



Gen. Petraeus' strategy for "the most complex and maddening type of war"

(Published in *Scripps Howard Service News*, October 4, 2007)

[Clifford D. May](#)

Colaboraciones n° 1977

October 9, 2007

It's the Pentagon's job to prepare for wars of the future. But somewhere between Vietnam and Iraq, military planners confused "future" with "futuristic." They convinced themselves that combat in the 21st Century would resemble computer games. Satellites would provide intelligence. "Smart bombs" would do much of the killing. The enemy, overcome by "shock and awe," would lose his will to fight.

But the future, as they say, ain't what it used to be. Put to the test in Iraq, American military forces succeeded brilliantly in bringing down Saddam Hussein's regime. In the next phase, however, an insurgency driven by both al-Qaeda and Iran's mad mullahs, post-

modern warfare failed spectacularly.

Satellites could not distinguish between enemy combatants and friendly civilians. Nor could they identify weapons caches and car-bomb factories hidden in schools and mosques. Targets that could not be located could not be destroyed. No computer program could resolve sectarian conflicts fueled by foreign terrorists who slaughtered innocents while American troops were cooped up in well-guarded Forward Operating Bases (FOBs). Videos of beheadings posted on the Internet provoked more shock and awe than a Cruise Missile ever could.

But here is one of the marvelous things about the U.S. military: It

learns and adapts. Other bureaucracies do not. The Post Office, public schools and the Passport Office – they plod on without inspiration or innovation, blaming their failures, now and forever, on “inadequate funding.”

The military is different perhaps because, for those in uniform, the price of failure is death. “[T]he sad fact is that when an insurgency began in Iraq in the late summer of 2003, the Army was unprepared to fight it,” wrote military analyst John A. Nagl. The Army was, he added, “unprepared for an enemy who understood that it could not hope to defeat the U.S. Army on a conventional battlefield, and who therefore chose to wage war against America from the shadows.”

As for why was the Army was unprepared, Nagl’s explanation is simple: “After the Vietnam War we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war. In hindsight, that was a bad decision.”

Eventually, however, a good decision followed. The military went to work on the problem and this year published the results: “The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual,” a 419-page guide to fighting what military scholar Andrew Krepinevich expects will be “the dominant form of warfare over the next decade.”

Gen. David Petraeus, the current commander of U.S. forces in Iraq ,

was a principle author of the manual. Following its rules for counterinsurgency – abbreviated as COIN -- he has “surged” more troops into Iraq and stationed them not inside FOBs but on the hot, dusty streets of Iraqi cities and villages. To conventional military thinkers, this is insanity: It gives the enemy more troops to kill – and it places them in more vulnerable positions.

But Petraeus’ soldiers and Marines have quickly made it clear that their mission is to provide security for their hosts. Local populations have responded by treating the U.S. forces as valued guests rather than foreign occupiers. And they have been providing the one thing a COIN operation must have to succeed: intelligence on where the enemy is lurking.

That isn’t all: Iraqis have been enlisting to fight alongside Americans – 30,000 volunteers in the past six months. As a result of these changes, Brig. Gen. John Campbell, assistant commander for the U.S. division in Baghdad , now says: “We’ve done a very good job on al-Qaeda. I think we’ve got them on the run.” Iraqi civilian fatalities are down significantly. And last month, American fatalities sunk to the lowest levels in more than a year.

Serious challenges remain. Al-Qaeda has not given up, in Iraq or elsewhere, and they, too, learn and adapt. Iran continues to train and direct terrorist militias in Iraq – and to supply them with sophisticated

weaponry. Iran also both bribes and threatens Iraqi politicians.

Sarah Sewall, who served in the Defense Department during the Clinton administration and now teaches at Harvard, calls COIN “the most complex and maddening type of war.” But it is a type of war that must be mastered if America is to defeat its 21st Century enemies -- the

Islamist forces sworn to our destruction.

General Petraeus and his troops are demonstrating that the American military is up to the challenge. Whether America ’s political class and public also have the stomach for such a long and difficult struggle remains an open question.

[Clifford D. May](#), a former New York Times foreign correspondent, is the president of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a policy institute focusing on terrorism.

©2007 Scripps Howard News Service