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The So-Called COIN Debate and Institutional Memory

Bill Van Horn

I've been following with some interest the debate between the "Nagl-ites" and the "Gentile-ites" (for lack of better terms) regarding the supposed future of the Army. Both sides make some good points and some weak points, but what really strikes me is the historical vacuum both sides have established for their discussion. Neither camp seems willing to admit that there IS military history before Vietnam, or that we've seen this debate many times before. And in almost every case the debate ignores the reality that created it, preferring to seek refuge in what appears to be a distorted view of the past or a dream picture of the future.

I'd like to frame this discussion with two propositions. The first is that for the majority of its history, the U.S. Army has been a force that was used mainly for internal security or COIN-type missions. And the second proposition is that for the same majority of its history the Army has rejected that role; the amount of force in that rejection varying based on external considerations. Even during a time when any external conflict was very unlikely (the period after the Civil War), the Army focused the majority of its limited training time on the war it wanted to fight (a Napoleonic-style conflict or something like the Civil War) and not the war it was already fighting (the Indian Wars). What internal debate there was about this focus took place in the pages of the old *Army and Navy Journal*, with some discussion later appearing in the new branch journals (*The Cavalry Journal* and others, which didn't appear until the late 1870s and early 1880s), but the training methods and focus never really changed. It is indeed ironic that the first major doctrinal publication regarding COIN-type operations came not from the Army but from the Marine Corps, even though one could argue that the Army as an institution had more small wars experience historically.

Has this focus on conventional warfare hurt us? The Gentile camp would argue that it has not, while the Nagal camp might say that it has. I tend to fall closer to the Nagal camp, but for reasons that might surprise some. While the Army certainly must be prepared for a conventional conflict, it must not revert to its historical practice of discarding all COIN training once the shooting stops. Indeed, it cannot if it wants to retain its ability to provide credible advice to political decision makers. This is where the price of Root's mass mobilization Army plan and the aftermath of Vietnam converge to do their greatest damage.

In past small wars, a certain number of experienced officers and NCOs could be counted on to remain in the service, their experience available to future leaders both military and political. The Philippines in the early 1900s saw a number of officers and enlisted men with Indian Wars experience take to the field, and one could also argue that a generation of Marine Corps officers

was prepared for combat leadership in the jungles and mountains of Latin America in the 1920s.

Much of that changed with the coming of World War II and especially its aftermath. The Army again downsized, as it always does after a major conflict, but this time there were differences. Unlike the Civil War, which was fought mostly with state-centered Volunteer units while retaining a Regular unit core, the Army shrank across the board and rapidly. There were no experienced Regular units to fill the gaps, only skeleton units with a scattering of Regulars and draftees. With the short-term draftee becoming the backbone of the Army, training and rotation practices were changed, focusing on the individual and not the unit. This created a fluidity never before seen in the Regular Army, as well as a training system geared toward producing soldiers as quickly as possible.

The rotation system carried over to the officer corps, accelerating the generalist concept first introduced by Root's reforms. Unlike the pre-war Army, officers often didn't know their enlisted men well and with the rapid rotation system and an "up or out" mentality taking root they had no incentive to change that situation. These gaps, as well as a growing interest in business school management methods, kept officers focused on their own careers and not necessarily the wellbeing of their units. After all, they wouldn't be there long enough to fix major problems or effect changes.

By the end of Vietnam, with its fixed tours of duty (which had first appeared in Korea) and wide variety of personnel management problems (end of tour award packages for officers, inflated decorations, declining morale within most units), the officer corps was locked in a "career first" mentality. Speaking generally, the focus was on having had a command slot of some sort, moving to the right staff slot, and then getting out of country as soon as possible. Those who wanted multiple command tours (or even a full year in the field) were seen as obstructing the system and depriving another officer of his "fair" shot at command. There was little concern for the welfare of the troops who saw their commander change every six months (if not sooner). It was all about having the right boxes checked.

This mentality also manifested itself in a desire to forget about Vietnam once the conflict was over. In a throwback to the Indian Wars era, where generals spent more time in public debates about who captured how many Rebel cannons on what hilltop than they did dealing with the problems their troops faced on the Frontier, the Army focused its entire being on a warfare scenario in Western Europe. Experienced officers and NCOs were eased out (pushed out in the case of Special Forces and others) and the way cleared for a high-tech conflict. There was also much angst about the All-Volunteer Force – with most forgetting that a volunteer Army was the historical norm for the United States and a large draftee Army an unpopular exception.

What was missing from the post-Vietnam Army was a large group of experienced officers and enlisted men to pick up the slack. The draftee Army had deprived the Army of its core of experienced privates and corporals (a rank that actually disappeared during Vietnam), and the new "up or out" system ensured that such a core would never appear again. The war had also burned out the experienced sergeants, requiring the Army to start from scratch. And the officer corps, gutted by careerism and a personnel system that did not allow them to bond with units or build effective command relationships, was in no position to carry on in the way that their Civil

War veteran forefathers had. While the generals argued, the post-Civil War officers had returned to units with at least a core of experienced men and gotten on with the serious business of fighting an irregular war. In the post-Vietnam war Army the officers either got out or looked after their own careers, often coming to units that were hostile and riddled with any number of problems.

One way to deal with this was to simplify training scenarios and situations. It may have appeared easier to do this with a major conflict scenario and its scripted Warsaw Pact-style opponent than it would be with a low-intensity scenario and its free-play style of opponent, or it may have been an institutional grab back to the “good old days” of stand-up warfare. It was also a logical step in some ways given the threat of the Soviet Union. But it also managed to return to the old pattern of shelving low intensity conflict in favor of a more traditional scenario. This time, though, there was no real cadre of experienced soldiers to fall back on in time of need.

The results, in hindsight, are disturbingly clear. We fielded an Army that in words of one British observer was “not to be believed” in terms of maneuvering large elements on the battlefield. But we also fielded a force that lacked practical experience and training in smaller engagements, and lacking that experience they were unable to provide informed advice to political leaders. While the public motto might have been “no more Vietnams,” the situation was actually similar to the lead-up to major American involvement in that region. Lacking experience, except in a few focused areas that were not valued by the service as a whole, the Army either underestimated the impact of operations other than war or marginalized them in its planning structure. Desert One, Grenada, and Mogadishu stand as monuments to this marginalization.

Small wars will not go away. They have always been a part of the international landscape, and show no signs of abating. While the Army should not abandon its conventional ability, it likewise cannot afford to shelve COIN/small wars/low intensity conflict again. As a succession of presidents have shown, overseas commitments will not decline just because the Army does not like them. In fact, they seem to become more common under idealistic administrations (Wilson, Clinton, G.W. Bush). Since the personnel system no longer allows the formation and retention of the Regular cadre that used to be the Army's backbone for such operations, a conscious effort must be made on the part of the institution to preserve the hard-won lessons of our current small wars for future leaders and decision-makers. That is the challenge, and it is one that the Army must not fail to grapple with this time around. While losing a small war may not make much military difference, it can have policy repercussions that echo down through the years.

An Army that maintains and values its institutional COIN knowledge is well-placed to offer credible advice on the subject. War is war, but warfare has many shades, tones, and levels. Commanders who showed great battlefield ability and skill during the Civil War often foundered on the Frontier, and with disastrous results for the men under their command. Others performed with skill against one tribal group, only to fail when facing another. But those who built their reputations in the Civil War and then showed ability on the Frontier found themselves leading troops in the Philippines or providing advice to successive administrations prior to 1900. The Army cannot afford to lose that capability again.

Bill Van Horn is an employee of Montana State University with a longstanding interest in military history and military affairs. His main research interests are the Frontier Army (1866-1891) and the Vietnam War. His research on Fourth Cavalry operations in 1874 was published in the 2005 volume of Military History of the West.

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