French resources, and caused the eventual withdrawal of Imperial forces from the peninsula.

The Franco-Prussian War, while best remembered for the crushing French defeat at Sedan, evolved into a complex second phase of partisan warfare, occupation, and inconclusive military engagements. During the first phase of the war, French armies using standard post-Napoleonic tactics engaged Prussian armies with more advanced post-Napoleonic tactics. The Prussians defeated the French in a series of large traditional battles, isolating a field army at Metz, obliterating a second at Sedan, and capturing the French Emperor, Napoleon III.[12] With their armies lost and government fallen, the French suffered a decisive defeat.

Yet the war did not end with Sedan. A civil government under Leon Gambetta emerged, organized new military units, and within a month had another half million men under arms. The remnants of the French military, plus armed civilians, fortified Paris and prepared for a long Prussian siege. Giuseppe Garibaldi created an army of international volunteers, christened the Army of the Vosges, and marched into France. Lacking the training, equipment, and drill of regular soldiers, and because French tactics had been called into question by previous battles, these new armies did not seek to fight set-piece battles with the Prussian Army. Instead, they adopted new tactics and dispersed across the countryside, forcing the Prussians to turn their regular army into an occupying force. The Prussians were forced to disperse an army of over 100,000 men to protect supply lines from partisan attacks.

In contrast to their success in set piece battles, the Prussians were continually frustrated by this stage of the war. No less a personage than Molke the Elder began to contemplate a war of indeterminate duration that could only end with the destruction of the civil infrastructure of France.[13] The tide only decisively turned against the French when Gambetta, looking to reverse earlier French defeats, ordered French forces to resume conventional offensive operations against the Prussians. As they transitioned to this role, each army was quickly routed by the Prussians, who were relieved to be fighting set piece battles again.[14]

After the Franco-Prussian War, military analysts spent considerable effort to understand why the French were so decisively beaten in the first phase

and why both French and Prussian casualties were so high.[15] Yet the successful resistance of the French in the second phase, and the Prussian inability to gain traction against these operations, attracted comparatively little attention. Those who wrote about it at all, such as Hans Delbruck, did so in quasi-philosophical terms.[16] As after the Vendée almost a century before, traditional operations completely dominated the military historiography of the period.

The tide only decisively turned against the French when Gambetta . . . ordered French forces to resume conventional offensive operations.

Like the Franco-Prussian War, the second Boer War, fought between 1899 and 1902, had distinct phases, beginning with conventional battles and later transitioning to guerilla warfare. Yet even in the conventional battles the Boer armies displayed asymmetric tactics. The British used close order linear formations for infantry and the *arme blanche* for cavalry.[17] The Boer regular units used dispersed formations for infantry and mounted infantry tactics for their horsemen. This tactical asymmetry produced a series of defeats for the British on both the offense and the defense for the first few months of the war.[18] With a new commander, new tactics, and many more troops the British turned the table on the Boer, eventually destroying the regular Boer armies and capturing the capitals of the Boer republics in 1900.

The remaining Boer regulars, augmented by volunteers but without a central government, organized themselves in commando units, and began to fight a mobile guerilla war in Boer territory. For the next two years the British had to deal with Boer commando raids and pacify the countryside. The British developed a system of small distributed fortifications (blockhouses), ran barbed wire throughout the countryside, and eventually began destroying farmland and civilian population centers. Civilians were rounded up and concentrated in prison camps, called concentration camps, further depriving the Boer military units of succor and support.[19]

Without a civil structure for resistance, the independent Boer units began to surrender to the British. The British and what remained of the Boer leadership negotiated a new civil structure, which eliminated the Boer republics but also set the groundwork for changing the British Cape Colony into the Union of South Africa, an element of the British Commonwealth.

The second Boer War is important because the Boer presented the British with two asymmetric challenges. In the first phase they fought for traditional objectives, including the holding and taking of specific ground, but did so with nonstandard tactics. In the second phase they transitioned to a full guerrilla tactical system.

In the aftermath of the second Boer War, the British military went to great lengths to systematically reverse the tactical reforms of the war. The Boer War was seen as an outlier, both geographically and conceptually, involving a

weak foe without a regular military. The revised British infantry and cavalry tactics were seen as temporary expedients, and changed back to 1899 doctrine.[20] This tactical retrogression would have disastrous consequences for the British in 1914.

In post World War II and colonial applications, these lessons were "relearned" by the French in North Africa and East Asia, and the United Kingdom during the Malay Emergency and to some extent in Northern Ireland.[21] In a depressingly familiar pattern, the hard-learned lessons of irregular war had to be relearned through the expenditure of blood and treasure. These lessons, learned also by United States military and civilian leadership in Vietnam, were relegated to near obscurity until recent events in Iraq and Afghanistan brought a rush of thought and rediscovery in terms of military education, doctrine, and cultural discourse.[22]

These historical examples show that very different military powers—Republican France, Prussia, and Great Britain—have had to face challenges from adversaries who used asymmetric tactics during all or part of a conflict. In each case, the side with more traditional tactics struggled to adjust to the challenge, and defined the challenge as outside of the scope of normal military operations. After the war, the lessons were shunted to the side, and considered to be applicable only to the very narrow circumstance of the specific conflict, and not considered as part of the normal course of war.

Linguistic Imprecision and Strategic Mischaracterization

The use of the term "irregular warfare" is not simply a matter of harmless imprecision; it exerts a pernicious effect on the way that policy makers plan for and conduct military operations, as well as on military historiography. Military and political analysts fail to adequately and accurately learn lessons from irregular operations and they fail to apply relevant lessons from the broader knowledge base about military operations.

Political psychologists have shown that the terms we use to describe issues can influence the way that we evaluate options and frame potential solutions.[23] Verbal metaphors imply and cue cognitive heuristics. To modify the initial quotation from Wittgenstein, "the choice of my language indicates the limits of my world." The choice to describe nontraditional tactics and operations as "irregular" limits the ability to prepare for, and learn from, these experiences.

Irregular warfare implies a distinctness from regular warfare, reinforced by framing irregular warfare in opposition to regular warfare. Modern US doctrine even goes so far as to pool "conventional," "regular," and "traditional" warfare as "essentially synonymous."[24] This framing very clearly positions "irregular" as something different and distinct from normal military operations.

"Irregular" implies infrequency. Yet military events that depart from standard set piece battles are frequent throughout history and in the post-Napoleonic period. Even traditional wars have theaters where nontraditional tactics are practiced, such as Allenby's campaign against the Ottoman Turks. Biddle and Friedman argue that even these distinctions are blurred, as the

tactical principles underlying asymmetric tactical systems are very similar.[25] Yet "irregularity" implies something that is infrequent, abnormal, and defies systematic study and routine processes and solutions.

In addition to frequency, "irregularity" also implies diminished importance. Because irregular wars are infrequent and abnormal, they should not receive the same level of attention in terms of resources, training, or study, as regular warfare. Irregular warfare thus becomes ancillary to regular warfare. This depreciates our understanding of irregular warfare and, ironically, of regular warfare.

Deductive Failures

The deductive failure is the inability of analysts to draw on the general knowledge of warfare and history for recommendations and insight on the current conflict. If the conflict is irregular, it is apart from our generalized understanding of warfare, and thus we toss out history and conceptual leverage which might be very applicable to the problem if we just thought of it as warfare.

Some analysts have argued that there are irregular aspects to all wars. Biddle and Friedman argue that there is a tactical continuum, and their analysis of the 2006 Lebanon campaign shows how Hezbollah blended tactics.[26] Military analysts who rely exclusively on either pole fail to process the full effects of Hezbollah tactics, and to the extent that Israeli tactics were designed for one or the other pole, they were inadequate in facing the challenge of Hezbollah.

Another consequence of this deductive failure is to break the link between war and politics. Clausewitz is very clear that war is a political act with political objectives. Yet in irregular war, the political objectives are often forgotten as analysts focus on the tactical challenges. Negotiated settlements become very difficult to reach, or even propose. The military becomes a jealous protector of its autonomy, citing tactical expediency as a reason for avoiding civilian oversight. When confronted with continued French resistance in 1871 and Bismarck's demand for a negotiated settlement, Moltke wrote that " . . . only the military point of view counted. The political viewpoint counted only insofar as it did not demand things that were militarily not allowable."[27] Bismarck advocated a (harsh) negotiated settlement, while Moltke wanted to break the French civilization once and for all by destroying population centers and farmland.[28]

Somewhat ironically, each incident of irregular warfare analyzed ended with military commanders recommending courses of actions that approached the Clausewitzian ideal type of total warfare. Having conceptually severed the link between war and politics, the purely military solution became unrestrained destruction. The natural tension between politics and total warfare which Clausewitz identified is disturbed, and thus there is a tendency to move towards the extreme of total warfare.

In the case of the Vendée, the Republican armies committed deliberate atrocities on a grand scale, going so far as to rename the region the *Vengé*, the

French word for vengeance.[29] Some modern historians claim that Vendée was the first genocide among post-Enlightenment European peoples.[30] During the second phase of the Franco-Prussian War, Moltke proposed *Exterminationskrieg* (war of extermination) specifically targeting civilian population and resource centers.[31] In the case of the Boer War, the British army implemented the systematic resettling of civil populations into camps and the deliberate destruction of farmland.[32]

Inductive Failures

The inductive failure is the inability of theorists and analysts to link together the specific instances of irregular warfare into a general theory, with general lessons and characteristics. Thus any retrospective analysis tends to be episodic, and disconnected from the more generalized theories of warfare. Because knowledge and narrative are disconnected, the lessons fail to play a part in the gradual accumulation of knowledge which forms the basis of social science and strategic studies.

After each irregular war, there was a disturbing pattern of backsliding on tactical lessons learned. The historiography of irregular wars and operations is instructive. The emergence of the *Levée en masse* during the French Revolution is the cornerstone of emerging Napoleonic warfare, but the concurrent popular uprising in the Vendeé is a footnote.[33] The first phase of the Franco-Prussian war exerted influence through 1914, and yet the second phase has been forgotten. The tactical innovation in the British Army during the second Boer War had been obliterated ten years later.

Because these wars were viewed as irregular, there appeared to be no harm in letting the lessons lapse, or even failing to fully document these operations. Moreover, even when documented, these wars were not analytically linked to "regular" wars, and thus remained merely case studies for historians, not evidence for theories of warfare. This allows the theory of "regular" warfare to propagate and develop without the influence of "irregular" warfare. This hurts the cumulative understanding of warfare as a whole, as "regular" warfare studies become increasingly detached from the actual experiences of war, while "irregular" war suffers from dramatic undertheorising.

In the case of the Boer War, the failure to incorporate specific knowledge into the general understanding of warfare was particularly damaging to British military doctrine. The Boer clearly demonstrated that loosely grouped infantry, operating in small groups and using the cover and concealment of the landscape, could infiltrate prepared positions and then bring decisive lethal force to bear. British writing from 1900 through 1914 discussed "Boer tactics," and often explained why they were not applicable to contemporary infantry or cavalry tactical problems.[34]

The infiltration tactics developed by the Boer would later form the basis of German *Stosstrupen* tactics, which would break open the static war on the Western Front during the First World War.[35] These tactics were used

with particularly devastating effect against the British in 1918. Boer success in defending ground, even with low force to space densities, also flummoxed the British and confounded international military analysts.[36] Yet it took the First World War belligerents two years to begin making these tactical adjustments. The elastic defense of strong points, rather than static defense in massed lines, did not emerge until 1916, and open order attack did not appear until late 1917.[37] The efficacy of these tactics was noted in 1902 after the second Boer War, but they were isolated from the broader body of military tactics, and not considered applicable to a general war in Europe.

Conclusion

The term "irregular warfare" reinforces a false and dangerous divide in how war is thought about and planned for. The strategic aim of war, the use of force to compel others to our will, is the same. Tactical concepts, including the use of cover and concealment, local concentrations of force, and the avoidance of decisive engagements, are the same. It is only the peculiar tactical systems which vary, and which may be asymmetric.

By promoting irregular warfare, analysts set it up as something distinct from regular warfare. Once separated, this leads to deductive and inductive logical failures. Deductively, analysts fail to apply the general body of knowledge about warfare to the specific situation at hand. This can include the failure to properly evaluate and manipulate political advantages, a failure to understand the political objective of an adversary, a failure to resort to previously established tactical lessons, and to pursue tactically expedient actions which complicate political solutions. Inductively, analysts fail to place the specific war into the accumulated body of general knowledge about warfare. Lessons, painfully learned through experience, are not reincorporated into the broader understanding of warfare.

Elements of tactical asymmetry have been a critical element of warfare from at least the French Revolution and the proto-Napoleonic period. The counterrevolution in the Vendée, the Franco-Prussian War, and the second Boer War all saw adversaries adopt asymmetric tactics in order to achieve political objectives, while belligerents relying on traditional tactics became increasingly frustrated with the course of war, and developed extreme tactical solutions.

In each case, lessons failed to take root in contemporary military thinking. The Vendée was overshadowed by emerging Napoleonic warfare. The second phase of the Franco-Prussian War provoked existential philosophical thought, while military planners focused on the decisive traditional Prussian victories at Sedan and Gravelotte. The second Boer War was deliberately excised from British tactical development.

The United States is currently learning difficult tactical lessons for which we are paying a high price. Yet if all we remember are specific tactical responses to idiosyncratic tactical challenges, we are doing ourselves a disservice. By treating our current experience as "irregular," and somehow disassociated from "regular" warfare, we diminish our understanding of both.

We risk continued surprise when adversaries change tactics. We also fail to bring our full set of historical experience, conceptual models, and political tools to bear on these challenges. As the US military begins to reflect on the experience of the past ten years, it is imperative that we not lose or deemphasize the lessons learned at such great cost.

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25. Stephen Biddle and Jeffrey A. Friedman, *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle, PA: US Army Strategic Studies Institute, September 2008).

26. Ibid., 24.

27. Helmuth Moltke, "The Campaign of 1870-1871," in Daniel J. Hughes, *Motlke on the Art of War: Selected Writings* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993), 39. Moltke was discussing the possibility of bombarding Paris after Sedan and the capture of Napoleon III.

28. Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War, 436-437*.

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