

Innovation or Inertia: The U.S. Military and the Learning of Counterinsurgency

by David Ucko

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Abstract: Following its encounter with insurgent violence in Iraq, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has sought to improve the U.S. military's ability to conduct counterinsurgency. This effort suggests a potential turning-point in the history of the U.S. military, which has traditionally devoted its attention and resources to "high-intensity" or "conventional" combat. Given this institutional culture, what are now the prospects of the U.S. military 'learning counterinsurgency'? In many ways, the ongoing reorientation is promising and targeted, informed directly by the U.S. campaign in Iraq. At the same time, Pentagon priorities still reveal a remarkable resistance to change, and this in spite of the radically altered strategic environment of the War on Terror. Given this intransigence – and the eventual fall-out from the troubled Iraq campaign – the ongoing learning of counterinsurgency might very well fail to produce the type of deep-rooted change needed to truly transform the U.S. military.

Introduction

The U.S. military has typically paid little attention to the nature and requirements of counterinsurgency and stability operations. Missions pitting the U.S. military against insurgents, or forcing it into stabilization tasks and policing duties abroad, have tended to be dismissed as beyond the military's remit or as "lesser-included" operations. The emphasis has instead been on achieving primacy against the armed forces of nation-states, involving an anticipated adversary shaped and operating very much like the U.S. military itself. This prioritization of "high-intensity" or "conventional" war has remained even though the U.S. military has faced

“unconventional” or “irregular” challenges at a greater frequency and in campaigns of greater duration and cost.¹ Indeed, even the major combat operations conducted by the United States have often preceded or involved a less conventional phase, entailing post-conflict stabilization or state-building.² Notwithstanding these historical trends, the U.S. military has – in its doctrine, education, training and, more broadly, in its culture – prioritized the destruction of military targets far above the different means of consolidating a new political order.³

The fundamental problem with the U.S. military’s aversion to counterinsurgency and stability operations is that it has confused the undesirability of these missions with an actual ability to avoid them. This proclivity has unnecessarily complicated the U.S. military’s, *malgré tout*, repeated engagements with such missions. As retired Army officer Ralph Peters wrote in 1999, “One way or another, we will go. Deployments often will be unpredictable, often surprising. And we frequently will be unprepared for the mission, partly because of the sudden force of circumstance but also because our military is determined to be unprepared for missions it does not want, as if the lack of preparedness might prevent our going.”⁴

The flaws in the U.S. military’s logic were made all-too clear in the early years of the War on Terror, as it failed to anticipate and then struggled to contain the “post-conflict” instability that came to characterize both *Operation Enduring Freedom* (OEF) and *Operation Iraqi Freedom* (OIF). Since this unanticipated encounter with counterinsurgency, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has launched a number of initiatives to improve the armed forces’ ability to conduct such missions. A military more adept at stabilization, it was reasoned, would be able to establish the conditions in Iraq necessary for a U.S. withdrawal from this troubled campaign. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, some also perceived a stability-operations capability as enabling the U.S. military to intervene in weak or failing states, seen as offering sanctuary to terrorist organizations. To others still, the reorientation is justified simply as providing the military with a means of consolidating its future combat victories, to “win the peace” as well as the war. Whatever the motivation,

¹ Frank Hoffman, “Small Wars Revisited: The United States and Nontraditional Wars,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Dec. (2005).

² Examples might include: the reconstruction of Germany and Japan following World War II, the advisory phase that preceded the Vietnam War, Panama’s stabilization following *Operation Just Cause*, and the troop commitment for peacekeeping duties in the Balkans following the interventions there in 1995 and 1999.

³ Frederick W. Kagan, *Finding the Target: The Transformation of American Military Policy* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006). See also Antulio J. Echevarria, II, *Toward an American Way of War* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute, 2004).

⁴ Ralph Peters, “Heavy Peace,” *Parameters: U.S. Army War College Quarterly*, Spring 1999.

since early 2004, the reorientation has gathered momentum. Departmental instruction, concept papers, training exercises, organizational changes and doctrinal field manuals have emerged, all relating specifically to counterinsurgency and stability operations.⁵

The reforms and restructuring within the DoD and the armed services suggest a potential turning-point in the history of the U.S. military. Yet what are the prospects of the U.S. military truly “learning counterinsurgency”? How deep-running are the reforms and how effective have they been in developing a U.S. military capacity to conduct counterinsurgency and stability operations? Having made a rhetorical commitment to focus on such operations, how committed is the DoD to the associated changes? Clearly, insufficient time has passed to enable definite answers to these questions. Nonetheless, an examination of the DoD’s initial response to this challenge reveals the first steps of a possible reorientation. Through this assessment, it is possible to determine whether there were not signs, even in the early stages, of a learning process compromised both in orientation and ambition.

The Learning Process

A military organization’s learning can occur on two levels: through bottom-up adaptation in the field and through top-down innovation at the institutional level.⁶ While the former suggests changes in tactics, techniques, and procedures implemented on the ground through contact with an unfamiliar operating environment, the latter involves the institutionalization of these practices through changes in training, doctrine, education and force structure.

In its history with counterinsurgency, the U.S. military has often adapted successfully in the field but failed to institutionalize lessons thus learned at the operation’s close. At this juncture, it has been typical for the U.S. military to discard whatever wisdom was accrued, forcing a renewed process of hurried adaption once troops are again committed to a similar mission.⁷ This pattern is what renders the top-down process of institutionalization so critical, a point made by Ambassador Eric S. Edelman, U.S. Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy, with regard to the ongoing adaptation seen in Iraq:

⁵For an overview of these initiatives, see David Ucko, “U.S. Counterinsurgency in the Information Age,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, Dec. 2005.

⁶Adam Grissom, “The Future of Military Innovation Studies,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2006.

⁷Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 36.

Great progress has been made on the ground by our civilians and our military, who have learned to work together and have adapted in innovative ways to meet these challenges. But for every ingenious adaptation we see in the field, we should ask ourselves – what institutional failure were they trying to overcome? What tools did we fail to provide them?⁸

The DoD's attempts to overcome “institutional failures” began in earnest in 2004, when senior Pentagon officials came to recognize the situation in Iraq as a protracted insurgency rather than the death throes of a defeated regime. Subsequent institutional innovation has occurred on three levels. *Conceptually*, the U.S. military has gained a clearer understanding of counterinsurgency, a process fueled by the Iraq War and driven by a community of officers and civilians well-versed in these types of campaigns. *Institutionally*, counterinsurgency has come to be integrated within military training, education and planning. *Operationally*, the U.S. military has radically changed its mode of engagement, launching in early 2007 *Operation Fardh al-Qanoon* – the first time since at least the Vietnam War that it was officially directed to prosecute a community-oriented, population-centered counterinsurgency campaign.⁹

Of course, the learning process has been gradual. The conceptual engagement with counterinsurgency was initially marked by a number of questionable assumptions. Confusion was evident, for example, in the Army's 2004 interim field manual on counterinsurgency as to the division of labor between military and civilian agencies involved in such campaigns. The Army recognized that insurgencies cannot be defeated by military means alone but assumed, therefore, that the burden of running a counterinsurgency campaign would be shared with civilian government departments.¹⁰ While seemingly logical, this calculation grossly exaggerated the ability of those civilian agencies and departments to deploy to the field in sufficient numbers and operate in a non-permissive environment.

⁸ Amb. Eric Edelman, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Remarks at the Department of State-Department of Defense Counterinsurgent Conference, Washington DC, 28 Sept. 2006.

⁹ In DoD jargon, “population-centered” operations are “aimed at assuring, persuading, and influencing indigenous U.S. populations through the provision of security, humanitarian assistance, basic services, infrastructure, institution-building, support for the rule of law.” See Office of the Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy (OUSD(P)), *Interim Progress Report on DoD Directive 3000.05: Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations* (Washington DC: DoD, 2006), p. 4.

¹⁰ In listing the types of support to be tendered by the U.S. military in a counterinsurgency campaign, FMI 3-07.22 included only “military” tasks, none of which targeted the provision of security, of services or of basic governance. See Department of the Army, FMI 3-07-22, *Counterinsurgency Operations* (Washington DC: U.S. Army, 2004), p. vii. By contrast, FM 3-24, the 2006 update to the interim manual, stated in its first paragraph that “COIN requires Soldiers and Marines to be ready both to fight and to build – depending on the security situation and a variety of other factors.” See Department of the Army & United States Marine Corps (USMC), FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington DC: U.S. Army, 2006), pp. 1-19.

The wholesale delegation of the developmental and reconstruction- and governance-related aspects of such campaigns to unable or ill-suited civilian agencies created a capability gap, which the military has and will be asked to fill. The failure to consider this conundrum in the early conceptual treatment of counterinsurgency and stability operations was therefore a serious shortcoming.¹¹

These types of missteps, however, were quickly addressed, largely due to the tenacity and intellectual openness of the soldiers and academics driving the learning process. Members of this informal network tend to be educated in the finer points of counterinsurgency, often having earned a doctoral degree on the subject, and have relevant operational experience in previous “peace operations.” Others simply believe that these types of challenges will be more common in the future and that the U.S. military, therefore, needs to learn. Between tours in Iraq, or from within the military’s war colleges and research centers, this “COIN community” has disseminated their views on the operational environment in Iraq, sustaining a process of conceptual learning and refinement.

The COIN community’s desire to learn has been marked by an uncommon level of humility and lack of chauvinism. Its members have challenged the orthodoxy of their own services and even listened carefully to critics of the military and of its operations in Iraq. In February 2006, for example, Gen. David Petraeus, U.S. Army, and Gen. James N. Mattis, USMC, convened a two-day conference at Fort Leavenworth to discuss emerging counterinsurgency doctrine. A host of civilian representatives and a number of strong critics of the military from the human-rights community, academia and the press were invited to participate. Also invited was Brig. Nigel R. F. Aylwin-Foster, the British officer who in 2005 authored a scathing critique of the U.S. military’s attempt to learn and conduct counterinsurgency – and who was now asked to give the conference’s opening address.¹² As Lt-Col John Nagl, then the Military Assistant to the Deputy Secretary of Defense, put it, “We’re inviting our critics to see the sausage being made and to help push the ball forward . . . I cannot think of another institution that has exhibited a greater interest in evaluating itself closely and looking hard at itself.”¹³

From 2005 in particular, this effort to learn has translated into a number of high-profile conferences devoted to counterinsurgency and a significant increase in articles and monographs published on the topic by

¹¹ See also the September 2004 Joint Operating Concept for Stability Operations, which contented itself with the assumption that, in post-combat stability operations, “the military and interagency community will achieve synergy in planning and execution.” Joint Forces Command, *Stability Operations Joint Operating Concept* (Norfolk, VA: JFCOM/J9, 2004), p. v.

¹² See Nigel Aylwin-Foster, “Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations,” *Military Review*, Nov.-Dec. 2005.

¹³ Interview with Lt-Col John Nagl, U.S. Army, Military Assistant to the Deputy Secretary of Defense, DoD, Arlington, VA, Mar. 28, 2006.

military authors.¹⁴ In this manner, the U.S. military has developed a clear and realistic understanding of counterinsurgency – one laid out in several concept papers and manuals produced in 2006.¹⁵ The flagship publication was undoubtedly the Army-Marine Corps FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency* – a doctrinal field manual devoted exclusively to the subject.¹⁶ This new field manual broke with previous doctrine by focusing heavily on the implications of committing U.S. ground troops to counterinsurgency operations and their undertaking, when necessary, of strictly civilian as well as military tasks. Previous doctrine had referred to “support to counterinsurgency” and presupposed that “generally, U.S. forces do not engage in combat.”¹⁷ While laudable, this aspiration has neither prevented deployments from taking place nor prepared U.S. troops for when they do.

Alongside the conceptual learning of counterinsurgency, the Pentagon has also sought to integrate both counterinsurgency and stability operations into its planning and priorities. Soon after the Iraq invasion, counterinsurgency began to feature more heavily in the military’s training exercises and curricula.¹⁸ Appointed commanding general at Fort Leavenworth in late 2005, Gen. David Petraeus was able to entrench this shift in priorities, which was reflected in the curricula and programs of the Army’s Combined Arms Center and Command and General Staff College.¹⁹ Across the U.S. military, meanwhile, new centers were established and programs announced dedicated to improving the armed forces’ ability to conduct stability operations. The Defense Language Transformation Roadmap, a strategy for linguistic training within the department and services was approved in early 2005.²⁰ In May 2005, the Marine Corps established the Center for Advanced Operational Cultural Learning at Quantico, VA, to help educate the Corps on the cultural dimension of

¹⁴ In 2004, *Military Review* featured at most nine articles relating to counterinsurgency; in 2005, the number rose to 29. In *Parameters*, the U.S. Army War College Quarterly, the figure rose from three articles in 2004 to eleven in 2005. Many of the new articles were also based on operational experience and increasingly emphasized a broad conceptualization of counterinsurgency, embracing its civilian, as well as military components.

¹⁵ See, for example, Marine Corps Combat Development Command (MCCDC), *Tentative Manual for Countering Irregular Threats: An Updated Approach to Counterinsurgency Operations* (Quantico, VA: MCCDC, 2006); MCCDC, *Small-Unit Leaders’ Guide to Counterinsurgency* (Quantico, VA: MCCDC, 2006); and USMC, “Marine Corps Operating Concepts for A Changing Security Environment,” 2006.

¹⁶ Army & USMC, *Counterinsurgency*.

¹⁷ See Department of the Army, FM 100-5, *Operations* (Washington DC: U.S. Army, 1993), pp. 13-7; Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), JP 3-07, *Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other than War* (Washington DC: Office of the JCS, 1995), pp. III-9; Department of the Army, FM 3-07, *Stability Operations and Support Operations* (Washington DC: U.S. Army, 2003), pp. 4-12.

¹⁸ Robert W. Cone, “The Changing National Training Center,” *Military Review*, May-June 2006.

¹⁹ Volney J. Warner, & James H. Willbanks, “Preparing field grade leaders for today and tomorrow,” *Military Review*, Jan.-Feb. 2006, p. 108.

²⁰ Department of Defense (DoD), *Defense Language Transformation Roadmap* (Washington DC: DoD, 2005).

combat. The assumption guiding both initiatives was that U.S. troops will be participating regularly in operations where understanding of – and good relations with – the local population are necessary. While many of the initiatives seen in this period were small-scale and slow to come to fruition, there was nonetheless a sense that new priorities were being taken onboard.

The effort of institutionalizing counterinsurgency across the DoD was helped by its issuing of Directive 3000.05 in 2005, which instructed the military to view stability operations as on the same level of importance as major combat operations, to prepare accordingly, and to conduct such missions – including, as and when needed, its civilian components.²¹ To develop a capability to conduct stability operations, the directive assigned 83 tasks of varied specificity to various sections within the Defense Department, the implementation of which was to be overseen by the Stability Operations office within the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). Within the Army, the DoD directive has led to the establishment of a Stability, Security, Transition and Reconstruction (SSTR) Division to serve “as the focal point for the integration of all SSTR activities within the Army.”²² As detailed in the first Pentagon report on 3000.05 implementation, other DoD components were also making “great progress in meeting the exigencies of ongoing stability operations” – in particular with regard to doctrine, training, education, and experimentation.²³

Operationally, too, the U.S. military has undergone a gradual process of learning. The U.S. military had hitherto – in the peace operations of the 1990s as well as in the early years of the War on Terror – tended to emphasize force protection over mission objectives.²⁴ Concerned above all with minimizing the risk of casualties, U.S. troops were unable to provide sustained security, to gather human intelligence through foot patrols or project a presence – tasks deemed critical to the prosecution of a counterinsurgency campaign. When it came to the use of force, the U.S. military tended to focus predominantly on combating an enemy rather than protect a population and – to make matters worse – these operations were often conducted with insufficient awareness of the potentially counterproductive effects of applying force indiscriminately or in excess. With few exceptions, this mode of operations characterized the U.S. military’s early experimentation with counterinsurgency in Iraq.²⁵ In broad terms, the

²¹ DoD, *Directive 3000.05: Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations* (Washington DC: DoD, 2005).

²² Association of the United States Army, *The U.S. Army’s Role in Stability Operations*, Torchbearer Issue Oct. 2006 (Arlington, VA: AUSA Institute of Land Warfare, 2006), p. 19.

²³ OUSD(P), *Interim Progress Report*.

²⁴ John A. Gentry, “Military Force in an Age of National Cowardice,” *The Washington Quarterly*, 1998. See also Jeffrey Record, “Collapsed Countries, Casualty Dread, and the New American Way of War,” *Parameters*, Summer 2002, pp. 4-23.

²⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Strategic Survey 2003/4* (Oxford: OUP for the IISS, 2004), p. 45; George Packer, “The Lessons of Tal Afar,” *The New Yorker*, Apr. 10, 2006, p. 51.

U.S. military was as an institution either unaware or unswayed by the particular logic of counterinsurgency and stability operations – endeavors that differ in important ways from those conducted to defeat a specific military adversary.

In contrast, the planning and implementation of *Operation Fardh al-Qanoon*, launched in February 2007, emphasized several of the principles laid out in FM 3-24, the new counterinsurgency field manual. The continuity between the learning of counterinsurgency and its operationalization in Iraq is personified in Gen. David Petraeus, who as commanding general at Fort Leavenworth helped author the counterinsurgency manual and who was subsequently appointed commander of Multinational Force Iraq (MNF-I), putting him in charge of all U.S. forces in Iraq. Soldiers participating in the Baghdad Security Plan were instructed to operate extensively on city streets rather than simply occupy fortified, isolated bases; to provide security rather than strike individual targets; and to deploy in mass with an increased risk of U.S. casualties, but with a higher likelihood of gaining the support of the then better-protected population.²⁶ For various reasons, the adoption of these counterinsurgency principles has been problematic – the shift in strategy may have been too tardy, applied on too limited a scale and with insufficient domestic support to be sustained for the necessary time period. However, the notion of U.S. combat troops conducting these operations at all is nonetheless testament to a remarkable learning curve.

Meeting Resistance

Clearly, the U.S. military is learning counterinsurgency. If the September 11th attacks and the Afghanistan invasion did not prompt a realignment in U.S. military priorities, its encounter with insurgency in Iraq triggered a rapid learning process that has, in the span of a few years, generated promising results. To many, it seems implausible that the U.S. military will again fail to plan properly for stability operations as it did in 2003 with the Iraq invasion or be caught flatfooted by a nascent insurgency. In that sense, it is possible to argue that the U.S. military has learned counterinsurgency, at least to the degree possible in this short time period.

Yet the learning process described above has been neither unproblematic nor incontrovertible. Indeed, we must go beyond the mere recital of counterinsurgency-related initiatives and place this narrative within the wider institutional context of the Pentagon. In so doing, it becomes clear that while the learning was in many ways impressive, its manifestations have often been peripheral to the DoD as a whole. As a result, the learning has not, to date,

²⁶The parameters of the new strategy were laid out by President Bush in his Address to the Nation, Washington DC, Jan. 10 2007. See also IISS, “Iraq Under the Surge: Implementing Plan B,” *Strategic Comments*, Mar. 2007.

compelled a genuine acceptance of counterinsurgency as a U.S. military mission or a related reorientation of priorities and capabilities.

This lag is primarily due to the fact that the people driving the learning process have so far lacked the influence necessary to sway the wider military culture. The COIN community frames the Iraq operation as the latest in a long string of campaigns in which the U.S. military has had to conduct community-oriented operations in a non-permissive environment. Perceiving – in the rise of al-Qaeda and the growing sophistication of non-state armed groups – signs of a future marked by increasingly frequent and complex irregular campaigns, those interested in counterinsurgency insist that the U.S. military must innovate by developing a capability to conduct such missions.

While rarely outright rejected, this logic is not widely shared across the Pentagon. The DoD's quadrennial defense review (QDR) of 2006 offered little beyond vague rhetoric to fulfill the vision of the stability operations directive, released only three months earlier.²⁷ While emphasizing the importance of integrating counterinsurgency as part of the U.S. military's remit, there were few substantive directives to fulfill this ambition. In places – in particular with regard to the QDR's decisions to cut the end-strength of the ground forces – it seemed as if counterinsurgency, which is often manpower-intensive, did not form part of DoD's vision at all.²⁸ Other major Pentagon policy papers have been similarly silent on the topic of counterinsurgency – strikingly so, given the U.S. military's ongoing engagement in such campaigns.²⁹ At most, these institution-wide documents would acknowledge the importance of “irregular war,” but prioritize counterterrorism strikes over the population-centered and manpower-intensive operations also included in this category. Those interested in counterinsurgency and stability operations were clearly moving against the grain of the wider organization, so much so that some likened their cause to an “institutional insurgency.”³⁰

Opposition to the learning of counterinsurgency springs from a combination of old, flawed and wishful thinking. In the first place, the COIN community faces resistance from the old guard, who have clung on to the conventional priorities, “tribal” equities and military culture typical of the U.S.

²⁷ DoD, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington DC: DoD, 2006).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-45.

²⁹ The writers of the 2005 *National Military Strategy* were instructed not to mention Iraq in the document, as the Secretary of Defense perceived this campaign as a distraction that would soon be over. Interview with senior officer involved in the drafting of the NMS, Washington DC, 13 Mar. 2007. See also JCS, *National Military Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington DC: Office of the Chairman, 2004); DoD, *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington DC: DoD, 2005); or JCS, *Capstone Concept for Stability Operations*, vol. 2 (Washington DC: Joint Staff J-7/Director for Operational Plans and Joint Force Development, 2005).

³⁰ Interview with Lt-Col John Nagl, U.S. Army.

military. Whether through inertia or conviction, large swathes of the DoD continue to view all “operations other than war” as an afterthought to the U.S. military’s primary mission: major combat operations – and this in spite of the threat of terrorism, the U.S. military’s involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq and the significant difficulties faced in these campaigns.

This mindset expresses itself most clearly in the Pentagon’s budgetary allocations and decisions over force structure, which are oriented predominantly toward high-intensity combat. In its budget requests, the DoD has continued to pour money into costly programs with questionable value in today’s strategic environment. Released as the U.S. military was gearing up to conduct an expanded counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq, the budget request for FY08 prioritized “traditional kinds of weapons programs” and “move[d] ahead with the vast majority of the acquisition programs included in the Services’ long-range plans – most of which were also projected in the last, pre-9/11, Clinton Administration defense plan.”³¹ While extra-budgetary supplemental appropriations have helped cover the costs of ongoing operations, these funds were never intended to develop a general capability to conduct counterinsurgency.³² Disturbingly, however, even these extra-budgetary bills have been used to fund conventional weapons platforms, supplementing, quite literally, the allocations made for high-cost defense systems in the base budget.³³

The military’s force structure has also remained optimized for high-intensity combat. While steps taken by the DoD have improved the ground forces’ suitability for counterinsurgency, the primary aim of these initiatives has been to enhance the military’s *usability* – and its anticipated “use” remains major combat operations. Despite all the benefits inherent to modularization, for example, the new modular unit of the Army, the Brigade Combat Team (BCT), remains structured for conventional combat.³⁴ Though the Army now plans to place more stability-operations-relevant forces in various “Functional” and

³¹ Steven M. Kosiak, *Analysis of the FY 2008 Defense Budget Request* (Washington DC: CSBA, 2007), p. 20. The budget request sought “\$27 billion for aircraft programs, up \$4.1 billion or 18 percent from this year; \$14.4 billion for ship programs, up \$3.2 billion or 29 percent; and \$6 billion for space programs, an increase of \$1.2 billion or 25 percent more than Congress authorized this year.” Tony Capaccio, “Bush Seeks Big Boost for Plane, Ship, Space Programs,” *Bloomberg.com*, Feb. 5, 2007.

³² The bulk of the supplementary spending is by force spent on providing pay and benefit to soldiers and their families and on resetting worn-out equipment.

³³ See Jonathan Karp, “Pentagon Redefines ‘Emergency,’” *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 3, 2007. The most blatant example concerned the attempted acquisition of two Joint Strike Fighters. See Pat Towell, Stephen Daggett & Amy Belasco, “Defense: FY2008 Authorization and Appropriations,” *CRS Report for Congress*, Order Code RL33999, Congressional Research Services, Library of Congress, Updated May 11, 2007, p. 15.

³⁴ Brian G. Watson, *Reshaping the Expeditionary Army to Win Decisively: The Case for Greater Stabilization Capacity in the Modular Force* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute, 2005). See also Andrew Feickert, “U.S. Army’s Modular Redesign: Issues for Congress,” *CRS Report for Congress*, Order Code RL32476, CRS, LoC, Updated May 5, 2006.

“Multifunctional Brigades,” it is telling that the Army’s plans for the plus-up in forces focus mainly on the construction of more, combat-oriented, BCT units.³⁵ Similarly, while the Marine Corps’ plans for expansion include boosts to some stability-operations-relevant forces – military police, civil affairs and intelligence units – “the bulk of additional end strength is currently allocated to building more conventional combat capabilities,” such as artillery batteries, tank units, and fighter squadrons.³⁶

The rebalancing of the Army’s reserve and active components (the RC and AC, respectively) represents a more promising initiative. This effort sees several units with relevance to stability operations – primarily military police, transportation, petroleum/water distribution units, civil affairs and psychological operations – shifted from the RC, where they typically reside, to the AC where they are more readily usable.³⁷ However, to what degree does this action relate to stability operations? The initial language surrounding the rebalancing referred to reducing “reliance on the reserve component during the first 15 days of a “rapid response operation” and to limit reserve mobilization, especially for high demand units, to once every six years” – all important objectives, but none that relate directly to stability operations.³⁸ It is doubtful, also, whether the units with purported relevance to stability operations will be trained accordingly:

is civil affairs organized, trained, equipped, and educated adequately for future missions, or is it still geared for dealing with civilians in a more traditional fight? Are medical personnel trained for family medicine or combat triage and emergencies? . . . Even more fundamentally, given the complexity of the task, it may be possible that new specialties need to be created.³⁹

Both in force structure and in budgetary allocations, the Army and the Marine Corps are displaying notable continuity with traditional priorities. Even in training and education, where progress has been comparatively strong, there are signs that major combat operations have continued to dominate. By one estimate, “about 70% of the training at the Captains Career Course [at Fort Knox, KY] is for conventional warfare.”⁴⁰ With regard to the Marine Corps, a

³⁵ See Michèle A. Flournoy & Tammy S. Schultz, *Shaping U.S. Ground Forces for the Future: Getting Expansion Right* (Washington DC: Center for a New American Security, 2007), pp. 25-26. See also “DoD News Briefing with Under Secretary of Defense David Chu, Lt. Gen. Stephen Speakes, and Lt. Gen. Emerson Gardner from the Pentagon,” Arlington, VA, Jan. 19, 2007.

³⁶ Flournoy & Schultz, *Shaping U.S. Ground Forces*, p. 28. See also Frank G. Hoffman, “Complex Irregular Warfare: The Next Revolution in Military Affairs,” *Orbis* (Summer 2006).

³⁷ Feickert, “U.S. Army’s Modular Redesign,” p. 19.

³⁸ Nina M. Serafino, “Peacekeeping and Related Stability Operations: Issues of U.S. Military Involvement,” *CRS Issues Brief for Congress*, Order Code IB94040, CRS, LoC, Updated June 25, 2005, p. 11.

³⁹ Flournoy & Schultz, *Shaping*, p. 20. A similar argument was made in Hans Binnendijk, David C. Gompert & Richard L. Kugler, “A New Military Framework for NATO,” *Defense Horizons*, (May 2005), p. 10.

⁴⁰ Fred Kaplan, “Challenging the Generals,” *New York Magazine*, Aug. 26, 2007.

general “lack of appropriate training settings and conditions” has rendered “the Urban Warfare Training Center (UWTC) at Twenty-nine Palms the only place where Marines can simulate the complex environment that we’ve been operating in for the past 15 years” – and this course runs for only one week.⁴¹

In terms of education, Col Kevin P. Reynolds, U.S. Army (ret.), has shown that at the Army War College in 2006, only “6.2 percent of the courses offered and approximately 4.8 percent of the hours in the core curriculum” dealt directly with counterinsurgency, “either as a subject of the lesson or as a major sub-section of a lesson,” and that only two of 90 electives offered “address counterinsurgency or a directly related subject.”⁴² Similarly, Marine Captain Scott Cuomo notes that the Marine Corps’ basic officer course, infantry officer course and instruction for infantry squad leaders involve limited instruction specifically focused on irregular warfare and counterinsurgency.⁴³ These findings are backed by an internal DoD report on the implementation of Directive 3000.05, which recognized that “the degree to which stability operations are incorporated into DoD education programs varies by institution and is not well coordinated.”⁴⁴

Clearly a complete disinvestment in conventional capabilities would be unwarranted. Given its overmatch in combat power and relative weakness in counterinsurgency and stability operations, it is however telling that the U.S. military has not undergone more of a rebalancing – particularly given the nature of ongoing operations. Clearly, the COIN community has struggled to displace traditional preoccupations and entrenched interests; to a large extent, old think has prevailed.

It does not help, of course, that the COIN community advances a cause that is *anathematic* to the traditional American way of war, significantly raising the barrier against its entry into the DoD mainstream. The use of force in counterinsurgency campaigns cannot be overwhelming; victory – where achieved – is ambiguous rather than decisive; the winning formula is low-tech and high-risk and casualties must be expected as part of a long-haul effort likely to span years if not decades. Through its culture and history, the U.S. military was from the outset averse to these types of operations. This predisposition has been manifested during the Iraq

⁴¹ Scott A. Cuomo, “Will We Be Prepared for What’s Next?,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (July 2007).

⁴² Col Kevin P. Reynolds (ret.), “Insurgency/Counterinsurgency: Does the Army ‘Get It?’” Paper for Presentation at the International Studies Association Annual Convention, Feb. 28-March 3, 2007, Chicago, IL, pp. 7-8. In subsequent correspondence, Col Reynolds (ret.) noted that “the War College has more than doubled the amount of time allocated to COIN in its curriculum for this academic year [2007-08].” Even so, even when doubled, the relevant statistics do not go much beyond the ten-percent mark.

⁴³ For an exact breakdown, see Cuomo, “Will We Be Prepared?”

⁴⁴ OUSD(P), *Interim Progress Report*, p. 14.

campaign, which has showcased the complexity and apparent intractability of counterinsurgency.

Learning from Iraq

One might have anticipated that the costly campaign in Iraq would force the DoD to focus on the area where it was proving itself to be the most lacking, namely counterinsurgency. In one sense, Iraq has allowed for an accelerated and more accurately targeted learning process. It has provided a platform for those advocating the learning of counterinsurgency to spread their ideas. However, the interpretation of this campaign as signifying a need to learn counterinsurgency clashes with that of other DoD components, which view it as a temporary aberration that will not be repeated. All too often, Iraq is cast as an exception to the rule: the specific political circumstances leading to the invasion were so peculiar, the United States' international isolation so inauspicious, and the initial occupation so bungled, that it is thought unlikely that a similar scenario will ever occur. At best, therefore, the learning of counterinsurgency is understood as an Iraq exit-strategy, after which the topic will lose its relevance. More often, the learning of counterinsurgency is dismissed as an unimaginative attempt to "prepare to fight the last war," a fallacy typical of military institutions undergoing change. Future irregular adversaries, so the argument runs, should be confronted *indirectly*, using Special Operations Forces to train and assist foreign proxies – which obviates the need to deploy U.S. ground forces.⁴⁵ These arguments are supported – if not rationally, then emotively – by the troubled nature of the Iraq campaign: there is no enthusiasm to consider a future marked by similar engagements. In this sense, having provided the initial impetus for the learning of counterinsurgency, the Iraq campaign might also sound the death knell for this entire enterprise.

It should be added, in this context, that the DoD leadership largely opposed applying counterinsurgency methods in Iraq in the first place. This change in strategy was driven by the White House and forced upon the Pentagon. DoD papers were for example paying scant attention to counterinsurgency in October 2005 when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced a "clear-hold-build" strategy for Iraq steeped in classical counterinsurgency theory.⁴⁶ The commanders both of CENTCOM and of

⁴⁵ Interviews with OUSD(P) staff, Department of Defense, Arlington, VA, April 2007. The indirect approach was heralded in the 2006 QDR, which accordingly boosted SOF resources and authorities. Importantly, the QDR made virtually no provision to transform the wider military to engage *directly* in counterinsurgency, should the "enabling partners" of the indirect approach be in any way inadequate or even nonexistent. DoD, *QDR*, pp. 2,11.

⁴⁶ Condoleezza Rice, "Iraq and U.S. Policy," Opening Remarks Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington DC, Oct. 19, 2005. The new strategy emphasised the so-called "oil-spot" technique, used to good effect in past counterinsurgencies, whereby countrywide stability is ensured gradually by consolidating control in specific cities and regions at a time.

MNF-I opposed this change in strategy, pushing instead for a *reduction* in the presence and visibility of U.S. troops in Iraq.⁴⁷ Since then, the split has widened: President Bush's request that Donald Rumsfeld resign in late 2006 was a clear sign that the Pentagon's approach to operations in Iraq was no longer *de rigueur*. When it came to changing course in Iraq, Bush set out to escalate rather than reduce the U.S. troop commitment, thereby heeding the advice of the COIN community ahead of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the military brass.⁴⁸

Against this backdrop, and given the tentative manner in which the Pentagon has so far engaged with counterinsurgency, questions must be asked regarding the sustainability of the innovative measures seen to date, to wit, the rapid, if limited, integration of counterinsurgency in the training, doctrine and education of the U.S. military. As stated above, it is typical historically for the U.S. military to adapt to ongoing counterinsurgency campaigns, but then to discard the lessons learned at the close of the operation. In light of these tendencies, do the most recent of initiatives represent learning counterinsurgency anew or simply a logical reaction to having stumbled into an unexpected counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq? With the eventual close of the Iraq campaign, will counterinsurgency again be pushed off the table, leaving the military just as unprepared for these contingencies as it was when it invaded Iraq in 2003?

The answer depends largely on the outcome of the Iraq campaign. A relatively positive outcome may help those who pushed counterinsurgency onto the wider DoD sell their message, gain positions of influence and, thus, continue to affect the institution's orientation. No doubt, the tentative yet undeniably positive results of the "surge" in Iraq in 2007 influenced the decision to have Gen. Petraeus chair the board selecting Army promotions to brigadier-general.⁴⁹ This is the type of positional authority to come with an improved security situation in Iraq. If the DoD was to move further in this direction, the learning of counterinsurgency would be facilitated by the fact that the majority of low- to middle-ranking soldiers and Marines have now conducted several tours in Iraq and gained a hard-won familiarity with counterinsurgency. The problem here is that sustaining a "good-news story"

⁴⁷ Both Gen. George Casey, MNF-I commander, and Gen. John Abizaid, CENTCOM commander, saw U.S. forces as "an 'antibody' in Iraqi society"; U.S. troops were therefore secluded in armoured bases and emphasis was placed on getting Iraqi security forces to conduct operations in their stead. Max Boot, "Can Petraeus Pull It Off?," *The Weekly Standard*, Apr. 30, 2007.

⁴⁸ Briefing the President and Vice President on policy options for Iraq in December 2006, the JCS discouraged an increased commitment of U.S. forces and advocated instead a shift "from combating insurgents to supporting Iraqi troops and hunting terrorists." Robin Wright & Ann Scott Tyson, "Joint Chiefs Advise Change in War Strategy," *Washington Post*, Dec. 14, 2006.

⁴⁹ Ann Scott Tyson, "Petraeus Helping Pick New Generals: Army Says Innovation Will Be Rewarded," *Washington Post*, November 17, 2007.

in Iraq will be costly, requiring a sustained effort for which there appears to be no real appetite.

Should the Iraq campaign produce failure or even an unsatisfactory outcome, the fate of the COIN community and of counterinsurgency as a topic appears bleak. Even if something significant can be salvaged in Iraq, there are already signs within the DoD that the learning of counterinsurgency has run its course, as an increasing number of Army and Marine Corps senior officers are arguing for a return to conventional priorities both in training and education.⁵⁰ Certainly, there are good reasons for these two services to retain their ability to conduct conventional combat – and it is true that the Iraq War had strained both services' combat capability. Yet given the U.S. military's enduring overmatch in conventional combat, its comparative weakness in stability operations and counterinsurgency and the lack of a near-peer competitor who might engage the United States conventionally in the foreseeable future, the hortatory demands for a return to traditional priorities appears more emotive than rational, more doctrinaire than reasoned. It also echoes the familiar tendency within the U.S. military to consider anything that detracts from conventional war-fighting capabilities as eroding the force's readiness, however defined.

A suboptimal outcome in Iraq might also encourage the idea that counterinsurgency must simply be avoided. Already in 2006, some defense analysts were arguing that the U.S. military should adopt “a policy of abstention from small wars of choice.”⁵¹ While the costs, complexity and duration of counterinsurgency would certainly support such a course of action, it must be recalled that this was precisely the policy followed by the U.S. military as it invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. In the history of the U.S. military, the hope of avoiding counterinsurgency has all too often been confused with an actual ability to do so and justified a marginalization of counterinsurgency in its training, education and doctrine. Not only has this mindset unnecessarily complicated the U.S. military's eventual involvements in counterinsurgency but it has also encouraged its adversaries to attack it asymmetrically, where it is weak.

Another tempting, yet misleading, conclusion to be drawn from a

⁵⁰ See Marina Malenic, “Hard Skills Going Soft: Army Concerned that COIN is Displacing Conventional Training,” *Inside Defense*, July 2, 2007; Army Prepares to Keep Troop Levels Steady in Iraq,” *AUSA News*, Nov. 1, 2006. In his 2006 Commandant's Planning Guidance, Gen. James T. Conway, USMC, lamented that current wartime deployments had eroded “the skills Marines need for combined-arms maneuver, mountain warfare, amphibious, and jungle operations.” While acknowledging the importance of counterinsurgency, Conway offered a not-so-subtle reminder of the Corps' real calling: “Other types of forces, unique to counterinsurgency and much in demand, will have to be stood up. However, we will maintain robust, contingency response forces required by law to be “*the Nation's shock troops*,” *always ready – and always capable of forcible entry*.” Gen. James T. Conway, USMC, “Commandant's Planning Guidance,” 2006, pp. 3-4 – emphasis in original.

⁵¹ Jeffrey Record, “The American Way of War: Cultural Barriers to Successful Counterinsurgency,” *Policy Analysis*, (Sept. 1, 2006), p. 17.

negative Iraq outcome would be that counterinsurgency simply does not work and should be abandoned as a priority.⁵² It is possible that, as far as the DoD is concerned, the COIN community will have “played its hand” in Iraq. Handed an opportunity to employ its new doctrine in *Operation Fardh al-Qanoon*, which – at first glance – appears congruent enough with the wisdom of FM 3-24, a subsequent failure to achieve results might tarnish not only the counterinsurgency manual but also those associated with it. Of course, such a conclusion would be unfair, as the implementation of FM 3-24 in Iraq was not only extremely limited (both in breadth and in depth) but also tardy. Applied four years into the campaign, with timelines shortened due to domestic political pressure, the surge strategy also diverges in important respects from the principles laid out in FM 3-24: there is little to no “confidence in the staying power of both the counterinsurgents and the HN [host-nation] government”; the operation is not guided by what FM 3-24 terms “a clear understanding of the desired end state”; militarily, even the increase in troop numbers leaves the U.S. military far below the ideal force ratios drawn up in FM 3-24, at least until adequate indigenous forces are stood up; and, given their infiltration by extremist elements, the premise that the “primary frontline COIN force is often the police – not the military” is here entirely inapplicable.⁵³

These important divergences between theory and practice may be lost in the search to apportion blame for setbacks in Iraq. It is more than possible that poor implementation would in such an instance be confused with poor theory – particularly as the senior brass of the military opposed “the surge” from the very outset. Rather than signaling the beginning of an operational capability, the Baghdad Security Plan could, at worst, represent the end of the U.S. military’s counterinsurgency moment.

This blame game will itself be critical to the future of counterinsurgency within the U.S. military. “Reform,” James Dobbins notes, “comes in the wake of

⁵² Some early proponents of this view include Maj.-Gen. Charles J. Dunlap, the Deputy Judge Advocate General of the U.S. Air Force, who has written several articles arguing against the logic of FM 3-24. See Maj.-Gen. Charles J. Dunlap Jr, “America’s asymmetric advantage,” *Armed Forces Journal*, (Sept. 2006). Edward N. Luttwak provides another critique of counterinsurgency theory as defunct, arguing that the prescriptions of FM 3-24 “are in the end of little use or none.” See Luttwak, Edward N., “Dead End: Counterinsurgency Warfare as Military Malpractice,” *Harpers* (Feb. 2007). For a convincing critique of Luttwak’s argument, see “Edward Luttwak’s ‘Counterinsurgency Malpractice’” by David Kilcullen, Apr. 15, 2007, and “Luttwak’s Lament” by Frank Hoffman, Apr. 22, 2007, both posted on the Small Wars Journal blog (www.smallwarsjournal.com).

⁵³ Department of the Army & USMC, *Counterinsurgency*, pp. 1-13, 1-24, 6-19. FM 3-24 suggested a tentative *minimum* force ratio of “twenty counterinsurgents per 1000 residents.” For Baghdad, this would mean a minimum force of 120,000 troops. Even if one accepts Petraeus’ estimate that a total of 85,000 U.S. soldiers and Iraqi security forces would operate in Baghdad, this would still constitute a substantial shortfall on the figures advocated, albeit tentatively, in FM 3-24. Hearing at U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee to consider nomination of Lt-Gen. David H. Petraeus, to be General and Commander, Multi-National Forces-Iraq, Jan. 23 2007.

disaster [and] sadly, Iraq represents an opportunity in this regard, one too good to be passed up.”⁵⁴ Yet the military’s effort to “get things right” will depend heavily on the analysis of what went wrong. Following the Vietnam War, the U.S. military was able to disassociate itself from the American defeat by blaming the politicians who had embroiled the nation in war and then forced the military to fight with “one hand tied behind its back.” With regard to Iraq, several such narratives could be construed to shield the military from closer self-scrutiny and reform.

First, much blame could be placed on those politicians and ideologues deemed responsible for the initial invasion of Iraq. President Bush, but even more so the neoconservative quorum of policy-makers and advisers thought largely to have determined the administration’s foreign policy, may – due to their presumed influence – carry the brunt for a less-than-optimal outcome in Iraq. While justifiable, such a critique can easily obscure the flaws in the military’s own approach to the mission, its one-sided investment in conventional weapons capabilities and its wholesale faith in the ability of transformational capabilities and precision-strike munitions to win wars.

On that note, it is similarly plausible that the uniformed military will, post-Iraq, look back and condemn those transformation-enthusiasts – including Donald Rumsfeld – who were so influential in setting the U.S. military’s Iraq strategy.⁵⁵ Such a narrative would likely invoke Gen. Eric Shinseki’s February 2003 Senate testimony, in which he recommended a force of “several hundred thousands” to stabilize Iraq, and claim that this view was widely representative of the uniformed military but quashed by civilian ideologues whose limited combat experience did little to temper their faith in transformational gadgets and capabilities.⁵⁶ For many in the military, this assessment would rightly resonate – but it must be recalled that, as institutions, both the Army and Marine Corps dismissed stability operations and small wars as very distant priorities.⁵⁷ More generally, whereas a larger occupying force might very well have helped, the Army and Marine Corps would nonetheless, through their own narrow pursuit of conventional dominance, have been ill-prepared to undertake the tasks required to stabilize post-war Iraq.⁵⁸ If

⁵⁴ James Dobbins, “Who Lost Iraq?,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sept./Oct. 2007, p. 64.

⁵⁵ Elisabeth Bumiller, “At an Army School for Officers, Blunt Talk about Iraq,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2007.

⁵⁶ Shinseki’s statement, in full, reads: “I would say that what’s been mobilized to this point – something on the order of several hundred thousand soldiers are probably, you know, a figure that would be required. We’re talking about post-hostilities control over a piece of geography that’s fairly significant, with the kinds of ethnic tensions that could lead to other problems. And so it takes a significant ground-force presence to maintain a safe and secure environment, to ensure that people are fed, that water is disturbed, all the normal responsibilities that go along with administering a situation like this.” See “Hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee – Subject: The Fiscal Year 2004 Defense Budget,” *Federal News Service*, Feb. 25, 2003.

⁵⁷ See Kagan, *Finding the Target* & Hoffman, “Complex Irregular Warfare,” pp. 404-405.

momentum amasses behind the need to learn counterinsurgency, it is critical that the Army and Marine Corps leadership recognize their own inadequacies in preparing for and conducting full-spectrum operations.

Finally, it is also far from implausible that the military will want to blame its interagency partners rather than recognize its own faults. Whatever may be said about the U.S. military's learning of counterinsurgency, it remains the case that "the greatest challenge to the U.S. Government's ability to conduct SSTR operations is the lack of integrated capability and capacity of civilian agencies with which the military must partner to achieve success."⁵⁹ While the military can be faulted for not having studied or prepared for counterinsurgency, these operations do require the expertise and resources of several civilian departments and agencies, all of whom have – with few exceptions – struggled to deploy and operate effectively in Iraq and other conflict zones. To a large extent, this relates to the lack of security in theatre, but it is also true that, within several civilian agencies, participating in foreign campaigns and cooperating with the DoD is not cast as a career-advancing experience.⁶⁰

The military can be justified in criticizing its civilian counterparts for not playing a more active role in what should ideally be interagency campaigns. However, it is important that this critique not be accompanied by any undue complacency within the military as to its own readiness and ability to conduct counterinsurgency – or about its role in such campaigns. It is not only the prescribed responsibility of the military to administer military occupation abroad, but also – subsequent to Directive 3000.05 – its policy.⁶¹ In the haste to blame civilian agencies and departments, this critical injunction must not be forgotten – indeed it must prompt greater learning and coordination between the military and the civilian agencies to create a veritable national counterinsurgency capability.

With so many means of shielding itself from criticism arising from a suboptimal outcome in Iraq, it nonetheless seems uncertain whether the military will engage in the type of self-critical assessment needed to pursue its learning of counterinsurgency. Perhaps the greatest source of hope lies in the accumulated experience of the soldiers and Marines who have deployed on several tours to Iraq and thereby gained first-hand experience with counterinsurgency.⁶² For these service-members, Iraq has been a punishing

⁵⁸ Lt-Col Frank Hoffman (ret.), "Troop Level Increases: Pyrrhic Victory?," *Proceedings*, Apr. 2007.

⁵⁹ Robert Gates, "Report to Congress on the Implementation of DoD Directive 3000.05 *Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations*," (Apr. 1, 2007), p. i.

⁶⁰ Interview with Col T. X. Hammes (ret.), USMC, Washington DC, May 17, 2007.

⁶¹ See U.S. Code of Federal Regulations, Title 32, Volume 2, §368.6, which sets out "the initial establishment of military government" as one of the Army's main functions. I am grateful to Col Michael S. Bell, U.S. Army, for having drawn my attention to this CFR section.

experience. If they draw the lesson that the U.S. military cannot simply ignore counterinsurgency but must instead prepare for an increasingly irregular world, the U.S. military may move in the direction of learning counterinsurgency. It is difficult to imagine the circumstances by which the collective familiarity with counterinsurgency gained through the campaign in Iraq would disappear or be displaced by strictly conventional war-fighting priorities.

At the same time, the process of turning individual operational experience into institutional memory is far from straightforward. The British Army, despite repeated engagement in counterinsurgency, has historically found it difficult to internalize the lessons drawn from these campaigns, necessitating quick adaptation on the ground with each new engagement. There, the individual memory of previous notionally similar operations has flattened the learning curve, but to institutionalize this wisdom has proven an altogether more difficult proposition.⁶³ For the U.S. military, this problem is compounded by its grounding in conventional war and cultural predisposition to focus almost exclusively on these types of campaigns.

The DoD is also a highly conformist institution, complicating efforts to introduce a new way of thinking, particularly one that goes against the organization's prevailing logic and culture. The U.S. military's leadership has been raised with conventional priorities and an institutional orthodoxy that prizes traditional combat over messy and intensely political contingencies. Any attempt to displace this orthodoxy has to occur with the consent of the senior brass, who would thereby devalue their own experience and standing.⁶⁴ In this manner, and with few exceptions, the self-identification of the organization is perpetuated. Indeed, Fred Kaplan notes that "six years into this war, the armed forces – not just the Army, but also the Air Force, Navy and Marines – have changed almost nothing about the way their promotional systems and their entire bureaucracies operate."⁶⁵ The critical question is whether Gen. Petraeus and his cohorts will be given a chance to change this state of affairs.

Any effort to displace the existing institutional orthodoxy will be complicated further by the resource constraints that will affect the U.S. military in the near future. For the DoD to maintain its conventional primacy while at the same time develop additive capabilities for counterinsurgency, its budget would

⁶² Fred Kaplan noted in August 2007 that "of the 127 captains taking the five-week [Captains Career] course, 119 had served one or two tours of duty in Iraq or Afghanistan, mainly as lieutenants. Nearly all would soon be going back as company commander." See Kaplan, "Challenging the Generals."

⁶³ See Hugh Eaton & Greg Boehmer *et al.*, *The British Approach to Low-Intensity Operations*, Technical Report, Network-Centric Operations Case Study (Washington DC: Office of Force Transformation, 2007).

⁶⁴ Interview with Richard Downie, Director, Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, National Defense University, Washington DC, Mar. 30, 2006. See also Lt-Col Paul Yingling, "A Failure in Generalship," *Armed Forces Journal* (May 2007).

⁶⁵ Kaplan, "Challenging the Generals."

most probably need to grow. Yet, as Steven Kosiak has argued, “such increases may be unlikely given growing concerns about the size of the deficit and budgetary pressures associated with the pending retirement of the baby boomer generation.”⁶⁶ An Office of Management and Budget report details how the combined spending on Medicare, Social Security and Medicare – three major entitlement programs – is likely to increase from 43 percent of non-interest Federal spending to up to 66 percent in 2035, when the remaining baby boomers will be in their 70s and 80s, to around 75 percent by 2080: “in other words, almost all of the budget, aside from interest, would go to these three programs alone [which] would severely reduce the flexibility of the budget.”⁶⁷ Covering these costs, Kosiak further explains, “will become ever more difficult as the ratio of working-to-retired Americans declines.”⁶⁸ The result will be a larger federal deficit and additional funding limits for the DoD.

This squeeze on the defense budget will be further tightened as the military draws down in Iraq. During the past few years, the U.S. military has been able to fund some initiatives associated with counterinsurgency through extra-budgetary supplementals, whose primary function it was to cover unexpected war costs. At the very least, the supplementals have granted the DoD greater flexibility in its budgetary allocations as well as a significant pool of funds. However, this state of affairs will not persist. Already in 2007, Congress was with good reason seeking to clamp down on the DoD’s use of supplemental requests – measures that, in theory, ought only to be employed when the related costs are of an emergency nature.⁶⁹ Whatever the duration of the Iraq campaign, it is likely that the DoD will be forced to integrate the extraordinary costs of ongoing operations into its baseline budget. In the face of such a squeeze, the Pentagon will need to make a series of tough choices as to what priorities to pursue and which ones to drop. At this point, it is highly uncertain whether counterinsurgency will make the cut.

Conclusion

It is too early to say with any real certainty whether or not counterinsurgency will become a central priority for the U.S. military. The evidence emerging from its initial encounter with counterinsurgency in 2003 presents a mixed picture: on the one hand, a group within the DoD has driven an impressive learning process, featuring the rapid integration of counterinsurgency across the doctrine, education and training of the armed services. On the other hand, the U.S. military has remained structured for

⁶⁶ Kosiak, *Analysis*, p. 20.

⁶⁷ Office of Management and Budget, *Fiscal Year 2008 Budget of the U.S. Government, Analytical Perspectives* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007), p. 183.

⁶⁸ Kosiak, *Analysis*, p. 20.

⁶⁹ Towell, Daggett & Belasco, p. 2.

conventional war and, more important yet, emerging opportunities to change force structure or budgetary priorities have not been seized. To the extent that the U.S. military has innovated to face irregular threats, it has focused predominantly on boosting special operations forces for various *indirect* means of exerting influence, which do not involve regular U.S. ground troops nor prepares them for direct engagement in counterinsurgency. The future of counterinsurgency within the U.S. military thus seems to hang in the balance, dependent on whether the message and cause of the COIN community is accepted and thereby gains momentum or whether it is rejected and pushed off the table. The Iraq War, and its interpretation within the United States in general and within the DoD more particularly, will most likely make the difference.

