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Iraq-style counterinsurgency is fast becoming the U.S. Army's organizing principle. Is our military preparing to fight the next war, or the last one?

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The Petraeus Doctrine



Image credit: Benjamin Lowy/VII Network

For a military accustomed to quick, easy victories, the trials and tribulations of the Iraq War have come as a rude awakening. To its credit, the officer corps has responded not with excuses but with introspection. One result, especially evident within the U.S. Army, has been the beginning of a Great Debate of sorts.

Anyone who cares about the Army's health should take considerable encouragement from this intellectual ferment. Yet anyone who cares about future U.S. national-security strategy should view the debate with considerable concern: it threatens to encroach upon matters that civilian policy makers, not soldiers, should decide.

What makes this debate noteworthy is not only its substance, but its character—the who and the how.

The military remains a hierarchical organization in which orders come from the top down. Yet as the officer corps grapples with its experience in Iraq, fresh ideas are coming from the bottom up. In today's Army, the most-creative thinkers are not generals but mid-career officers—lieutenant colonels and colonels.

Like any bureaucracy, today's military prefers to project a united front when dealing with the outside world, keeping internal dissent under wraps. Nonetheless, the Great Debate is unfolding in plain view in publications outside the Pentagon's purview, among them print magazines such as [Armed Forces Journal](#), the Web-based [Small Wars Journal](#), and the counterinsurgency blog Abu Muqawama.

The chief participants in this debate—all Iraq War veterans—fixate on two large questions. First, why, after its promising start, did Operation Iraqi Freedom go so badly wrong? Second, how should the hard-earned lessons of Iraq inform future policy? Hovering in the background of this Iraq-centered debate is another war that none of the debaters experienced personally—namely, Vietnam.

The protagonists fall into two camps: Crusaders and Conservatives.

The Crusaders consist of officers who see the Army's problems in Iraq as self-inflicted. According to members of this camp, things went awry because rigidly conventional senior commanders, determined "never again" to see the Army sucked into a Vietnam-like quagmire, had largely ignored unconventional warfare and were therefore prepared poorly for it. Typical of this generation is Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, once the top U.S. commander in Baghdad, who in late 2003 was still describing the brewing insurgency as "strategically and operationally insignificant," when the lowliest buck sergeant knew otherwise.

Younger officers critical of Sanchez are also committed to the slogan "Never again," but with a different twist: never again should the officer corps fall prey to the willful amnesia to which the Army succumbed after Vietnam, when it turned its back on that war.

Among the Crusaders' most influential members is Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, a West Pointer and Rhodes Scholar with a doctorate from Oxford University. In 2002, he published a book, impeccably timed, titled [*Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons From Malaya and Vietnam*](#). After serving in Iraq as a battalion operations officer, Nagl helped rewrite the Army's counterinsurgency manual and commanded the unit that prepares U.S. soldiers to train Iraqi security forces. (Earlier this year, he left the Army to accept a position with a Washington think tank.)

To Nagl, the lessons of the recent past are self-evident. The events of 9/11, he writes, "conclusively demonstrated that instability anywhere can be a real threat to the American people here at home." For the foreseeable future, political conditions abroad rather than specific military threats will pose the greatest danger to the United States.

Instability creates ungoverned spaces in which violent anti-American radicals thrive. Yet if instability anywhere poses a threat, then ensuring the existence of stability everywhere—denying terrorists sanctuary in rogue or failed states—becomes a national-security imperative. Define the problem in these terms, and winning battles becomes less urgent than pacifying populations and establishing effective governance.

War in this context implies not only coercion but also social engineering. As Nagl puts it, the security challenges of the 21st century will require the U.S. military "not just to dominate land operations, but to change entire societies."

Of course, back in the 1960s an earlier experiment in changing entire societies yielded unmitigated disaster—at least that's how the Army of the 1980s and 1990s chose to remember its Vietnam experience. Crusaders take another view, however. They insist that Vietnam could have been won—indeed was being won, after General Creighton Abrams succeeded General William Westmoreland in 1968 and jettisoned Westmoreland's heavy-handed search-and-destroy strategy, to concentrate instead on winning Vietnamese hearts and minds. Defeat did not result from military failure; rather, defeat came because the American people lacked patience, while American politicians lacked guts.

The Crusaders' perspective on Iraq tracks neatly with this revisionist take on Vietnam, with the hapless Sanchez (among others) standing in for Westmoreland, and General David Petraeus—whose Princeton doctoral dissertation was titled "The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam"—as successor to General Abrams. Abrams's successful if tragically aborted campaign in Vietnam serves as a precursor to Petraeus's skillfully orchestrated "surge" in Iraq: each demonstrates that the United States can prevail in "stability operations" as long as commanders grasp the true nature of the problem and respond appropriately.

For Nagl, the imperative of the moment is to institutionalize the relevant lessons of Vietnam and Iraq, thereby enabling the

Army, he writes, “to get better at building societies that can stand on their own.” That means buying fewer tanks while spending more on language proficiency; curtailing the hours spent on marksmanship ranges while increasing those devoted to studying foreign cultures. It also implies changing the culture of the officer corps. An Army that since Vietnam has self-consciously cultivated a battle-oriented warrior ethos will instead emphasize, in Nagl’s words, “the intellectual tools necessary to foster host-nation political and economic development.”

Although the issue is by no means fully resolved, the evidence suggests that Nagl seems likely to get his way. Simply put, an officer corps that a decade ago took its intellectual cues from General Colin Powell now increasingly identifies itself with the views of General Petraeus. In the 1990s, the [Powell Doctrine](#), with its emphasis on overwhelming force, assumed that future American wars would be brief, decisive, and infrequent. According to the emerging Petraeus Doctrine, the Army (like it or not) is entering an era in which armed conflict will be protracted, ambiguous, and continuous—with the application of force becoming a lesser part of the soldier’s repertoire.

Nagl’s line of argument has not gone unchallenged. Its opponents, the Conservatives, reject the revisionist interpretation of Vietnam and dispute the freshly enshrined conventional narrative on Iraq. Above all, they question whether Iraq represents a harbinger of things to come.

A leading voice in the Conservative camp is Colonel Gian Gentile, a Berkeley graduate with a doctorate in history from Stanford, who currently teaches at West Point. Gentile has two tours in Iraq under his belt. During the second, just before the Petraeus era, he commanded a battalion in Baghdad.

[Writing in the journal *World Affairs*](#), Gentile dismisses as “a self-serving fiction” the notion that Abrams in 1968 put the United States on the road to victory in Vietnam; the war, he says, was unwinnable, given the “perseverance, cohesion, indigenous support, and sheer determination of the other side, coupled with the absence of any of those things on the American side.” Furthermore, according to Gentile, the post-Vietnam officer corps did not turn its back on that war in a fit of pique; it correctly assessed that the mechanized formations of the Warsaw Pact deserved greater attention than pajama-clad guerrillas in Southeast Asia.

Gentile also takes issue with the triumphal depiction of the Petraeus era, attributing security improvements achieved during Petraeus’s tenure less to new techniques than to a “cash-for-cooperation” policy that put “nearly 100,000 Sunnis, many of them former insurgents, ... on the U.S. government payroll.” According to Gentile, in Iraq as in Vietnam, tactics alone cannot explain the overall course of events.

All of this forms a backdrop to Gentile’s core concern: that an infatuation with stability operations will lead the Army to reinvent itself as “a constabulary,” adept perhaps at nation-building but shorn of adequate capacity for conventional war-fighting.

The concern is not idle. A recent article in *Army* magazine notes that the Army’s National Training Center in Fort Irwin, California, long “renowned for its force-on-force conventional warfare maneuver training,” has now “switched gears,” focusing exclusively on counterinsurgency warfare. Rather than practicing how to attack the hill, its trainees now learn about “spending money instead of blood, and negotiating the cultural labyrinth through rapport and rapprochement.”

The officer corps itself recognizes that conventional-warfare capabilities are already eroding. In a widely circulated white paper, three former brigade commanders declare that the Army’s field-artillery branch—which plays a limited role in stability operations, but is crucial when there is serious fighting to be done—may soon be all but incapable of providing accurate and timely fire support. Field artillery, the authors write, has become a “dead branch walking.”

Gentile does not doubt that counterinsurgencies will figure in the Army’s future. Yet he questions Nagl’s certainty that situations resembling Iraq should become an all-but-exclusive preoccupation. Historically, expectations that the next war will resemble the

last one have seldom served the military well.

Embedded within this argument over military matters is a more fundamental and ideologically charged argument about basic policy. By calling for an Army configured mostly to wage stability operations, Nagl is effectively affirming the Long War as the organizing principle of post-9/11 national-security strategy, with U.S. forces called upon to bring light to those dark corners of the world where terrorists flourish. Observers differ on whether the Long War's underlying purpose is democratic transformation or imperial domination: Did the Bush administration invade Iraq to liberate that country or to control it? Yet there is no disputing that the Long War implies a vast military enterprise undertaken on a global scale and likely to last decades. In this sense, Nagl's reform agenda, if implemented, will serve to validate—and perpetuate—the course set by President Bush in the aftermath of 9/11.

Gentile understands this. Implicit in his critique of Nagl is a critique of the Bush administration, for which John Nagl serves as a proxy. Gentile's objection to what he calls Nagl's "breathtaking" assumption about "the efficacy of American military power to shape events" expresses a larger dissatisfaction with similar assumptions held by the senior officials who concocted the Iraq War in the first place. When Gentile charges Nagl with believing that there are "no limits to what American military power ... can accomplish," his real gripe is with the likes of Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz.

For officers like Nagl, the die appears to have been cast. The Long War gives the Army its marching orders. Nagl's aim is simply to prepare for the inescapable eventuality of one, two, many Iraqs to come.

Gentile resists the notion that the Army's (and by extension, the nation's) fate is unalterably predetermined. Strategic choice—to include the choice of abandoning the Long War in favor of a different course—should remain a possibility. The effect of Nagl's military reforms, Gentile believes, will be to reduce or preclude that possibility, allowing questions of the second order (How should we organize our Army?) to crowd out those of the first (What should be our Army's purpose?).

The biggest question of all, Gentile writes, is "Who gets to decide this?" Absent a comparably searching Great Debate among the civilians vying to direct U.S. policy—and the prospects that either Senator McCain or Senator Obama will advocate alternatives to the Long War appear slight—the power of decision may well devolve by default upon soldiers. Gentile insists—rightly—that the choice should not be the Army's to make.

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