

Let's Win the Wars We're In

Your mission remains fixed, determined, inviolable. It is to win our wars.

—General Douglas MacArthur¹

By JOHN A. NAGL

A stunning if predictable development in the military community over the past 2 years has been the backlash against the promulgation of counterinsurgency learning in the midst of the ongoing campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. These wars have spurred long-overdue changes in the way the U.S. military prepares for and prioritizes irregular warfare. These changes are hard-won: they have been achieved only after years of wartime trials and tribulations that have cost the United States dearly in money, materiel, and the lives of its courageous Servicemembers.

Yet despite the relatively tentative nature of such changes, there are already those who predict grim strategic outcomes for America if its military, particularly the Army, continues the process of adaptation. Gian Gentile, the vocal Army critic of counterinsurgency adaptation, has written that a “hyper-emphasis on counterinsurgency puts the American Army in a perilous condition. Its ability to fight wars consisting of head-on battles using tanks and mechanized infantry is in danger of atrophy.”² He is not alone in his views. Three brigade commanders in the Iraq War wrote a white paper warning about the degradation of seldom used field artillery, declaring that the Army is “mortgaging [its] ability to fight the next war” by neglecting the requirements for combined arms operations.³ The Army Secretary, Pete Geren, and Chief of Staff, General George Casey, both assert that the Army is

C Company, 2nd BN, 27th Infantry Bgt (Samuel Bericde)

Elements of 25th Infantry Division conduct combat operations with Iraqi army amid burning oil fields

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“out of balance” in part because of “a focus on training for counterinsurgency operations to the exclusion of other capabilities.”⁴ Prominent civilian thinkers in the academic community have presented similar arguments.⁵ With such dire warnings, one might forget that there’s a war on right now.

The mission of the U.S. Army is to fight and win the Nation’s wars. When bullets are flying, Soldiers are in harm’s way, and the national interest is at stake, the Army must devote the last full measure of its devotion to winning the wars it is in. Future conflicts are important, but the present conflicts are critical: the United States is not winning a counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan and, at great cost, just managed to turn around another in Iraq that was on the verge of catastrophic collapse only 2 years ago. A continued American commitment to both campaigns is likely necessary for some years to come. America’s enemies in the Long War—the al Qaeda terrorist organization and its associated movements infesting other states around the world—remain determined to strike. A host of trends from globalization to population growth to weapons proliferation, which the Army has recognized in its latest posture statement, suggests that the “era of persistent conflict” against lethal nonstate irregular foes will not end any time soon.⁶ For all these reasons, the security of the Nation and its interests demand that the Army continue to learn and adapt to counterinsurgency and irregular warfare and that it institutionalize these adaptations so they are not forgotten again.

Forgetting Lessons—On Purpose

We put an army on the battlefield that I had been a part of for 37 years. The truth of the matter is: It doesn’t have any doctrine, nor was it educated and trained, to deal with an insurgency. . . . After the Vietnam War, we purged ourselves of everything that dealt with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war. In hindsight, that was a bad decision. . . . We have responsibility.

—General John Keane⁷

Critics charge that by adapting more fully to the unique demands of counterinsurgency, the Army is preparing to fight the last war. In this accusation, “the last war” refers not only to Iraq but also to an even earlier

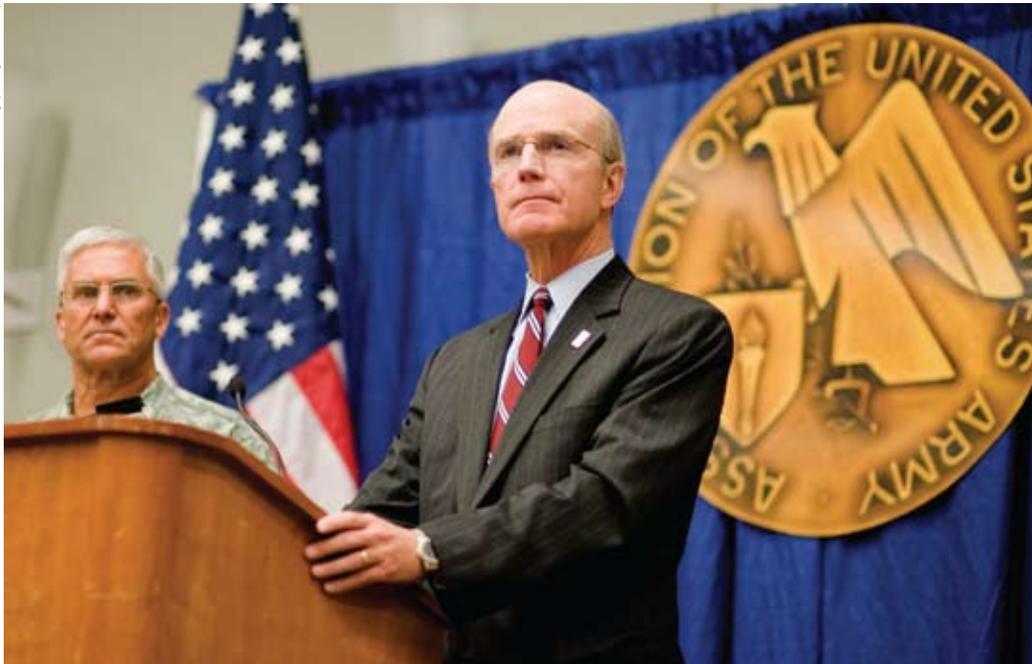
controversial conflict. As Gentile sees it, those seeking to improve the Army’s counterinsurgency capabilities are “busy fighting Vietnam all over again in Iraq.”⁸ This implies that the Army has nothing to learn from the Vietnam counterinsurgency experience.

Interestingly, that was precisely the Army’s view at the time. In the wake of that war, the Army opted to focus on large-scale conventional combat and “forget” counterinsurgency. Studies criticizing the Army’s approach to the Vietnam War were largely ignored. The standard narrative was promulgated by Colonel Harry Summers in his 1982 book *On Strategy*: “Instead of orienting on North Vietnam—the source of the war—we turned our attention to the symptom—the

reasons to renew its emphasis on conventional combat. The threat of a Soviet invasion of Europe was a clear and present danger at the time. The post-Vietnam Army was a demoralized “hollow force” wracked by desertion and drug abuse. It badly needed to be infused with a new sense of mission, which was achieved through doctrinal revisions and a massive conventional force buildup from the late 1970s through the 1980s.

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U.S. Army (D. Myles Cullen)



Army Chief of Staff GEN Casey and Army Secretary Pete Geren brief congressional staffers

guerrilla war in the South.”⁹ Summers argued that the focus of American strategy should have been to defeat North Vietnam through conventional operations; the insurgency itself was inconsequential. General William Westmoreland and many others concurred with this assessment: “the United States failed in Vietnam because it did not use its military power to maximum advantage,” largely due to restrictive micromanagement by civilian policymakers in Washington.¹⁰ The solution was to rebuild an Army focused exclusively on achieving decisive operational victories on the battlefield.

The Army certainly did need to be rebuilt after Vietnam, and there were good

The dark side of this rebirth, however, was the rejection of irregular warfare as a significant component of future conflict. Rather than rethinking and improving its counterinsurgency doctrine after Vietnam, the Army sought to bury it, largely banishing it from its key field manuals and the curriculum of its schoolhouses. Doctrine for “counterguerrilla” or “low-intensity” operations did make a comeback in the 1980s, but the Army regarded such missions as the exclusive province of special operations forces. Worse, these revamped doctrinal publications prescribed the same enemy-centric conventional operations and tactics that had been developed in the early 1960s, again giving short shrift to the

importance of securing the population and countering political subversion.¹¹ It was as if the Vietnam War had never happened.

The Army's superlative performance in Operation *Desert Storm* in 1991 provided validation for its reforms but further entrenched the mindset that conventional state-on-state warfare was the future, while counterinsurgency and irregular warfare were but lesser included contingencies. The Army did not adjust to the fact that its peer competitor had collapsed, spending the decade after the end of the Cold War continuing to prepare for war against a Soviet Union that no longer existed. As Brian McAllister Linn writes in his recent survey of the Army's history, the Army's post-Cold War leadership believed that "the army should devote itself to the organizational 'imperatives'—doctrine, force mixture, recruiting, and, above all, training—at which it already excelled."¹²

Deployments to Somalia, Haiti, and the Balkans in the 1990s brought the Army face to face with different types of missions that did not adhere to the *Desert Storm* model. Despite the relatively high demand for its forces in unconventional environments, the Army continued to emphasize "rapid, decisive battlefield operations by large combat forces" in its doctrine and professional education. For example, "a year after the humiliating withdrawal from Somalia, [Command and General Staff

College] students honed their planning skills on a scenario predicated on a reconstituted Soviet Union launching vast mechanized armies at NATO [the North Atlantic Treaty Organization]."¹³ The overriding emphasis on conventional operations left the Army unable to deal effectively with the wars it ultimately had to fight, as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has observed:

In the years following the Vietnam War, the Army relegated unconventional war to the margins of training, doctrine, and budget priorities. . . . This approach may have seemed validated by ultimate victory in the Cold War and the triumph of Desert Storm. But it left the service unprepared to deal with the operations that followed: Somalia, Haiti, the Balkans, and more recently Afghanistan and Iraq—the consequences and costs of which we are still struggling with today.¹⁴

Unprepared is a hard word, but Iraq and Afghanistan have presented the Army with hard realities that it has fought to overcome.

Failure of Adaptation

Our military institution seems to be prevented by its own doctrinal and organizational rigidity from understanding the nature of this war and from making the necessary modifications

to apply its power more intelligently, more economically, and the above all, more relevantly.

—Brian Jenkins¹⁵

The Army's lack of preparedness was exacerbated by its failure to adapt fully and rapidly to the demands of counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan. By early 2002, the Taliban appeared defeated and Afghanistan firmly under the control of America's Afghan allies. The fall of Baghdad in April 2003 after a 3-week campaign initially appeared as another confirmation of the superiority of U.S. military capabilities. In both instances, the enemy had other ideas. Inadequate contingency planning by both civilian leaders and military commanders to secure the peace contributed to the chaotic conditions that enabled insurgent groups to establish themselves. With some notable lower level exceptions, the institutional Army did not adapt to these conditions until it was perilously close to losing these wars.

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U.S. forces faced with insurgencies had no doctrinal or training background in irregular warfare and reacted in an ad hoc fashion to challenges. The Army's official history of the Iraq War between 2003 and 2005 argues that:

While relatively few American Soldiers in Iraq in 2003 were familiar with counterinsurgency warfare and its theorists, it did not take long before many of the basic concepts of counterinsurgency made their way into U.S. Army planning and operations. This process was indirect and based on immediate requirements rather than experience or doctrine. . . . In the spring and early summer, most Soldiers assessed the situation in their [areas of operations] and designed responses they believed were critical to address the unique political, economic, and military challenges in those areas.¹⁶



Soldier scans sector during Operation *Raider Harvest*, Muqadiyah, Iraq

4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team (John Crosby)

The events that transpired in Iraq (as well as Afghanistan) after the end of major combat operations belie this rather rosy explanation. Many early ad hoc approaches to counterinsurgency failed to protect the population from insurgent attacks and alienated the people through the excessive use of force.¹⁷ Many units, such as the 3^d Armored Cavalry Regiment under Colonel H.R. McMaster, did develop and employ effective population-centric counterinsurgency techniques independently, but such improvements were not emulated in a coordinated fashion throughout the force.¹⁸ It was not until 2007 that the Army finally adopted a unified approach that effectively secured the population and coopted reconcilable insurgent fighters in Iraq—but the Army still has not managed to make that leap in Afghanistan.

The brave efforts and sacrifices of American Soldiers in both theaters have added up to less than the sum of their parts due to institutional resistance to change. Even as counterinsurgency learning percolated throughout the ranks, the Army was slow to recognize the need to adapt its doctrine, organization, training, and procurement priorities to ensure that its forces were properly prepared for the wars they were fighting. Secretary Gates recently told military officers at the National Defense University, “For every heroic and resourceful innovation by troops and commanders on the battlefield, there was some institutional shortcoming at the Pentagon they had to overcome.”¹⁹ The Department of Defense (DOD) as a whole was still operating on a peacetime footing. Its documented failure to quickly provide sufficient quantities of up-armored Humvees, Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles, and surveillance equipment to troops in the field is illustrative of an organization practicing business as usual at a time of crisis. The Army, for its part, calls for the Future Combat System, the “Grow the Force” initiative, and more Brigade Combat Teams as its solution to the problems of insurgencies.²⁰ However laudable these long-term plans might be, they do not adequately address the immediate requirements of current conflicts.

Lack of urgency amid rapidly changing circumstances is a theme that has run throughout the Army’s handling of Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, the Army clung to the failing strategy of rapidly transitioning security responsibility to indigenous forces as Iraq fell into chaos in 2006 and persistently

resisted calls for troop increases to provide population security.²¹ U.S. forces in Afghanistan remain undermanned, and to fight the resurgent Taliban, they have relied heavily on airstrikes, which have served to kill and alienate civilians in large numbers. In both theaters, the mission of training and advising allied security forces has been severely under-resourced and is still organized and manned in makeshift fashion. According to the Government Accountability Office, as of April 2008, the United States has fielded just 46 percent (1,019 of 2,215) of the DOD-required number of embedded trainers for the Afghan National Army,²² and only about 32 percent (746 of 2,358) of required military mentors to the Afghan National Police²³—despite the fact that victory in this struggle depends on America’s ability to develop capable host-nation security forces.

The most frustrating aspect of these problems is that they represent a failure to learn from history. As Major Niel Smith, USA, rightly laments, “It is embarrassing that it

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took us over three years to develop a comprehensive approach to counterinsurgency in the field when many of the ‘lessons’ were found on the bookshelves of the post library.”²⁴ The key tenets of counterinsurgency—including the need to secure the population, subordinate military measures to political ends, use minimum force, and work through the host nation—are not new. Practitioners from T.E. Lawrence to David Galula to Sir Robert Thompson to Robert Komer all expounded cogently on these issues based on extensive experience from the Middle East to the Far East. Although these lessons were freely available, the Army failed to begin institutionalizing counterinsurgency learning until the 2006 development of U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3–24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3–33.5, *Counterinsurgency*.

In many ways, the Army has still not institutionalized the lessons of 5 years of fighting in Iraq and 7 years in Afghanistan. Bat-

alion commanders leading counterinsurgency operations in Iraq as part of the “surge” in 2007 and 2008 still had not read Galula or the other essential texts on counterinsurgency.²⁵ Useful tools to secure and control the population, such as biometric identification measures, remain in short supply. No institutional doctrine guides the still-ad hoc effort to advise the Iraqi and Afghan security forces. And there is still no systematic attempt to inculcate the hard-won truths about the wars of today into the next generation of Soldiers, as a young second lieutenant in the Army’s Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC) recently discovered:

I am through the third week of the course now. During our down time, I have been reading FM 3–24. I have had several of my fellow [lieutenants] ask me, “What the heck is that?” They have never heard of it. (Nor have they heard of Cobra II, Fiasco, or Assassins’ Gate, which I have also had on me.) I asked one of our platoon cadre if a class on [counterinsurgency] COIN operations is part of our BOLC II curriculum, and he asked me, “What is COIN?”²⁶

Other DOD schools provide students with far better counterinsurgency education. The Army could learn from the Marine Corps’ Infantry Officer Course, where students are required to read FM 3–24 and other key works by theorists and practitioners such as Galula and T.X. Hammes.

Preparing for Future Warfare

Correcting the persistent flawed thinking about future conflict requires overcoming significant obstacles and acknowledging that adversaries will force real rather than imaginary wars upon military forces until those forces demonstrate the ability to defeat them.

—Colonel H.R. McMaster²⁷

These sins of omission indict an Army that has not taken its current wars seriously enough. When the Army is fully engaged, with half its combat brigades deployed in two wars for which it was not adequately prepared—including one that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is “not convinced that we’re winning”²⁸—it is its clear duty to adapt to the demands of the current fights. The fact that the Secretary of Defense had to remind the Army that it was “unprepared”

for the wars it was required to fight and also warn the entire defense establishment against “Next-War-itis” is illustrative of a pernicious mindset that irregular warfare is a fleeting phenomenon of lesser importance than conventional conflicts.²⁹ It would indeed be convenient if that were the case. Unfortunately, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan threaten key U.S. interests if left unresolved and represent a harbinger of wars to come.

Talk of overcommitment to the current wars suggests there is something more pressing on the horizon. Michael Mazarr, for example, asserts that the military should avoid irregular warfare because large-scale wars, “were they to occur, would engage U.S. interests that dwarfed anything at stake in contingencies such as Somalia or even Afghanistan.”³⁰ Apparently Iraq, sitting at the heart of the Middle East on top of the fault line between the two major sects of Islam as well as the globe’s second largest proven oil reserves, is not pressing enough. The near-civil war conditions that prevailed there in 2005 and 2006 brought in covert Iranian intervention and could have drawn involvement from Saudi Arabia and other

Sunni Arab states, becoming a theater for a destabilizing proxy war between the region’s competing powers. Afghanistan, meanwhile, is the focal point of the war on terror. The Taliban, with its tribal allies, seeks to drive out the United States and NATO in order to retake control of the country. The same insurgency threatens the stability of Pakistan, a country that possesses nuclear weapons and is currently the base for al Qaeda. Giving the Taliban any more breathing room would have disastrous consequences for the security of the entire region and for the United States.³¹

A close look at the historical record reveals that the United States engages in ambiguous counterinsurgency and nationbuilding missions far more often than it faces full-scale war. The Army’s new FM 3–07, *Stability Operations*, correctly notes that “Contrary to popular belief, the military history of the United States is one characterized by

stability operations, interrupted by distinct episodes of major combat.”³² Just since the end of the Cold War, American troops have been deployed to make and keep the peace in such strategic backwaters as Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. Similar demands will only increase in a globalized world where local problems increasingly do not stay local and where “the most likely catastrophic threats to our homeland—for example, an American city poisoned or reduced to rubble by a terrorist attack—are more likely to emanate from failing states than from aggressor states.”³³

Furthermore, trends such as the youth bulge and urbanization in underdeveloped states, as well as the proliferation of more lethal weaponry, point to a future dominated by chaotic local insecurity and conflict rather than confrontations between the armies and navies of nation-states.³⁴ This future of persistent low-intensity conflict around the

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U.S. Marine (right) and Estonian soldier during clearing operation of enemy stronghold

U.S. Marine Corps (Freddy G. Cantu)

globe suggests that American interests are at risk not from rising peer competitors but from what has been called a “global security capacity deficit.”³⁵ As such, the U.S. military is more likely to be called upon to counter insurgencies, intervene in civil strife and humanitarian crises, rebuild nations, and wage unconventional types of warfare than it is to fight mirror-image armed forces. It will not “have the luxury of opting out [of these missions] because they do not conform to preferred notions of the American way of war.”³⁶

Both state and nonstate enemies will seek more asymmetric ways to challenge the United States and its allies. America’s conventional military superiority, which remains substantial, will drive many of them to the same conclusion: When they fight America conventionally, they lose horribly in days or weeks. When they fight unconventionally by employing guerrilla tactics, terrorism, and information operations, they have a better chance of success. It is unclear why even a powerful enemy would want to risk a costly head-to-head battlefield decision with the United States. As Secretary Gates said, “Put simply, our enemies and potential adversaries—including nation-states—have gone to school on us. They saw what America’s technology and firepower did to Saddam’s army in 1991 and again in 2003, and they’ve seen what [improvised explosive devices] are doing to the American military today.”³⁷

The developing strategic environment will find state and nonstate adversaries devising innovative strategies to counter American military power by exploiting widely available technology and weapons and integrating tactics from across the spectrum of conflict. Frank Hoffman terms these adversaries *hybrid threats*:

*Hybrid threats incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder . . . coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict.*³⁸

The resulting conflicts will be protracted and hinge on the affected populations’ (foreign and American) perceptions of truth and legitimacy rather than the outcome of tactical engagements on the battlefield.

Interestingly, they sound similar to the insurgencies that the United States is currently combating, only more difficult. The learning curve is not going to get any easier.

Building the Army We Need

[A]part from the special forces community and some dissident colonels, for decades there has been no strong, deeply rooted constituency inside the Pentagon or elsewhere for institutionalizing our capabilities to wage asymmetric or irregular conflict—and to quickly meet the ever-changing needs of our forces engaged in these conflicts.

—Secretary of Defense Robert Gates³⁹

The Army today is out of balance, but not just because of a stressful operational tempo and certainly not because of a long-overdue increase in counterinsurgency training and education. Rather, it is because the Army, along with the broader defense establishment it is a part of, remains rooted in an organizational culture that continues to prioritize the requirements for a hypothetical future big war over the irregular conflicts the force is currently fighting.

It may not be possible to change the culture of the Nation’s defense institutions in the near term, but it is certainly possible to address the Army’s traditionally stilted priorities by strengthening the internal constituencies demanding attention for irregular warfare. For example, the effort to advise host-nation security forces in Iraq and Afghanistan would benefit from an Army Advisor Command that, among other functions, would be the advocate for all aspects of

tion and advising host-nation security forces, require specialized organization, training, and preparation for maximum effectiveness. The advisory effort in particular suffers under the current makeshift transition team system with inadequate manpower and training, and no doctrinal base to speak of. Given the importance of advisors to today’s wars and to America’s partners in the future, the Army must seriously consider developing a permanent Advisor Corps.

Development of an Advisor Corps and other irregular warfare-focused training, education, and career paths must occur against the backdrop of an overall increase in Army end-strength that should exceed the addition of 65,000 troops currently anticipated by 2012. Given the protracted, manpower-intensive nature of counterinsurgency and the need to prepare for other contingencies, the only way to achieve balance in the force is to make it bigger. An expanded Army would permit more dwell time between deployments for adequate training across the spectrum of conflict.

The U.S. Army has adapted to the demands of counterinsurgency over the past few years, but too painfully, fitfully, and slowly. As the Secretary of Defense has noted, “In Iraq, we’ve seen how an army that was basically a smaller version of the Cold War force can over time become an effective instrument of counterinsurgency. But that came at a frightful human, financial, and political cost.”⁴⁰ While individual Soldiers and units have much to be proud of, the institutional Army’s record of counterinsurgency adaptation to the current conflicts leaves much to be desired. Thousands of lives were

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the advisor mission within the institutional Army. The Army’s current structures to preserve the lessons of irregular warfare, such as the U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center in the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, are under-resourced and thus unable to affect the larger institutional mindset in any meaningful way.

The Army also needs to recognize that key functions in counterinsurgency and other irregular operations, such as civil reconstruc-

lost while Soldiers and their leaders struggled to learn how to deal with an unfamiliar situation. At least some of those losses might have been avoided had the Army and defense community at large learned from rather than discounted past lessons and experiences.

The U.S. military’s role in irregular warfare cannot be wished or willed away, and the Army has a responsibility to prepare itself to fulfill that role as effectively as possible. It is irresponsible to assume that current and

future foes will play to America's strengths by fighting conventionally rather than through proven, cost-effective, insurgent-like asymmetric strategies. It is irresponsible to think that the United States will always have a conscious choice of whom it fights and how—for the enemy always gets a vote. And it is irresponsible to devalue irregular warfare adaptations needed on the battlefield today in favor of other capabilities that might be useful in a hypothetical conflict later.

In the profession of arms—whether the wars be large or small, of our choosing or not—there is still no substitute for victory. **JFQ**

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NOTES

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³⁶ Gates, September 29, 2008.

³⁷ Gates, October 10, 2007.

³⁸ Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, December 2007), 8.

³⁹ Gates, September 29, 2008.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*