



SMALL WARS

JOURNAL

This Week at War: Rise of the Irregulars

By *Robert Haddick*

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The U.S. isn't militarizing intelligence, it's civilianizing the military.

Here is the latest edition of [my column at Foreign Policy](#):

Topics include:

- 1) Need to fight a war? Recruit a civilian, not a soldier
- 2) The U.S. military should get ready to taste its own precision-guided medicine

Need to fight a war? Recruit a civilian, not a soldier

Last week, the *Washington Post's* David Ignatius [discussed](#) how the line between the Central Intelligence Agency's covert intelligence activities and the Pentagon's military operations began blurring as George W. Bush's administration ramped up its war on terrorism. In his column, Ignatius took some swipes at former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld for exceeding his authority by encroaching on turf legally reserved to the CIA. The Defense Department also was criticized for taking on too many diplomatic and foreign aid responsibilities as well. Ignatius expressed concern that without clearer boundaries separating covert intelligence-gathering from military operations, "people at home and abroad may worry about a possible 'militarization' of U.S. intelligence."

Ignatius missed the larger and far more significant change that continues to this day. In order to survive and compete against the military power enjoyed by national armies, modern irregular adversaries -- such as the Viet Cong, Iraq's insurgents, the Taliban, and virtually all other modern revolutionaries -- "civilianized" their military operations. Rumsfeld's intrusions onto CIA and State Department turf were initial attempts at civilianizing U.S. military operations. Whether it realizes it or not, the U.S. government continues to civilianize its own military operations in an attempt to keep pace with the tactics employed by the irregular adversaries it is struggling to suppress. This trend has continued after Rumsfeld's departure from government and has significant implications for how the United States will fight irregular adversaries in the future.

In modern irregular warfare, the most difficult problem is identifying and finding the enemy. Insurgents benefit from the "home-field advantage" and their ability to blend in with the civilian population. It is natural that when U.S. military forces are tasked with rooting out insurgent cells in such situations, they seek to infiltrate the same civilian population to gain target intelligence. It should, therefore, be no surprise to find the U.S. military's special operations units behaving more like the CIA's operatives and agents, whose civilian status is a better match to the mission.

The CIA has used its authorities and relative flexibility to assemble a blend of covert civilian and paramilitary capabilities, a blend much more suited for modern irregular warfare. As a civilian intelligence agency, the CIA has the authority and resources to establish relationships with a variety of indigenous

partners, some official and some not. According to Bob Woodward's *Obama's Wars*, the CIA has recruited a large Afghan paramilitary force, a combined covert intelligence and military force that can engage in a wider range of activities than a standard Afghan army unit. The CIA has poached many former special operations soldiers into its own paramilitary ranks. These paramilitary operatives have the authority to do everything they used to do while they were in the military -- such as organizing direct action raids -- while also performing operations limited to the CIA, such as covert missions inside countries not at war with the United States.

Meanwhile, the utility of conventional ground forces continues to diminish. After the experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, a political backlash against overt military interventions is already evident. This week the House of Representatives **rebuked** the Obama administration over the intervention in Libya and narrowly avoided voting in favor of immediate withdrawal. The House also **narrowly defeated** a measure that would have required a faster exit from Afghanistan. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said that a future defense secretary advocating another large intervention in Asia or Africa "**should have his head examined.**" The continued presence of U.S. conventional ground troops in Iraq is so politically toxic to both Iraqi and U.S. policymakers that the State Department is planning to recruit a small army of **5,100 civilian security personnel** to protect its facilities and diplomats next year.

The common thread in all these developments is that conventional military operations, especially sustained ground operations, attract too much attention and are too politically fraught to be useful against irregular adversaries. These adversaries adopted a civilian guise in order to evade Western firepower. Western governments in turn are civilianizing their military operations in order to evade the attention that comes with overt deployments and to achieve the operational flexibility required to succeed on the terrain where irregular adversaries operate. This will mean the increased use of covert intelligence operations, official and indigenous paramilitary groups, the recruitment of local militias, and civilian security contractors. With this civilianization of military operations, regular soldiers will be left wondering why they weren't invited to the next war.

The U.S. military should get ready to taste its own precision-guided medicine

Of all the casualties suffered during the past decade of war, one -- the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) -- did not die soon enough for many military analysts. In the 1990s, a group of theorists inside the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment predicted that precisely aimed weapons, cued by exquisitely perceptive sensors and control systems, would allow the United States military to completely dominate any battlefield it entered. For many analysts, RMA's promises of dominating future battlefields led to excessive investment in technology in the 1990s at the expense of better soldier training, especially for small-unit leaders. The result they believed was a military unprepared to face irregular adversaries. After a decade of mostly inconclusive fighting and over 6,000 U.S. soldiers killed in action, many bitter combat veterans are happy to see the wizard's dreams of RMA dominance cast onto the ash heap of history. As has happened after other technological jumps forward in warfare, the Pentagon's theorists failed to respect adversaries' ability to adapt to a changing threat.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq seemed to demonstrate the irrelevance of RMA theory, especially for irregular campaigns against non-state actors. U.S. soldiers who had to focus on the immediate task of surviving and succeeding in these wars quickly lost any interest they may have had in RMA theory. But, to badly paraphrase Trotsky, although today's soldiers aren't interested in RMA, RMA is interested in them. The RMA theorists of the 1990s foresaw U.S. warfighters employing sophisticated sensors, command networks, and precision weapons against vulnerable enemies. The results in the real world this past decade have been underwhelming. But today's RMA theorists may have found a new vulnerable target for precision strikes -- the United States military itself.

In a paper written for the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, a Washington, D.C. military think-tank, Barry Watts, a former U.S. Air Force officer and Pentagon analyst, prepared a current scorecard on RMA's shortfalls and progress. *[The Maturing Revolution in Military Affairs](#)* reveals that in attempting to structure itself to take advantage of the promises offered by RMA, the U.S. military may have made itself vulnerable to an adversary's RMA campaign.

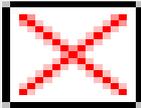
Even though the United States continues its long irregular wars against insurgents in ungoverned places such as Afghanistan, it has continued to build a worldwide infrastructure to support RMA warfighting techniques and employ those techniques in its current irregular campaigns. Satellite communication networks relay commands and data to and from hunter-killer airborne drones. Nearly all munitions are guided by satellite or laser. Most soldiers have radios and other electronic devices tying them into large command networks. And vehicles and aircraft find their way by satellite or electronic signals.

Watts discusses how vulnerable this sensor and communications structure has become to enemy attack. Irregular adversaries have adapted to U.S. RMA capabilities by dispersing and masking their identities. By contrast, Watts describes how vulnerable satellites networks, over-centralized command systems, and an overreliance on large hub bases, are vulnerable to precision missile attack. The Air Force and Navy, the services least affected by enemy action this decade, have made themselves the most vulnerable.

U.S. ground forces, the most exposed to combat, are the most prepared to survive against an RMA-capable adversary. The concentrated buildup of U.S. ground forces in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in 1991 and 2003 would have been ripe targets for an RMA-capable adversary. By contrast, over the past decade the Army and Marine Corps have adapted to counterinsurgency by dispersing small units across wide spaces. Although this was done to increase effectiveness in a low-intensity counterinsurgency campaign, this structure and the skills and techniques required to implement it will also be useful for surviving and succeeding against high-end adversaries equipped with RMA capabilities designed for finding and destroying massed concentrations of military forces.

Many military leaders lost interest in RMA because its promises to dominate the battlefield weren't fulfilled in Iraq and Afghanistan. America's adversaries learned to adapt to the revolution's effects. Just like the adversaries they recently fought against, the original revolutionaries will now have to adapt.

About the Author



Robert Haddick

Robert Haddick is a contractor at U.S. Special Operations Command. From January 2009 to September 2012 he was Managing Editor of *Small Wars Journal*. During this time, he wrote the “This Week at War” column for *Foreign Policy*. Haddick was a U.S. Marine Corps officer, served in the 3rd and 23rd Marine Regiments, and deployed to Asia and Africa. He has advised the State Department, the National Intelligence Council, and U.S. Central Command.

In the private sector, Haddick was Director of Research at the Fremont Group, a large private investment firm and an affiliate of the Bechtel Corporation. He established the firm's global proprietary trading operation and was president of one of Fremont's overseas investment subsidiaries.

In addition to *Foreign Policy* and *Small Wars Journal*, Haddick's writing has been published in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Air & Space Power Journal*, and other publications. He has appeared in many radio and television interviews.

Contact Robert at robert@smallwarsjournal.com.

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{7} <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1539>

{8}

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304906004576369801913947130.html?mod=ITP_pageone_2

{9} http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2011/06/the-maturing-revolution-in-military-affairs/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New+CSBA+Report+The+Maturing+Revolution+in+Military+Affairs&

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