COIN rose and fell in Vietnam, then returned 40 years later as the main mission in Iraq and Afghanistan.

THE SECOND COMING OF COUNTERINSURGENCY

By John T. Correll

In 1961, the new gospel of counterinsurgency swept like wildfire through the US armed forces, ignited by the personal enthusiasm of President John F. Kennedy. His long-standing interest in what he called "limited brushfire wars" took on additional urgency when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev pledged support for socialist "wars of national liberation" in the Third World.

Two weeks after Kennedy's inauguration, the White House sent a National Security Action Memorandum to the Pentagon directing more emphasis be put on the development of counter-guerrilla forces. It was the first of 23 Kennedy NSAMs on the subject.

The President lavished particular attention on the Army Special Forces. On a visit to the Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, N.C., he took conspicuous pleasure in authorizing wear of the green beret, banned previously by Army leaders as elitist.

All of the services jumped on the counterinsurgency bandwagon. The Air Force organized a "Jungle Jim" squadron with vintage aircraft that could operate from remote, primitive bases and established the Special Air Warfare Center at Eglin AFB, Fla., with the 1st Air Commando Group as its primary mission element.

Kennedy recalled former Army Chief of Staff Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor to Active Duty and made him Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Taylor, who had argued for "flexible response" and less reliance on strategic airpower, had retired in protest and vented his disgruntlement in *The Uncertain Trumpet.* Kennedy read it with approval.

The venue for testing the new doctrine would be Vietnam, where communist insurgents had ousted the French colonial powers and were attempting to overthrow the pro-Western regime of Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon.

In October 1961, Army Special Forces at Fort Bragg put on a demonstration of capabilities for the White House press corps. Among those attending was Francis Lara of Agence France-Presse, who had covered the French war in Indochina. "All of this looks very impressive, doesn't it?" Lara said to Tom Wicker of the *New York Times.* "Funny, none of it worked for us when we tried it in 1951."

The Call to COIN

The United States had some historical precedent for commando and expeditionary operations, dating back to Robert Rogers and his Rangers in the French and Indian War. However, these actions were peripheral and could scarcely be categorized as counterinsurgency.

The European colonial powers dealt with insurgency in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, but the United States had limited experience. There was some resemblance to counterinsurgency in fighting the Apaches in Arizona and New Mexico, but a closer fit was US suppression of the Moro insurrection in the Philippines in the early 1900s.

The term "counterinsurgency"—instantly abbreviated to COIN—did not come into widespread use until the 1960s, and there are various opinions on how to define it. In general, it refers to countering armed revolution by irregular forces employing Mao Zedong's hit-and-run tactics from the 1930s: "The enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue."

In the 1960s and later, the model cited most often for successful counterinsurgency was the British suppression of communist guerrillas in Malaya between 1948 and 1954. But most of the Malayan rebels were ethnic Chinese—a minority group in the country—which made it easier to isolate and target them.

In a phrase that would resonate for the rest of the century, Gen. Gerald Templer, the British high commissioner in Malaya, said, "The answer lies not in pouring more troops into the jungle, but in the hearts and minds of the people." The basic strategy, developed by Robert Thompson, an officer on Templer's operations staff, was "Clear and Hold"—clearing an area of insurgents and then keeping it clear. It went considerably beyond the winning of hearts and minds. More than 400,000 Chinese villagers were forcibly resettled to separate them from the guerrillas, who could not sustain themselves in the jungle without help. Substantial numbers of insurgents were killed by direct military action.

Thompson led a British advisory team to South Vietnam from 1960 to 1965. At his suggestion, Ngo Dinh Diem relocated rural villagers into more than 3,000 fortified "Strategic Hamlets" between 1961 and 1963. The idea was to separate the peasants from the insurgents, but the main effect was to alienate the villagers. The experiment was dropped after the death of Diem in 1963. Afterward, Thompson wrote a book, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and*

Vietnam, which is still regarded as the classic text on counterinsurgency.

The Experiment Falls Short

Army Special Forces and Air Force air commando squadrons deployed to Vietnam, initially in a training and advisory capacity but gradually evolving to participation in combat. The Central Intelligence Agency, continuing the swashbuckling tradition of its World War II predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), had been in Southeast Asia since the 1950s, engaged in covert actions and intelligence gathering.

By 1965, the Army had 60 Special Forces camps in Vietnam. Counterinsurgency played well in news reports back home, but its effectiveness in Vietnam was minimal.

Vietnam was different from Malaya in several key respects. Malaya was an indigenous, homegrown insurgency with no significant support from outside. The war in South Vietnam was instigated, directed, and sustained from North Vietnam. In Malaya, the British were the sovereign authority, in full control of both the fighting and domestic policymaking. In Vietnam, progress in counterinsurgency was undercut by a balky and corrupt government that had little interest in correcting the root causes of dissent.

Kennedy said more than once, "It's their war, we can't win it for them," but when President Lyndon B. Johnson took over,

President John Kennedy speaks with Army Brig. Gen. William Yarborough at Fort Bragg, N.C., in 1961. Kennedy took pleasure in reinstating the Green Berets.

Photo by Cecil W. Stoughton via the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

USAF photo

An A-1E "Sandy" from the 1st Air Commando Squadron escorts an HH-3C rescue helicopter on a mission to recover a downed pilot in Vietnam in 1966.

he introduced US forces in large numbers and made it his war—and America's. Army Gen. William C. Westmoreland, commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), dispensed with the "Enclave Strategy"—which was supposed to keep Viet Cong insurgents out of secure populated areas—and replaced it with "Search and Destroy."

"By late 1966, the war in Vietnam clearly had escalated to a conventional level with US forces heavily committed to combat," said Lt. Col. David J. Dean in an article for *Air University Review.* "The air commandos were not involved in counterguerrilla operations but mostly flew close air support missions."

Counterinsurgency continued in such endeavors as Operation Phoenix, conducted by Army Special Forces and the CIA to identify and aggressively "neutralize" what was called the "Viet Cong infrastructure" in villages. The winning hearts and minds phrase—sometimes reduced to the cynical acronym "WHAM"—was heard mostly in jokes until it was brought back in the COIN revival of the 2000s.

Not everyone agreed that counterinsurgency had failed in Vietnam. Gen. Creighton W. Abrams Jr., who followed Westmoreland at MACV, switched from "Search and Destroy" back to "Clear and Hold" with emphasis on protecting the population. Military historian Lewis Sorely, who admires Abrams, said the war was essentially won by 1970, when some 90 percent of the population had been brought under government control.

Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, commander of the North Vietnamese Army, had never fundamentally regarded the conflict as an insurgency. He believed that guerilla operations were useful in the beginning but that the final outcome would be decided by the regular army. In the end, Giap was right. When Saigon fell in 1975, it was to 18 main force divisions of the North Vietnamese Army, not to insurgents.

COIN in Disrepute

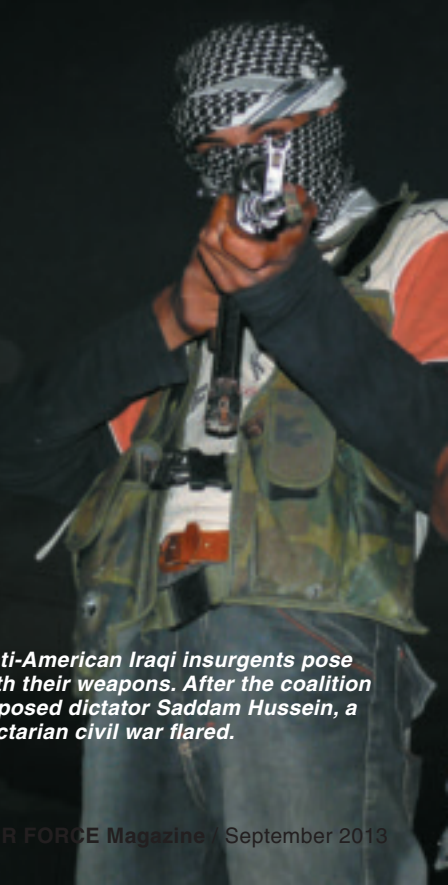
The prevailing opinion among US military leaders was that counterinsurgency had been discredited in Vietnam. In the years that followed, the word almost disappeared from joint usage and doctrine. The preferred term was "Foreign Internal Defense," which covered a range of unconventional warfare activities.

US special operations forces shifted their focus to raids, rescues, and commando missions. Some special operations capabilities, such as the firepower of Air Force gunships, were prized for their value at all levels of conflict.

The new threat of the 1970s was left-wing terrorism in Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America. In the most notorious incident, 11 Israeli athletes were taken hostage and killed by the Palestinian group Black September at the 1972 Olympics in Munich, Germany. However, terrorism seldom presented a military target or a military solution, so counterterrorism was generally treated as a matter for law enforcement.

The spectacular failure of "Desert One," the April 1980 military mission to rescue Americans held hostage in Iran, raised big questions about the structure and capabilities of US special operations forces. When the hastily planned mission went wrong, several aircraft were lost and eight US servicemen were killed in a swirling sandstorm at a covert refueling site inside Iran. At congressional insistence, the budget for special operations forces was quadrupled. The Joint Special Operations Command—pulling together the Army's Delta Force, the Navy's SEAL Team 6, the Air Force's 24th Special Tactics Squadron, and other units with "unique and specialized skills"—was created in 1980 to conduct secretive, high-risk operations.

Congress was still not satisfied, and despite the objection of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the powerful US Special Operations Command (SOCOM) was established in 1987. A proposal in the House of Representatives to make SOCOM the equivalent of a fifth armed service did not pass.



Anti-American Iraqi insurgents pose with their weapons. After the coalition deposed dictator Saddam Hussein, a sectarian civil war flared.

After additional congressional pressure, the Army-Air Force Center for Low-Intensity Conflict was established. Doctrine writers divided military operations up into war and Military Operations Other Than War, or MOOTW—pronounced "Mootwah" by its detractors. A further division made a distinction between combat and noncombat Mootwah. The ridicule proved too much to withstand. Army Gen. John M. Shalikashvili, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that "real men don't do Mootwah." MOOTW fell by the wayside and the Center for Low-Intensity Conflict was shut down.

The Gulf War and other regional conflicts of the 1990s were showcases for airpower, which threatened the prestige and budgets of the ground forces. Any notion that the relative roles of the services had changed was shouted down by advocates of "boots on the ground" in the Pentagon. The Marine Corps expounded on "the Three-Block War," and there was renewed interest in counterinsurgency, especially in the West Point Department of Social Sciences—widely known as "Sosh."

Photo via Wikipedia

Nation Building

The debate abruptly changed Sept. 11, 2001, when airliners hijacked by terrorists crashed into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in rural Pennsylvania. The initial response concentrated on Afghanistan, which had served as a training base and headquarters for al Qaeda terrorists. Over the next three months, Afghan irregulars, supported by US airpower and other forces, seized control of the country and drove al Qaeda into retreat and hiding.

In the aftermath, the United States made radical revisions to its defense plans and strategies. President George W. Bush was convinced that the terrorists in Afghanistan were only part of a broader "Axis of Evil" in Asia and the Middle East. He persuaded Congress and a coalition of allies to take pre-emptive action against Iraq, which intelligence reports said, erroneously, possessed weapons of mass destruction and was likely to use them. Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq was promptly ousted by conventional military operations.

The coalition then turned to what it perceived as an insurgency in Iraq by terrorists and others. In what critics described as "mission creep," the operation morphed into nation building, reminiscent of the early Army Special Forces efforts in Vietnam. This was all the more amazing because in the 2000 election campaign, Bush had been adamant that US troops should not be used for nation building. In February 2003, he committed the United States to "rebuilding Iraq" and said we would stay there "as long as necessary."

In 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced in testimony to the Senate that the US strategy in Iraq was "Clear, Hold, and Build," which combined Robert Thompson's "Clear and Hold" concept from Malaya with Bush's recent conversion to nation building. Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld declared his surprise and disagreement, but Bush confirmed what Rice had said. The new policy was drawn from the flourishing counterinsurgency movement in the Army, imported to the White House through National Security Council and State Department channels.

The catch was that the problem in Iraq was not an insurgency in any classic sense of the word. It was a sectarian civil war between the Shiite majority and the Sunni and Kurdish minorities. It broke loose in 2003 after a fateful decision by the Coalition Provisional Authority to disband the Iraqi military, which left a power vacuum and no indigenous infrastructure to help maintain order.

The new US National Defense Strategy in March 2005 said irregular warfare—terrorism, insurgency, and other forms of nonconventional conflict—was the dominant form of war facing the United States and its allies. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates talked constantly of the importance of fighting irregular wars and said that "the Army will not repeat the mistakes of the past, where irregular warfare was shunted to the side after Vietnam." The main job of the Air Force was explained as supporting the ground forces in these endeavors.

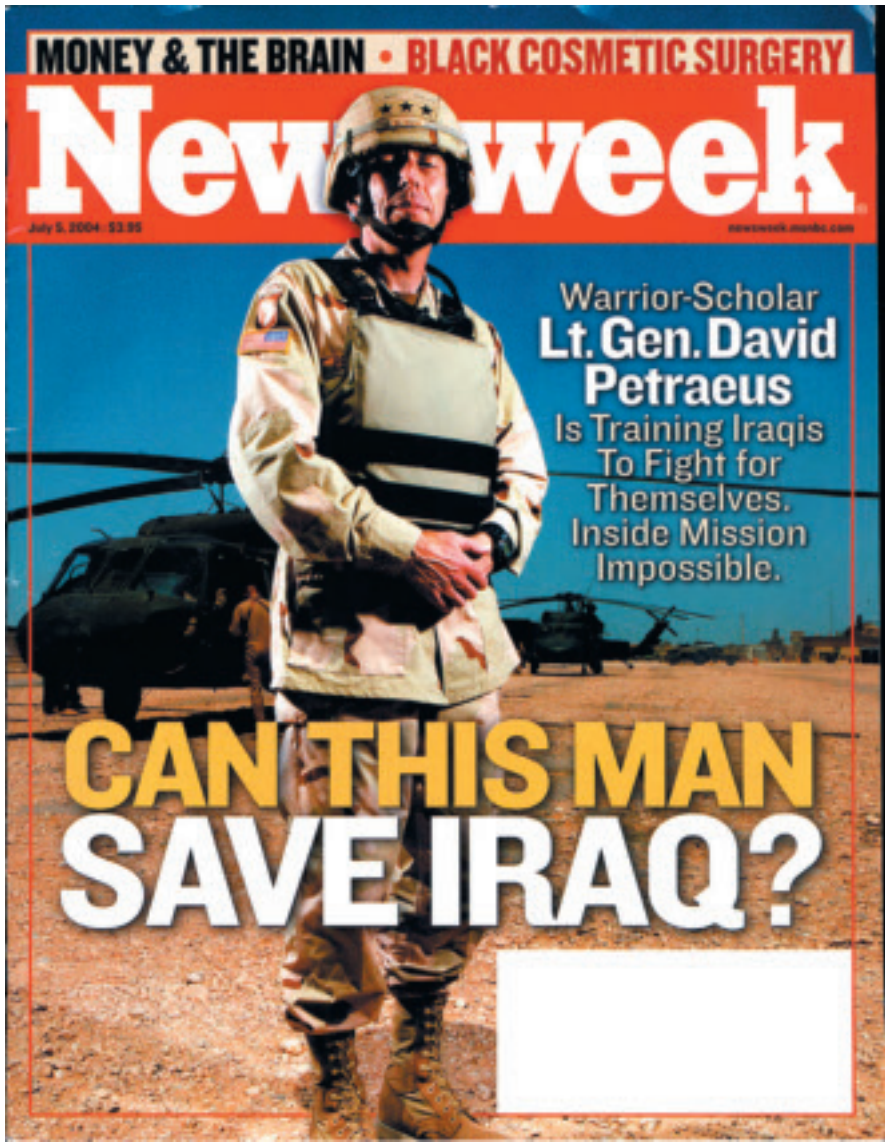
Despite its concentration on Iraq, the US was committed to establishing a stable government in Afghanistan as well. "Afghanistan was the ultimate nation building mission," Bush said in his memoir, *Decision Points.*

The Age of Petraeus

The most influential figure in the second coming of counterinsurgency was David H. Petraeus, an Army infantry officer whose Ph.D. dissertation at Princeton—"The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam"—called for a renewal of Army interest in counterinsurgency and low-intensity conflict. As an assistant professor of international relations in the West Point Social Sciences department in the 1980s, Major Petraeus developed lasting contacts with others of similar persuasion.

As commander of the 101st Airborne Division in Iraq in 2003, Major General

Photo via Newsweek



David Petraeus graced the cover of* Newsweek *magazine as the head of the Multinational Security Transition Command, which aimed to win Iraqi hearts and minds.

Petraeus achieved remarkable success with classic counterinsurgency and protection of neighborhoods around Mosul. Posters encouraged the troops to "Win Iraqi Hearts and Minds." On his second tour in Iraq in 2004, Petraeus—now a lieutenant general and head of the Multinational Security Transition Command—appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* with large type asking, "Can This Man Save Iraq?"

Army Col. H. R. McMaster got comparable results with COIN in Tal Afar in northwest Iraq, where he protected the citizens from insurgents, restored basic services, and kept his soldiers circulating among the population. Unfortunately, the effects in Mosul and Tal Afar were local and temporary. They did not last when Petraeus and McMaster left.

Petraeus returned to the United States in 2005 as commander of the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., where the Army composed its doctrines. He made it his top priority to rewrite the field manual on counterinsurgency and to help him do it he called upon a diverse group of military and civilian advisors and contributors, including colleagues from Iraq and "Sosh" department alumni. He gathered in academicians and journalists, many of them favorably disposed toward COIN as an alternative to lethality in military operations. Sarah Sewall, director of Harvard's Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, co-sponsored a workshop on COIN with Petraeus at Leavenworth.

Field Manual 3-24, Counterinsurgency, came out to great acclaim in December 2006, issued concurrently as Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5. It was written in an informal, sometimes breezy style ("Remember, small is beautiful"), stating that "soldiers and marines are expected to be nation builders as well as warriors." FM 3-24 set the standard for "effective counterinsurgency" at 20 counterinsurgents per 1,000 citizens in the population. For Iraq in 2006, that meant a combined coalition-Iraqi force of 614,000.

Petraeus was awarded his fourth star and went back to Iraq, this time as Multinational Force-Iraq commander, in 2007. His deputy was Lt. Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, the officer who two years previously had furnished Condoleezza Rice the "Clear, Hold, and Build" concept and suggested language for her testimony.

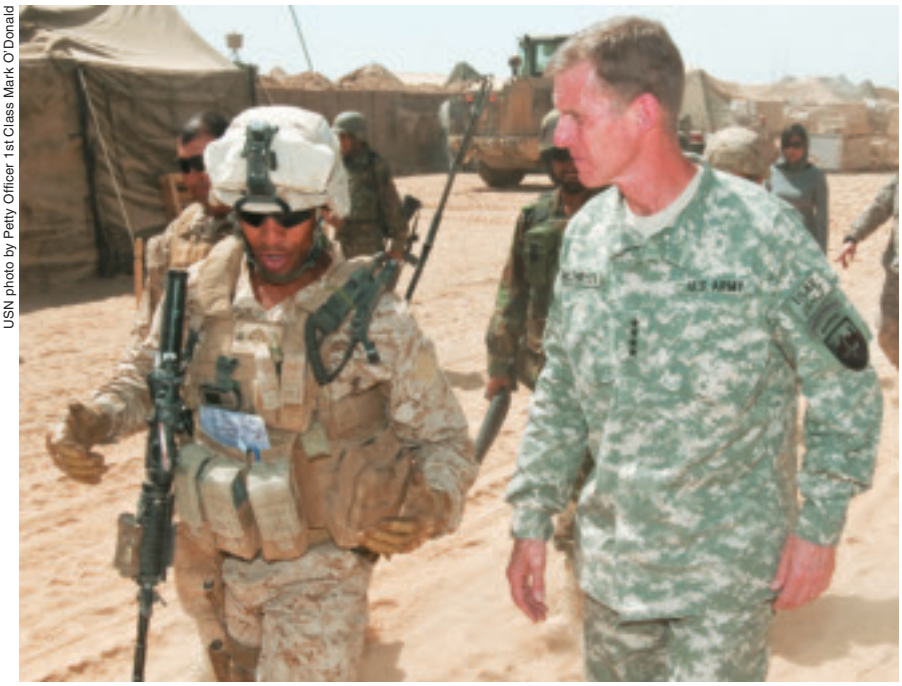
A surge of 30,000 additional US troops, ordered by Bush over objections from the Pentagon, enabled Petraeus to establish protection for more parts of the country. The level of violence dropped sharply. Argument continues about how much of this was due to the surge and COIN and how much to other factors, such as a rift between the Sunni tribal chiefs and al Qaeda. For a while, the Sunnis joined in the effort to eject the al Qaeda terrorists. In October 2008, Petraeus became commander of US Central Command, the most famous and influential general of his generation.

COIN was on a roll, but at some cost to the orientation and alignment of the force. "Nation building, rather than fighting, has become the core function of the US Army," said Army Col. Gian P. Gentile, director of the military history program at West Point and a veteran of the war in Iraq.

The Last Stand

President Barack Obama, taking office in 2009, shifted the emphasis of US military power from Iraq to Afghanistan, declaring that "the focus over the past seven years, I think, has been lost." He proceeded with reducing the force in Iraq but approved the full Pentagon recommendation for an increase of 22,000 troops in Afghanistan, in addition to the 38,000 already there. The strategy was "Clear, Hold, Build, and Transfer," meaning that the job would be turned over to Afghan authorities as soon as possible.

Army Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the new commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan, immediately upped the ante. He wanted 40,000 more troops in addition to those Obama had already approved, but said that force level would enable only a partial counterinsurgency. It would leave gaps between the protected areas and it would not close off access routes from al Qaeda sanctuaries in Pakistan. Obama finally agreed to an addition of 30,000 but stipulated that transfer of forces out of Afghanistan would begin in 2011. "Don't clear and hold what you cannot transfer," he said.



USN photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Mark O'Donald

Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal is briefed by Lt. Col. Calvert Worth, the commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, in Afghanistan. McChrystal's ouster as allied commander paved the way for Petraeus to attempt his brand of COIN.

McChrystal was second to none in his zeal to employ COIN. He put primary importance on avoiding civilian casualties, even if it meant less security for his own forces. He tightened restrictions on the use of airpower and firefights by ground forces. "I recognize that the carefully controlled and disciplined employment of force entails risk to our troops," he said, "but excessive use of force resulting in an alienated population will produce far greater risks."

He did not gain much from his policy of restraint. In April 2010, McChrystal acknowledged that not even one Afghan army company was yet ready to accept transfer of responsibility. His troubled tour came to a sudden end with a *Rolling Stone* interview in which McChrystal and his aides ridiculed Obama and the White House staff for their conduct of the war. Obama fired McChrystal in June and sent Petraeus to take over personally in Afghanistan.

Petraeus moderated the rigid use-of-force rules, but counterinsurgency would not take root in Afghanistan. As in Vietnam, a major problem was that the host nation government was not sufficiently committed to or capable of making it work.

The most effective results against al Qaeda terrorists were from attacks by CIA drones against sanctuaries in Pakistan and by the Joint Special Operations Command, operating under an executive order from Bush that authorized covert strikes and raids whenever necessary. In May 2011, a Navy SEAL team, working with the CIA and other special operations forces, killed Osama bin Laden at his secret base in Pakistan. The consensus was that counterinsurgency failed in Afghanistan. Petraeus did not become Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as his admirers had hoped. Instead, he retired and was appointed director of the CIA.

In revised defense guidance in January 2012, Obama proclaimed "the end of long-term nation building with large military footprints." Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta said that "US forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations." This effectively put an end to the decade-long resurgence of counterinsurgency. "Hearts and minds have been replaced by drones and SEALs," observed Michael Crowley in *Time* magazine. "Afghanistan was COIN's Waterloo," said Fred M. Kaplan, who had presented a sympathetic interpretation of Petraeus and his objectives in his book, *The Insurgents.*

Reappraisal and Rebound

"After the early deployment of force in both Iraq and Afghanistan to achieve critical national security objectives, mission creep—and the 'group think' of counterinsurgency doctrine—captured Pentagon leadership," said retired Air Force Lt. Gen. David A. Deptula in an article for AOL Defense. "This led to committing resources to what had then become contingencies of choice rather than necessity."

The last US troops withdrew from Iraq in 2011 and today the plan is to leave only a small contingent—mostly advisors and Army Special Forces—in Afghanistan after 2014. As in Vietnam, the effectiveness of COIN was limited to regional and temporary results.

The Army is rewriting the FM 3-24 counterinsurgency manual. Last year, the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth revised its estimate of forces required for a successful COIN campaign, recommending 40 counterinsurgents for every 1,000 citizens in the population. That is double the Petraeus rule of thumb of 20 and would, for example, size a force for Afghanistan at a knee-bending 1.4 million. The new FM 3-24 is due out in December 2013, but the latest draft has dropped the force-sizing ratio altogether.

Belief in the COIN concept persists. Odierno, deputy to Petraeus in Iraq and his successor in command there, is now the Army Chief of Staff. In an article in *Foreign Affairs* in 2012, he said that the Army must "preserve the intellectual and organizational knowledge it has gained about counterinsurgency, stability operations, and advise-and-assist missions. This expertise has come at a very high price that is etched into the hearts and minds of all of us who have worn the Army uniform over the last 10 years, and we will not dishonor our fallen comrades by allowing it to atrophy."

Col. Michael J. Meese, head of the Social Sciences department at West Point and a former advisor to Petraeus in Baghdad and Kabul, said COIN "was largely successful in being able to have the Iraqis govern themselves."

Gentile, whose affiliation at West Point is through the History Department rather than "Sosh," takes the opposite view. He has emerged as the foremost critic of counterinsurgency within the Army. He said the Army had become "so tactically oriented toward population-centric counterinsurgency that it [could not] think of doing anything else."

Counterinsurgency, Gentile said, is "not worth the effort." It might ultimately have worked in Afghanistan but only if the United States had been willing to stay there for generations. "I'm talking 70, 80, 90 years," he said. ■

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine *for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, "The Decade of Detente," appeared in the August issue.*