#### Air Education and Training Command

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Beating Goliath:
Why Insurgents Win
(and Lose)

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### What do we mean by "strong"?



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The side with *preponderant material resources*—i.e., quantitative superiority in population, territory, industrial production, financial resources, & in conventional military power, especially firepower.

In short, the **BIGGER** side. The **heavyweight**.



#### What do we mean by "lose"?



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Failure to achieve a war's *political* objective(s)—which may not mean military defeat.

The United States was never *militarily* defeated in Vietnam, but nonetheless lost the war because it failed to achieve its declared *political objective*: the preservation of an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam.

In the Algerian War (1954-1962), the French won militarily but **lost** politically.

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A rebellion against an indigenous government or a foreign occupier.



### The stronger side usually wins



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Clausewitz: "The best strategy is to be strong."

#### Examples of stronger side victories:

American Civil War (1861-1865)

Spanish-American War (1898-1899)

World War I (1914-1918)

World War II (1939-1945)

Cold War (1947-1991)

Gulf War (1991)



#### But sometimes the weaker side wins

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### Examples of weaker side wins—all involving defeat of great powers:

American War of Independence (1775-1783)

The Peninsular War (1808-1814)

French-Indochinese War (1946-1954)

Vietnam War (1965-1975)

Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989)

U.S. intervention in Lebanon (1982-1984)

U.S. intervention in Somalia (1992-1993)



### Why do Davids (insurgencies) beat Goliaths (great powers)?



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#### Four explanations:

- # 1. Stronger political will (Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars," *World Politics*, 1975).
- # 2. **Superior strategy** (Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*, 2005).
- # 3. Great power regime type (Gil Merom, How Democracies Lose Small Wars, 2003).
- # 4. Access to external assistance (My own research, "Why the Strong Lose," *Parameters*, 2006).



#### # 1. Stronger political will



- Greater stake in the fight leads to:
- Greater willingness to sacrifice, which in turn leads to:
- Waging a total war against a foe for whom the war is limited.
- (Insurgents also live in the theater of military operations, whereas their great power enemy often must project power into it.)



## **Asymmetry of Stakes: American War of Independence**

- A total war for the American rebels, who staked their "lives, fortunes & sacred honor" on victory.
- A limited, distant, colonial war for the British, who could afford—& did—afford the loss of America.
- Effect of French intervention: transformation of a colonial rebellion into a world war & relegation the North American theater of operations to 3<sup>rd</sup> rank (behind Europe and the Caribbean).



## Willingness to sacrifice as an indicator of political will



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Example: The Vietnam War Military Dead / % of Total Population:

US: 58,000/194,000,000 = 0.02%

VC: 1,100,000/20,000,000 = 5.50%

(5.5% of U.S. population today: **16,000,000**+)

US Civil War: 600,000/31,000,000 = 1.9%

French losses in World War I: 1,400,000/42,000,000 = 3.4%



## # 2. Better Strategy: Regular (Conventional) Warfare

- Direct approach.
- Firepower/technology reliant.
- Search for quick victory.
- Insensitive to war's underlying political struggle.
- Focus on destroying the enemy's military capacity.



#### Better Strategy: Irregular Warfare



- Indirect approach.
- Stealthy.
- Protracted/attritional.
- Patient.
- Casualty tolerant.
- Focus on exhausting the enemy's political will.

### # 3. Great power regime type: exploiting democracies' weaknesses

- Modern democracies have limited domestic political tolerance for protracted, indecisive wars—& our enemies know it.
- U.S. has been defeated only in wars against irregular adversaries: Vietnam, Lebanon, Somalia. (Iraq?)
- Suicide bombing has been directed almost exclusively against democracies or quasidemocracies.
- Our enemies—Ho, Saddam, Osama--have assumed we have no stomach for casualties.



#### # 4. Access to foreign assistance



- External help to the weaker side can reduce, even eliminate, material disparity in the theater of military operations.
- There are no modern examples of successful major insurgent wars unassisted by foreign help.
- The American rebels and Vietnamese
   Communists won only with foreign intervention; in contrast, the Confederates lost because they failed to attract foreign assistance.



### **American War of Independence**



- Americans sought French help from the outset.
- French Alliance of 1778 dramatically altered the military balance in North America & propelled Britain into a world war in which America became a secondary theater of operations.
- The British were arguably the weaker side in North America by 1781.



#### What did the French provide?



- Financial credits (U.S. bankrupt by 1780).
- Arms, equipment, uniforms.
- Gunpowder (90% of the total consumed by American forces).
- Volunteer commanders (Lafayette).
- An expeditionary army (Rochambeau).
- A naval fleet (De Grasse) that protected the flow of supplies & men from France—& that made Yorktown possible.
- Spanish & Dutch intervention against Britain.
- A direct threat to Britain itself.



#### Order of battle at Yorktown



- British: 8,500 men/0 warships
- Americans: 9,000 men/0 warships
- French: 22,800 men/38 warships



## The Rebellion's Strategic Transformation



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#### French Intervention:

- Set the stage for Spanish & Dutch declarations of war against Britain.
- Transformed a colonial insurgency into a world war
- Relegated North America to a tertiary theater of operations for the British (behind Europe & the Caribbean.
- Reduced the British to the weaker side in North America.



#### Vietnam War



- North Vietnam manufactured no military goods (except helmets).
- China, Soviet Union, & other Communist Bloc states supplied all of North Vietnam's military hardware.
- Chinese & Soviets constructed & operated North Vietnam's integrated AD system.
- 170,000 Chinese logistics troops operated & maintained North Vietnam's RR system.
- An unarmed North Vietnam could have defeated neither the United States nor South Vietnam.



### The Confederacy: Weaker side loses without foreign intervention.

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- 8:1 advantage in draftable (i.e., white) manpower
- 6:1 advantage in financial resources
- 6:1 advantage in industrial production
- 4:1 advantage in railroad track mileage
- Overwhelming maritime superiority

#### Confederacy had only two possible roads to victory:

- (1) a **strategy of guerrilla warfare** (never seriously considered), or
- (2) *foreign intervention* (withheld because of Antietam and Emancipation Proclamation).



### Does the Iraqi insurgency have what it takes to win?



- Political Will: Insurgency is a fractious coalition (rejectionists, Saddamists, Zarqawi jihadis) with a highly restricted political/terroritorial base. It has no national appeal.
- Strategy: Guerrilla warfare to drive U.S. out? Terrorism to provoke civil war? Desired end-state?
- Great Power Regime Type: Only real hope of success (Lebanon scenario).
- External Assistance: Indigenous weapons & munitions are plentiful; foreign jihadis no more than 10% of total insurgents; Iran working to expand influence in southern Iraq.

## The Real Threat: Insurgent Takeover or National Disintegration?

- Iraq: a Middle Eastern Yugoslavia?
- Similarities:
  - Relatively new & highly artificial states cobbled together from collapsed empires.
  - Deep ethnic/sectarian divisions impeding a unifying & sustainable nationalism.
  - Subject to disintegration absent central political dictatorship (Tito in Yugoslavia & Saddam in Iraq).
  - The Yugoslav state collapsed in the 1990s; the Iraqi state collapsed in 2003—in a "catastrophic success."

# The Iraq War: Challenges for the U.S. Government Develop America's Airmen Today ... for Tomorrow

- Fostering establishment of a legitimate Iraqi government—i.e., one commanding support among all three major sectarian communities.
- Creating professionally competent Iraqi military & police forces capable of assuming primary responsibility for the counterinsurgent war.
- Sustaining domestic political support for "staying the course" in Iraq.



#### **Beating Goliath: Conclusions**



- 1. The stronger side usually wins; the best strategy, therefore, is to be strong.
- 2. Weaker side (insurgent) victories are exceptional, & almost always rest on some combination of stronger political will, superior strategy, and foreign help.
- 3. External assistance is a common enabler of victorious insurgent wars, though certainly no guarantee of success.



#### **Beating Goliath: Conclusions (II)**



- 4. Modern democracies have limited political tolerance for overseas protracted wars against irregular enemies.
- 5. For the United States, the impact of casualties on political will is a function primarily of military action's perceived costs, benefits, and chances of success.
- 6. The United States has become a victim of its conventional military success.