

I

Introduction

“YOU NOW STAND AMONG THE GIANTS”

When David Petraeus took over in 2007 as the leading American general in Iraq, he had already served one year as a commander in northern Iraq and another as the head of the campaign to train Iraqi security forces. The journalist Greg Jaffe, who accompanied the American general at the time, concluded that Petraeus’s knowledge of Iraq was “astonishing.” On any given morning, Petraeus might investigate the status of a neighborhood bank that the Shiite-controlled Finance Ministry had closed to punish Sunnis. A moment later, he would inquire about a downed electrical transmission tower outside of Baghdad or the status of an Iraqi commander he was eager to replace. As one observer commented, “Petraeus understood Iraq from the most granular level to the most strategic. . . . He was monumentally well-prepared for that job.”¹

Three years later, Petraeus moved from Iraq to Afghanistan, replacing General Stanley McChrystal as top American commander after McChrystal was swiftly dismissed by President Obama after a bombshell article in *Rolling Stone* magazine quoted the American general and his staff being highly critical of White House officials.² In Afghanistan, Petraeus often briefed reporters using a PowerPoint slide that illustrated his “Anaconda strategy,” which in Iraq had entailed a relentless combination of military, economic, and political campaigns to annihilate the Islamic insurgency. In fact, while he readily admitted the two countries were different, Petraeus apparently talked with such fervor about his Iraq experience to make points about the best approach in Afghanistan that he drew eye rolls from seasoned Afghan hands.

Given that he had only hours to prepare for his Afghan assignment after his predecessor's snap resignation, perhaps Petraeus could be forgiven for relying on the Anaconda slide to guide his thinking in the latter case. Remarkably though, the busy Anaconda graphic that consisted of concentric circles and a dozen arrows remained a key part of Petraeus's briefing throughout his tour in Afghanistan. As the effort in Afghanistan continued to drag on, it is possible that his many positive experiences in Iraq actually led him to misjudge the Afghan war.

When Petraeus was in command in Iraq, the country was mired in a violent sectarian war between ethnic Sunni and Shiite forces. Mutilated corpses were ubiquitous on Baghdad streets. Residents blocked entry into their neighborhoods with debris and charred automobiles in an attempt to keep out suicide bombers and roving death squads. Petraeus successfully addressed this dire situation by placing his troops on the key lines between the warring factions. He also provided ammunition and money to more than 100,000 former Sunni insurgents, a group that had theretofore been a direct foe of U.S. forces but was now increasingly amenable to such incentives. Civilian deaths that had peaked at more than 3,500 a month dropped by more than 60 percent, a key improvement in Iraq's security situation at the time that helped legitimize President George W. Bush's controversial "surge" strategy.

In Afghanistan, by contrast, levels of violence were considerably lower than in Iraq, which led many of Petraeus's subordinate commanders to conclude that the rapacious national, regional, and local Afghan governments – and not the Taliban insurgency – were in many ways the main sticking points to prosecuting a successful counterinsurgency and nation-building effort. Petraeus faced a choice: he could attempt to reform the government by wresting power away from the most brutal provincial warlords or he could focus on improving security by targeting Taliban insurgents, an approach that entailed cooperating with the warlords' despised militias.

Following the Iraq playbook, Petraeus opted to go for security first, an approach that during his tenure produced only modest gains in the targeted southern regions. In some instances, Petraeus's embrace of the warlords may have even led villagers back into allegiance with the Taliban. One top American general recalled, "He seemed to think that if you killed enough [enemy fighters], that would be good enough. He brought that with him from Iraq."³

Just over a year after he arrived in Afghanistan in 2010, Petraeus left military service to become director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

During his own retirement ceremony in Fort Myers, Florida, Petraeus stood before hundreds of guests where he was recognized for his extraordinary thirty-seven-year military career. Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told his colleague, “You now stand among the giants, not just in our time, but of all time, joining the likes of Grant and Pershing and Marshall and Eisenhower as one of the great battle captains.”⁴ Petraeus’s remarkable successes in the late, desperate stages of the Iraq war alone validate Mullen’s claim about Petraeus’s place in the pantheon of brilliant American military leaders. Yet his mixed record in Afghanistan demonstrates that even giants have a hard time learning the right lessons from the last dirty war as they fight the next.

TWO CENTURIES OF DIRTY WARS

From 1776 to the present, the United States has been engaged in irregular wars almost without interruption. This book examines the ways in which the United States learned – and failed to learn – across two centuries of fighting these wars. It considers the major cases, including the prolonged conflicts in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, alongside lesser-known campaigns such as El Salvador in the 1980s, Greece in the late 1940s, and the Philippines in the 1950s, which have been largely neglected in our historical and political memory.⁵

Across cases new and old that constitute the American experience, this book explores the seemingly inexorable pendulum swings between pledging not to get into any more dirty wars and inevitably getting pulled back in, at which point we forget the lessons of the prior campaigns in the first place. At times, American officials and commanders learned the wrong lessons from prior conflicts. For example, the wrenching and far-from-decisive campaigns against elusive and lethal guerrilla forces in Iraq at the outset of the twenty-first century led to a renewed focus on counterinsurgency and nation-building in American strategic doctrine – a direction that brought some clarity and stability to the Iraq situation but may have, before our eyes, proved unsuitable for subsequent dirty wars. The apparent failure in Afghanistan of a similar U.S. counterinsurgency strategy to defeat, once again, an elusive and committed enemy after a decade of American involvement prompted yet another pendulum shift toward a more modest assessment of what this form of involvement in irregular warfare can achieve.

The book’s first section addresses the early years of this story, including the American Revolutionary War, the Civil War, Indian pacification

campaigns, the bitter experience of imperial pacification in the Philippines and Cuba, and “bandit chasing” in Mexico and Nicaragua in the early twentieth century. The focus then turns to the Cold War when the United States was either directly or indirectly involved in several dirty wars in Asia and Latin America as part of its protracted struggle “on every front” against the Soviet Union.⁶ The book’s last section looks at the American experience since September 11, 2001, a time that has included, in addition to the large, controversial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, relatively overlooked dirty war engagements in Colombia, the Philippines, and elsewhere.

While the discussion of the American experience in dirty wars is cumulative, each section of the book is designed to stand alone so that readers with more interest in specific U.S. historical periods can access these chapters directly. The narrative of the American experience is interspersed with short *intermezzi* that focus on non-U.S. experiences that provide international historical context and additional insights.

**Panjwai District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan,
March 11, 2012, the Tenth Year of the Taliban Insurgency against
the United States and NATO**

Before dawn, a heavily armed U.S. staff sergeant named Robert Bales quietly left the outpost of Camp Belambay in southern Afghanistan. Wearing night-vision goggles and traditional Afghan clothes over his combat fatigues, he walked a mile to a nearby village, where he massacred seventeen Afghan civilians, including nine children. Eleven of the victims were from the same family. Bales reportedly assembled most of the bodies, covering them with blankets before attempting to burn the corpses. He then returned to Camp Belambay and turned himself in.⁷

Bales, who had received numerous military decorations before the incident, was attached to a unit based at Joint Base Lewis McChord, a large army and air force installation near Tacoma, Washington. With more than a decade in the Army, he had served three tours of duty in Iraq and was deployed to Afghanistan for the first time in December 2011 as part of a village stabilization operation in which teams of Army Special Forces, supported by other troops, attempted to develop close relationships with village elders, organize local police units, and hunt down Taliban leadership. Panjai, located near the city of Kandahar, was the center of a U.S. military offensive in 2010 and had experienced heavy fighting. Bales’s defense attorney contended that his client reported

suffering from nightmares, flashbacks of war scenes, and persistent headaches after his multiple combat tours in Iraq – a severe case of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the condition with which many military veterans in the United States had become so painfully familiar.

The atrocities committed by Bales, which Afghan president Hamid Karzai denounced as an “inhumane act,” were only the latest of a long string of incidents in which American soldiers, many of whom had behaved honorably and courageously over years of combat, had suddenly committed a heinous act or snapped into some out-of-control cruelty. Only a month after Bales’s killing spree, for example, the bad news for American officials continued when the *Los Angeles Times* published a front-page photograph of a soldier from the U.S. Army’s 82nd Airborne Division with a dead insurgent’s hand on his shoulder. The insurgent reportedly died planting a bomb. The article reported that the photograph was one of several similar images of troops posing with the body parts of insurgents they had killed.⁸

**Sand Creek, Near Fort Lyon, Colorado Territory, United States of
America, November 29, 1864, the Fifty-third Year of the Intermittent
Native American Insurgency West of the Mississippi River**

On this November morning, a 700-man column of the Colorado Territory militia led by the aggressive Colonel John Chivington stormed the camp of Cheyenne chief Black Kettle. The surprise attack, known as the Sand Creek massacre, left 100 Cheyenne and Arapaho dead, at least two-thirds of whom were women and children. One of the American soldiers testified, “I saw the bodies of those lying there cut all to pieces, worse mutilated than any I ever saw before; the women cut all to pieces. . . . With knives; scalped; their brains knocked out; children two or three months old, all ages lying there, from sucking infants up to warriors. . . . By whom were they mutilated? By the United States troops.”⁹ Another witness observed, “Fingers and ears were cut off the bodies for the jewelry they carried. The body of White Antelope, lying solitary in a creek bed, was a prime target. Besides scalping him the soldiers cut off his nose, ears, and testicles – the last for a tobacco pouch.”¹⁰ Chivington’s men returned later to steal horses and kill many of the wounded before they left the camp. They also allegedly dressed their weapons and gear with scalps and other body parts, including human fetuses; they displayed these “trophies” in Denver’s Apollo Theater for the public to see.

Revelations about the Sand Creek massacre sparked a substantial public outcry back on the East Coast. Peace groups began to lobby

Washington to adopt more humane Indian policies. In 1870, abolitionist and social activist Wendell Phillips called three prominent American officers in the Indian Wars – George Custer, Phillip Henry Sheridan, and Eugene Baker – the “true savages on the great plains.”¹¹

VARIOUS LEVELS OF DIRTINESS

The Roger Bales and Sand Creek massacres, separated by 150 years, together serve as a chilling reminder that the United States has and will almost certainly continue to commit excesses in dirty wars. Indeed, the very nature of dirty wars often leads to excessive and even barbaric behavior, something that all participants, including democracies like the United States, are not immune from. Yet, contrary to what these two instances of apparent savagery suggest, the United States, where it has involved itself in dirty wars, has in fact done so on widely varying levels of engagement, and with various levels of commitment and dirtiness. In terms of levels of involvement, Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s and Iraq and Afghanistan this century are conflicts that America has fought directly, with combat boots on the ground. At other times, though, American involvement in dirty wars has been by proxy or otherwise indirect, often entailing the provision of economic aid and military training and materiel, as was the case in Colombia in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Likewise, in the instance of El Salvador in the 1980s, America was deeply involved in a dirty war but fought fairly “cleanly.” On the other hand, examples such as the Indian removal campaigns and the war in the Philippines beginning in 1898 are stark examples of times when the United States fought “dirty” dirty wars, engaging in such ruthless tactics as forced population removal and direct targeting of civilians. In addition, in the more recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan there was much talk about a “new kind of war” more able to avoid, say, civilian casualties. Yet these two wars were very much like the wars the United States has been fighting since its beginning.

The objective of this book is neither to condemn nor justify America's track record in dirty wars; rather, it is to examine their characteristic political dynamics in order to illuminate salient trends, lessons, and warnings. This book thus treats the “good, the bad, and the ugly” of the American experience in a form of warfare as controversial as it is constant – a history that continues to be written today and will likely continue to be written well into the future.

CONTEXT AND DEFINITIONS

Irregular wars are generally considered the conflicts that include guerilla insurrections, insurgencies, and counterinsurgencies. Irregular wars include all of the military and nation-building campaigns in which American forces have attempted to defeat elusive and informal foes as well as bolster friendly forces and governments. The concept of a class of warfare as “irregular” derives from the first internationally accepted definition of “regular” war in the Third Geneva Convention of 1949; that is, a war fought primarily between regular forces. According to the Convention, “regular armed forces” satisfy five criteria:

- Are commanded by a person (or persons) responsible for the decisions, movements, and actions of subordinates in matters relevant to the conflict
- Bear uniform markings or insignia that are recognizable from a distance
- Carry arms openly
- Conduct operations in accordance with the international laws and norms of war
- Act as representatives of states¹²

Broadly speaking, irregular warfare is the opposite of regular warfare. But suggesting contrasting qualities is not a definition, and indeed the international community’s current understanding of what irregular warfare is has grave limitations. Irregular wars tend to differ from archetypal “regular” wars in one or more of the ways that the Geneva Conventions highlight. Irregular wars, therefore, are conducted by forces that generally

- Lack clear hierarchies of command
- Do not bear soldierly markings
- Do not carry weapons openly
- Do not fight according to the period’s laws and norms of war
- Do not act as representatives of a particular state
- Do not display other familiar markers of conventional wars: official diplomatic engagement, formal declarations of war, formal surrenders, and signed peace treaties

For America, these irregular wars have involved a host of states and “non-state actors,” including insurgent bands, civilian collaborators, and paramilitary forces. To be sure, these wars are not necessarily small-scale or brief, as was the case in the protracted campaigns in Vietnam and, more

recently, Afghanistan; indeed, these two conflicts demanded U.S. attention and involvement for much longer than the two world wars. Afghanistan gained the distinction as the longest-running war in American history in 2010.

Moreover, as the Sand Creek and Roger Bales massacres illustrate, these types of wars tend to be, in a word, dirty. Irregular warfare often involves atrocities – or, in contemporary terms, human rights violations, crimes against humanity, and unjustified targeting of civilians. While massacres form the extreme and relatively rare instance of these abuses in the American experience, all of these irregular wars have some unsettling elements. In recent years, even though much attention has been given to the “surgical” tactics of remote drone strikes, quick-insertion special operations raids, and precision-guided munitions in Iraq and Afghanistan, counterinsurgency also has shown a much less clean side, as made abundantly clear by the grim reality of Roger Bales’s rampage in Panjwai and the Abu Ghraib prison scandal in Iraq a decade earlier.

Taking this observation further, as demonstrated by the strong public reactions against the massacres, it is usually immensely difficult for the U.S. government to sustain support for such wars. Worse, these wars challenge America’s self-image as a liberal democracy predicated on respect for human rights and the rule of law. Finally, and contrary to what we sometimes might assume, these irregular wars are ones that America tends to win – even if most of the attention goes to the occasional monumental defeats like Vietnam.

Although conflict of this sort is sometimes called “guerrilla warfare,” this label is misleading in a couple of ways. As we will see, the term “guerrilla” generally refers to a set of tactics and strategies for overcoming the power disparity against a superior, often conventional, adversary. The term “irregular” is both more capacious and more accurate, in that it emphasizes the difference between this type of war and war involving established conventions such as uniforms and avoiding intentional civilian casualties that we consider “regular” war. One or more sides in an irregular war may deploy guerrilla tactics; or they may not.

At the same time, this book often uses dirty war as an even more vivid and expansive term for the kinds of conflicts it examines. Perhaps the value of referring to these conflicts as dirty wars instead of irregular warfare is that it instantly reminds us that these conflicts are not simply defined by their irregularity but also their greater tendency for controversy, opacity, and moral dilemmas.

CATEGORIZING IRREGULAR WARFARE

There are some problems with setting the category of conflicts we are dealing with up against prevailing norms or conventions of war in a given historical period. One is the assumption, often implied, that the conventions of warfare embody a moral consensus on acceptable and unacceptable types of conduct. Warfare that fails to satisfy this consensus is, by logical argument, irregular. More accurate is that the norms of war in any historical period are mutable, often contested – and only very recently in internationally accepted courts of law.

By the same right, it is not easy to think of a war that has satisfied all the conventions of law or morality that prevail in a particular era. But does that make every war irregular? Another problem is that there are times when irregular conflicts – those that fail overwhelmingly or entirely to satisfy the prevailing norms – actually *are* the norm, as in the post-Cold War era.

An attempt to classify conflict in rigid academic terms has merit, but we must take into account the dynamic, convoluted, and ever-evolving nature of warfare. A more useful approach is to recognize that war occurs across a spectrum, extending from the unconventional to the conventional and encompassing a vast array of tactics, strategies, and approaches that, even within the same conflict, can intertwine and co-exist. This kind of thinking can help to distinguish the differences *between* conflicts but can also be used to examine the dynamics *within* a conflict, as a single conflict will often operate at different levels of the spectrum simultaneously.

Both regular and irregular conflicts can in some cases be considered “total,” when one or more of the warring factions fights using a full mobilization of domestic society and places national survival and victory over all else (including questions of morality and the laws of war), as was the case for most countries involved in World War II. Thus, to provide a contrast, World War II was a total war and largely a regular war while the Persian Gulf War in 1991 was a regular but not total war.

The line separating regular warfare and dirty war is thin and often not clearly visible. World War II, for example, is often remembered as being, despite its horrible lethality and destruction, a classic case of a regular total war since the fighting took place between conventional forces fighting in conventional manners. Yet this potentially simple interpretation overlooks the fact that all the key belligerents conducted themselves “irregularly.” Japanese and German troops, for example, frequently placed booby traps on dead bodies, shot medics, or pretended to give up and then jumped

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Excerpt

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aside while hidden guns showered bullets at Allied troops moving in to receive the surrender.¹³ The atomic bombs dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki instantly killed 105,000 people – mostly civilians.¹⁴

Another key issue is that some conflicts have been at once regular and irregular. The long and bloody war in postcolonial Vietnam that started in the late 1950s and ended nearly twenty years later in 1975 is such a case. While it often manifested the characteristics of a dirty war, Vietnam was primarily an international war between three recognized nation states – Hanoi's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), aided by the Soviet Union and China; Saigon's Republic of Vietnam (ROV), supported by the United States and other Asia-Pacific allies; and the United States. China was also a fourth *de facto* participant in the 1960s, when it sent hundreds of thousands of troops and support personnel to aid the DRV war effort.

American involvement in Vietnam began in the late 1950s as an irregular war between the U.S.-backed government in Saigon and largely southern irregular forces (known as the Vietcong) supplied by North Vietnam. Following France's ignominious defeat in its protracted campaign to maintain its colonial possessions in Indochina in the early 1950s, North Vietnam, America, and China came into the war heavily in the following decade when both regular and irregular warfare escalated, primarily in the South. The war ended between 1973 and 1975 as a largely conventional battle between the DRV and ROV. Vietnam was a special case of regular/irregular war. Although Vietcong guerrillas aided the DRV cause substantially, in the final analysis America and its allies lost a largely regular war against a determined DRV foe and its two main backers, the Soviet Union and China.

ZEITGEIST-LIKE MOTIVES OF A PARTICULAR ERA

By examining a large number of American episodes plus counterpoints from other countries, this book aims to rebalance our understanding of what can be learned from two centuries of American involvement in unconventional military campaigns. The United States has an extensive history of both fighting irregular wars abroad and dealing with their consequences at home. While the lessons of past conflicts have shaped the responses to each new war, every conflict brings unique challenges and successes that add to the U.S. experience with irregular warfare. These challenges and successes – at home and abroad – do more than just add to