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The Long War: Four Views

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While the Long War continues to march, four new books have presented challenging and sometimes contradictory conclusions about the war and its lessons for the future. This review essay looks at: the memoir of a Secretary of Defense, a recent RAND study, the *cri de coeur* of a retired general, and the memoir of a combat veteran and leading *coindinista*. What follows is not just a review essay, but also an exploration of lessons encountered, but not yet learned. It ends with a call for help from the *Small Wars Journal* readership.

Robert Gates's memoir, *Duty: the Memoirs of a Secretary at War* made tremendous splash^[1] for its hard-but-fair critique of two Presidents, the firing of a few generals, its blow-by-blow description of the battle inside the Pentagon to improve support to war-fighters, and, surprise to many, the emotional bond that this tough secretary forged with the troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. Lost in the many great vignettes and secretarial sea stories is the fact that the last chapter of this book, "Reflections," is a mini-war college, full of the kind of wisdom that can only come from years of strategic analysis, and a world class resume: Deputy National Security Advisor, head of the Central Intelligence Agency, President of Texas A&M, and Secretary of War for two Presidents with vastly different styles and priorities. Gates's take-aways are a short-course in strategy for future leaders.

Gates defends the Surges in Iraq and Afghanistan and lauds Presidents Bush and Obama for commanding and not just presiding over the Armed Forces. Gates criticizes "more and more senior officers" who "seek a high public profile and ... speak out, often on politically sensitive issues or even on matters beyond their area of responsibility (not to mention, expertise)" (p. 575). His negative examples are Admiral Fox Fallon and General Stan McChrystal, both of whom were fired for their untimely and unfortunate statements. At the same time, Gates praises General David Petraeus, a master communicator, for letting improving operational results in Iraq drive his command's strategic communications. He also lauds Admiral Mullen and General Peter Pace, his JCS chairmen, for their support.

Gates highlighted an important problem for future senior officers: dealing with the Congress. The dysfunctional legislature could not pass in a timely manner any of the five defense budgets that he sent up to the Hill. He characterized the U.S. Congress as "uncivil, incompetent in fulfilling its basic constitutional responsibilities...micromanagerial, parochial, hypocritical, egotistical, thin-skinned, often putting self (and reelection) before country..." (p. 581). While condemning the polarization in the Congress, he reminded his successors to be bi-partisan and respect individual members. He credits his senior aide, Robert Rangel, a former HASC staffer, with keeping him sane and focused in congressional relations, but the Secretary concluded that the Congress "was just another battlefield in my wars" (p. 581).

A recent RAND study by Linda Robinson, Paul Miller, John Gordon IV, et al. has caught the attention of many strategists. Lead author, Linda Robinson is an experienced combat journalist with a few books on the long war to her credit.[2] The new RAND study, *Improving Strategic Competence: Lessons from 13 Years of War*, was prepared for the US Army's Special Operations Command.[3] ARSOC is led by an unusually thoughtful officer, Lieutenant General Charles T. Cleveland, USA (ARSOC). He and his command have made it their mission to learn from conflict and improve their understanding of the human domain and irregular conflict. The RAND study built on the now well-known, *Decade of War* study from the Joint and Coalition Operational Analysis (JCOA) Division of the Joint Staff's J-7. While the JCOA study focused on the operational level, the RAND study focused on problems of strategy and planning. RAND's findings were:

- The making of national security strategy has suffered from a lack of understanding and application of strategic art.
- An integrated civilian-military process is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of effective national security strategy.
- Because military operations take place in the political environment of the state in which the intervention takes place, military campaigns must be based on a political strategy.
- Because of the inherently human and uncertain nature of war, technology can't substitute for socio-cultural, political, and historical knowledge and understanding.
- Interventions should not be conducted without a plan to conduct stability operations, capacity building, transition, and if necessary counterinsurgency.
- Shaping, influence and unconventional operations may be cost-effective ways of addressing conflict that obviate the need for larger, costlier interventions.
- The joint force requires nonmilitary and multinational partners, as well as structures for coordinated implementation among agencies, allies, and international organizations.[4]

Like Gates's book, the RAND study noted the problem of civilian and military friction in strategic decision-making, as well as the difficulty of integrating war plans and national plans. In particular, it contrasted the military's linear approach to strategy development with the civilian decision-makers need for an iterative process and an active dialogue. The RAND study recommends educating civilian policymakers and developing an integrated civilian-military process for strategy development (p. xvii). It also recommends more civilian presence at appropriate echelons of command (p. xix). At the same time, the study notes that many relevant interagency capabilities are shrinking or have never fulfilled their promises (p. 118). Indeed, in my view, as the long war grinds on, the drive toward whole of government solutions and civilian expeditionary capabilities, which peaked in the second Bush administration, has faltered. Many experts talk about the importance of whole of government solutions and unity of effort, but few officials are doing anything about it. Its roots in the State Department were always shallow, and many in the Pentagon are happy to return to their preoccupation with high-tech conventional warfare. Improving whole of government efforts are the least of their worries.

A thread that runs through both the JCOA study and the RAND study is yet another repetition of U.S. forces not understanding the operational environment and the people who live there. This is a particularly difficult problem for a global power with global responsibilities. LTG Cleveland and his command are right to be focused on the human domain. More on this, below.

While Gates's book and the RAND study focus on strategy and the civilian-military interface, Army Lieutenant General Daniel Bolger's book focuses on generals, military advice, and life in the combat zone from the foxhole to the four-star command post. The title of the book reveals its conclusions: *Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars*. [5] This book demands attention.

Bolger fought in both Afghanistan and Iraq and has an excellent reputation. He also has a talented pen, a few books under his belt, and a doctorate in history from the University of Chicago.

In Bolger's assessment, we did lots of things right in Afghanistan and Iraq. We adapted quickly, used the Guard and Reserve, increased the active force when it became necessary, rotated forces by units, had great equipment, learned to fuse real-time intelligence and special operations, showed an admirable level of restraint, fought well at the tactical level, and after a slow start, successfully trained two foreign armies (pp. 424-427). The problem was that on the military side, "above that tactical excellence yawned a howling waste" (p. 428).

The war required a way to use a tactically superb force to contain and attrit terrorist adversaries. In this, America's generals failed. We found ourselves impaled and bogged down in not one, but two Middle Eastern countries, and this on the best advice of educated, experienced senior military men and women who had all studied Vietnam in their service schools. Over time, piece by piece, the generals recommended slogging onward ... Absent a realistic campaign concept in both countries, wars of attrition developed. Some saw it as a failure of imagination (p. 428).

Bolger argues that we should have pursued "short, decisive conventional wars for limited ends..." (p. 429). While his observations are often spot on, his recommendations make little sense. Bolger would have had US forces leave soon after the seizure of Kabul and Baghdad. How soon and in what manner, he never says. In my view, if the United States had left quickly in these two cases, disaster would have followed. If we left Baghdad in the summer of 2003, we would have left behind chaos in the form of an emerging insurgency. In Kabul, it would have been worse: the Taliban and al Qaeda would have moved back into the vacuum, with their leadership laughing at how the United States had once again kicked the furniture and then went home. These campaigns have been long hard slogs, but the notion that we could have succeeded by just departing after the conventional fight is wishful, to say the least.

Bolger criticizes the creativity of U.S. generals. While he admired the Iraq surge, he gave credit for it to a retired Army general, Jack Keane. In the case of the Afghanistan surge, he said that the inadequate options that the uniformed leaders gave the President were "some, more, and even more" forces. In truth, on the Iraq Surge, a highly successful operation, the President did overrule his two generals in the field, but if you look at the big picture, that was not a failure of generalship, but the success of the Commander-in-Chief, his cabinet, an adaptive Joint Chiefs, and the new commanders, all of whom learned, shaped, and carried out a new Presidential intent.^[6] Bolger remains a skeptic on the Army's new fascination "with the shiny objects of counterinsurgency theory." He believes that, even before the manual came out, its tenets "had been tried and found wanting" (p. 429).

Bolger's book raises important questions, but has three major faults. First, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are not over. No matter how hard or prolonged the slog, it is wrong to say that we lost conflicts that clearly have not ended. Secondly, he fails to examine the full course of Washington decision-making. Generals may make campaign plans, but war plans are decided on by Presidents and managed by cabinet officers and the Joint Chiefs. The Gates book and the RAND study are both right to focus on Washington as the centerpiece of the decision-making struggles. Finally, the bulk of Bolger's book --- nearly 90 percent of it --- is a well written narrative of soldiers and officers at war. He has a terrific pen, a wonderful narrative style, and an eye for military detail. The sum of his chapters, however, does not add up to the conclusions of his book. It is refreshing to see a general officer demand

accountability from himself and his peers, but, in my view, the ‘failure of the generals’ fails as a thematic explanation for the Long war.

The last book in this quartet is an interesting book because the author, John Nagl, was a scholar, a counterinsurgency (COIN) practitioner, an educator, and later, an important participant in the development of the new COIN doctrine. Nagl’s first book produced a popular text that took its title in part from a famous T.E. Lawrence saying about the difficulty of counterinsurgency: *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*.^[7] His new memoir riffed off the title of his first book: *Knife Fights: A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice*.^[8]

Nagl, an armor officer, was an early convert to the importance of counterinsurgency, long before the war in Iraq. As a battalion operations officer there, his unit fought as dismounted infantry against insurgents in Iraq’s al Anbar province. Nagl, who left the Army after a stateside battalion command, saw the fruition of his beliefs in COIN --- “the proof of concept” (p. 151) --- in the Iraq surge. Afghanistan, however, proved a tougher nut to crack. There was no “awakening” there to match the positive effects of Iraq, and Team Obama announced the end-date of the surge in Afghanistan before it began. As the U.S. and NATO combat mission ends in Afghanistan, Nagl the scholar reminds the reader that “great powers lose small wars for only one reason: they run out of will to continue the fight.” He recommends the continued presence of an advisory and assistance force to insure the survival of the Afghan regime and prevent a Taliban victory.

Nagl believes, as Linda Robinson and her co-authors do, that future wars are more likely to be irregular conflicts than conventional fights. Contemporary history surely bears out their observation. He joins the critics of the American way of counterinsurgency in reminding the reader that COIN, an operational concept, is not a policy objective. Rather, the national interest provides our goal. Nagl writes:

The question is not whether the classical counterinsurgency principles of clear, hold, and build work ... The question is whether the extraordinary investment of time, blood, and treasure required to make them work is worth the cost. The answer to that question depends on the value of long-term stability in the country afflicted by an insurgency, and that answer varies with time and place (p. 215).

In all, Nagl’s book is a valuable addition to the literature on the long war. It is doubly so for the inclusion of his poem, “Ghost Stories,” expressing the haunted memory of his fallen comrades. Nagl reminds the reader of the need to take care of our volunteer-veterans who have borne so heavy a burden for more than 13 years.

These four disparate books demonstrate that as we learn about the Long War, there will be a number of key issues that will dog us for the next few decades. The Long War has come with a high price tag: a trillion and a half dollars and over 50,000 U.S. military casualties. At the thirteen year point, it appears less a problem to be solved than a condition to be managed. At the same time, this war has the potential to be a great teacher on the strategic lessons associated with decision-making, the character of contemporary conflict, and civil military relations. Here are just a few observations suggested by my own research on this subject and echoed in some or all of these four books:

- Military participation in national decision making is necessary but inherently problematic. Part of this comes from normal and functional civil-military tension, but many instances in the Long War show unnecessary misunderstandings. Civilian national security decision-makers must

improve their understanding of the complexity of military strategy and the military's need for planning guidance. At the same time, senior military officers in particular need to provide comprehensive sets of feasible options to solve national security problems. As noted in the RAND study reviewed here, while the military favors a comprehensive and linear process, civilian decision-makers look for an iterative process and a continuing dialog. Bolger reminded us that the senior-most generals and admirals failed to offer a full range of options for the Afghan surge.

- Neither national nor military intelligence in Iraq and Afghanistan was a complete success in supporting decision-makers. Intelligence on Afghanistan itself was scant and initially not actionable. In Iraq, pre-war intelligence was wrong about WMD, the Iraqi police, and the state of Iraqi infrastructure. In both wars, U.S. intelligence failed in telling battle space owners about the people whom they were protecting. The effects of these shortcomings were grave.

- As Bolger noted, the greatest accomplishment in intelligence came in the intimate relationship that developed between special operations forces and all-source intelligence. While there was often faulty execution or mis-coordination in raids, the excellence in blending operations and intelligence should serve as a model for national level decision-makers and conventional forces. At the same time, efforts to bridge the gap between conventional and special operations forces must continue, a fact recognized by the RAND study reviewed here.

- Neither national level figures nor field commanders fully understood the operational environment, including the human aspects of military operations. To fight, in Rupert Smith's term, "war among the people," one must first understand them.^[9] We were not intellectually prepared for the unique aspects of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, just as we failed at the same requirement in Vietnam. Efforts to solve this problem --- human terrain teams and the Af-Pak Hands Program, for example --- came too little and too late. Moreover, these efforts were inorganic adaptations, something apart from the normal unit activities. This devalued their potential contributions. The intelligence system was of little help here. The need for information aggregation stands as an equal to classical all-source intelligence. This problem calls for a whole array of fixes from improving language training, pre-deployment training, area expertise, and reforming the intelligence/information apparatuses. The Army's regionally aligned forces concept appears to be a step in the right direction. The renewed emphasis on the human domain and the human aspects of military operations must be reinforced and sustained over time.

- When conventional warfare skills were called for, the U.S. Armed Forces achieved A+ results. At the same time, the military was insensitive to needs of the post-conflict environment and not prepared well for insurgency in either country. Our lack of preparation for dealing with irregular conflicts was the result of a post-Vietnam organizational blind spot. Military performance improved over time. Indeed, field-level innovation on counterinsurgency showed an admirable capacity for learning and innovation. Furthermore, the development of the Army and Marine Corps doctrine on counterinsurgency, and its inculcation of the doctrine in the force was an excellent example of systemic adaptation under fire. The doctrine for COIN and stability operations needs revision, and this work is well underway.

- A prudent great power should avoid being a third party in a large-scale counterinsurgency. Foreign expeditionary forces in another country's insurgency have almost always failed. At the same time, it should also be remembered that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan did not begin as insurgencies, but evolved in that direction. It is not possible for a super power to disregard the possibility of future large-scale COIN or Stability Operation. The Armed Forces must be ready

for combat across the spectrum of conflict, and irregular wars on the low end of the spectrum will remain the most frequent form of conflict that they encounter.

- Another salient issue in irregular conflicts is the question of sanctuary. In Iraq and Afghanistan, our enemies exploited base areas in adjacent countries. This presents the United States with a dilemma. Does the United States violate international understandings about the sanctity of borders, or does it suffer the slings and arrows that come from letting your enemy have secure bases to attack you? Pakistan has proven to be a particularly difficult case.
- Wars that involve regime change are likely to be protracted conflicts. They require a substantial, patient, and prudent international effort to bring stability and foster reconstruction, especially in the wake of weak, corrupt, or failed states. These exercises in armed nation-building are complex, uncertain, and, with the passing of time, increasingly unpopular in the United States. In the words of General David Petraeus, progress in such conflicts will most often be “fragile and reversible.” Nevertheless, regime changes and long-duration stability operations will sometimes be necessary. The alternative is kinetic success followed by political chaos. There was an option not to invade Afghanistan or Iraq. There was never an option to leave Afghanistan or Iraq right after the conclusion of the initial phase of major combat operations. NATO’s experience in Libya --- a no-footprint, post-conflict presence --- shows that kinetic success in regime change requires dedicated follow-up actions.
- In a counterinsurgency, success may well depend in part on the political development of the host government, whose weakness, corruption and ineffectiveness are, ironically, elements in causation of the insurgency in the first place. It is possible to wave the “whole of government response” flag here, but, in truth, there are few assets in the State Department or USAID kit bags at present to mentor and assist a host government in political development. In associated areas, such as development and reconstruction, State and USAID have more assets, but far fewer than these contingencies required. Sadly, as noted in Linda Robinson et al.’s RAND study, the urge to develop whole of government capabilities for irregular conflict is waning. There needs to be a national discussion on these critical issues.
- Improving our ability to teach others to handle an insurgency or terrorists is likely to be a key to U.S. participation in irregular conflict. The RAND study reviewed here also emphasizes the need to improve pre-conflict shaping operations to prevent conflicts. Outside of its special operations forces, the United States is not well organized to accomplish this mission. Two possibilities commend themselves: the United States can form military assistance groups, or it can develop and refine ways to prepare conventional units for this mission in a rapid and effective manner.

There are doubtless dozens of other high-level, strategic lessons that one should learn from the long war. I invite the readers of *Small Wars Journal* to relate their key, strategic lessons, either as comments to this article, or in an email to the author at josephcollins22@gmail.com.

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End Notes

[1] Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Knopf, 2014).

[2] Linda Robinson's two most recent books are *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008); and *One Hundred Victories: Special Ops and the Future of American Warfare* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013).

[3] Linda Robinson, Paul Miller, John Gordon IV, Jeffrey Decker, Michael Schwille, and Raphael Cohen, *Improving Strategic Confidence: Lessons from 13 Years of War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014).

[4] The RAND lessons are summarized between pages ix and xix and then are detailed throughout the 142 page text.

[5] LTG Daniel Bolger, USA, *Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Co., 2014).

[6] One of the best descriptions of the Iraq Surge decision is Peter Feaver, "The Right to Be Right," *International Security* (Spring 2011), 87-125.

[7] Nagl's first book, in the paperback edition, was *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005)

[8] John Nagl, *Knife Fights: A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014).

[9] General Sir Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

About the Author



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This view was echoed by Elisabeth Robson-Elliot, the former Head of the BBC Russian Service. Speaking in 2019, she recalled that staff broadcasting over the Iron Curtain were "fighting for freedom of information" as much as anything else. But did this make the BBC a "Cold War" broadcaster? It was an argument repeatedly made by the Soviet Union in its criticism of programmes to Central and Eastern Europe. And it was certainly true that in its broadcasts the BBC challenged both the ideology and the interpretation of events espoused by those countries. However, for the former Managing Director of