

# HYBRID WARS

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*Those who cannot remember the lessons of the past are condemned to repeat it.*

—George Santayana

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PHOTO: Soldiers from 2/502d BCT 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), are clearing an area during a demonstration that turned violent in Mosul, Iraq, 12 June 2003. (U.S. Army, SSG Ronald Mitchell)

WE IN THE WEST are facing a seemingly new form of war—hybrid war.<sup>1</sup> Although conventional in form, the decisive battles in today’s hybrid wars are fought not on conventional battlegrounds, but on asymmetric battlegrounds within the conflict zone population, the home front population, and the international community population. Irregular, asymmetric battles fought within these populations ultimately determine success or failure. Hybrid war appears new in that it requires simultaneous rather than sequential success in these diverse but related “population battlegrounds.” Learning from the past, today’s enemies exploit these new battlegrounds because the West has not yet learned to fight effectively on them. We still do not fully appreciate the impact and complexity of the nuanced human terrain.

One need only read our daily newspaper headlines or listen to TV and radio news about the insurgencies being fought within the populations of Afghanistan and Iraq to understand the validity of the above observations. Insurgencies rage within these conflicts’ penetrated and often alienated populations in spite of our having first defeated the enemy’s conventional forces. Our population at home usually wearies of the protracted struggles, waged, until recently, with little apparent progress. We are in danger of losing if we fail to fully understand the human terrain in these conflicts, as well as, perhaps, the even more decisive battlegrounds of public opinion at home and abroad.

In the context of hybrid wars, especially at the population level, outcomes should be approached in terms of success or failure rather than the usual military distinctions of victory or defeat. In this regard, the goal or end state sought should be something like “secure improved normalcy,” not “defeat the enemy forces” or “overthrow the enemy regime.” The critical point is that to win hybrid wars, we have to succeed on three decisive battlegrounds: the conventional battleground; the conflict zone’s indigenous population battleground; and the home front and international community battleground.

## Merging Three Battlegrounds and Two Wars

In spite of the stark lessons of the past—Indochina, Vietnam, Greece, Somalia, and, most recently, Lebanon—we have not yet learned to succeed on the three combined battlegrounds of hybrid war. Military theorists have started to call those conflicts “hybrid wars” or “hybrid warfare” (to include the Army Chief of Staff when he recently announced publication of the new Field Manual (FM) 3.0, *Full Spectrum Operations*) but few, unfortunately, have talked substantively about how to fight such wars and achieve enduring success.

Thus, hybrid wars are a combination of symmetric and asymmetric war in which intervening forces conduct traditional military operations against enemy military forces and targets while they must simultaneously—and more decisively—attempt to achieve control of the combat zone’s indigenous populations by securing and stabilizing them (stability operations). Hybrid conflicts therefore are full spectrum wars with both physical and conceptual dimensions: the former, a struggle against an armed enemy and the latter, a wider struggle for, control and support of the combat zone’s indigenous population, the support of the home fronts of the intervening nations, and the support of the international community. In hybrid war, achieving strategic objectives requires success in all of these diverse conventional and asymmetric battlegrounds.

At all levels in a hybrid war’s country of conflict, security establishments, government offices and operations, military sites and forces, essential services, and the economy will likely be either destroyed, damaged, or otherwise disrupted. To secure and stabilize the indigenous population, the intervening forces must immediately rebuild or restore security, essential services, local government, self-defense forces and essential elements of the economy. Historically, hybrid wars have been won or lost within these areas. They are battlegrounds for legitimacy and support in the eyes of the people.

In Vietnam, after a flawed beginning, we learned from our mistakes and successfully won the battle within the South Vietnamese population—although we ultimately lost the war when massive U.S. home front political pressure forced us to withdraw.

From 1968 to 1973, we taught counterinsurgency in every military service school and college. (I myself directed a course on “Internal Defense and Development” at the U.S. Army War College.) However, after Saigon fell, the cry went up, “No more Vietnams!” We dropped all of our courses on counterinsurgency and nation-building and turned our attention to the Cold War, to conventional defensive operations and the nuclear threat. Later, our armed forces would enter Afghanistan and Iraq without the benefit of a focus on asymmetric war, and with virtually nobody trained in either counterinsurgency or nation-building. After several years of failure in those arenas, we have struggled

to relearn, teach, and practice the lost lessons. As our new surge strategy demonstrates, our ultimate success in current conflicts and future interventions will hinge on relearning these lessons of the past.

Fortunately, the Army and Marines have published a new Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*. But this volume deals primarily with assisting a host nation fighting an insurgency within its population. As noted above, in hybrid wars there likely will be no host government, indigenous military, or police forces at the outset; much of the political, economic, and social infrastructure will also likely have been destroyed or seriously damaged. These conditions will radically change how our military conducts counterinsurgency. As they have in Afghanistan and Iraq, our military forces will initially have to be responsible for conducting political and economic operations within the population. Until sufficient security and stability have been established to allow other government agencies to first participate and later assume responsibility, military forces will have these burdens while concurrently conducting military operations. FM 3-24 will be valuable as a source for developing hybrid-war strategy, but we will have to use historical lessons and ongoing experience to figure out how to implement strategy.

The Army is also about to issue FM 3-0, *Full Spectrum Operations*. This manual will be doctrinally vital to the conduct of hybrid war because it acknowledges that we must fight within populations as well as against conventional enemies: “Full spectrum operations are the purposeful, continuous, and simultaneous combinations of offense, defense, and stability . . . to dominate the military situation at operational and tactical levels . . . They defeat adversaries on land using offensive and defensive operations, and operate with the populace and civil authorities in the area of operations using stability operations.”<sup>2</sup> However, like FM 3-24, FM 3-0 will not provide the “how” for operations in either counterinsurgency or hybrid war. Dialogue in professional journals and military schoolhouses, combined with ongoing experience, will help determine the recipes for success in environments peculiar to individual hybrid wars. However, we can no longer delay filling this strategy and doctrine gap—the “how” to fight a hybrid war. That is what I propose we now do.

## Use the Past to Inform the Present

Our current enemies have targeted the populations as their battleground of choice. They fully recognize that they do not have the military strength to defeat us in a conventional or nuclear war. However, past experience demonstrates to them that they can win wars within the population that we have not learned to fight. They know they can protract such wars until home front and international community discouragement over casualties and cost force us to throw in the towel and withdraw. Our enemies' strategic and tactical objectives are thus not to destroy our conventional military forces and seize critical terrain, but to seize, control, and defend critical human terrain until we give up the fight. The decisive battles of the hybrid wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are being fought within the population battlegrounds—the populace in conflict, the home front populations of the intervening nations, and the international community.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important reasons our enemies have chosen populations as their battlegrounds is that they know that they can protract the war there almost indefinitely. Protraction as a definitive war strategy was first emphasized in modern times by Mao Tse-tung, who promulgated the concept of “protracted revolutionary war.” As Mao describes his strategy in his treatise *On The Protracted War*, “the only way to win ultimate victory lies in a strategically protracted war.”<sup>3</sup>

In my 1966-1967 book *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War*, I describe Mao's protracted war strategy this way: “To win such a war, the revolutionaries must try to reverse the power relationship...by wearing down the enemy's strength with the ‘cumulative effect of many campaigns and battles’; . . . by building their own strength through mobilizing the support of the people, establishing bases, and capturing equipment; . . . and by gaining outside political and, if possible, military support.”<sup>4</sup>

These aims reflect the classic essentials of a Fabian insurgency. Our enemies have learned that in hybrid war, protraction wins, especially with its trenchantly modern, technology-enabled impact on spectator populations. Both the insurgent's conventional and information operations are designed to protract the war and gain outside support, thereby wearing down their enemies.

As illustration, the Vietminh insurgents in Indochina knew that the French, using what was essentially an attrition strategy, would lose on both the conventional and population battlegrounds. By fighting a war of attrition, the French could never solve the “mass and disperse” dilemma—whether

they should concentrate to defeat the enemy's

conventional forces or disperse to

protect the population. Nor could

they cope successfully with the

internationalization of the war,

which included enemy safe

havens across the Chinese

frontier and massive materiel

support from the Vietminh's

major-power allies, China and

(to a lesser extent) the Soviet

Union. It was the resulting

protraction of the war and its com-

comitant impact on the French

home front that ultimately

proved decisive.

Our enemies also know

that failing to learn from the

French, we initially pursued

an attrition strategy in Vietnam. Although we consistently defeated our enemies on the conventional battlefield, we failed to defeat those buried within the population. We judged success by body count—the number of enemy killed or captured—rather than on how many civilians the government protected.

It was our faulty attrition strategy—our failure to orient operations on the population—that deprived the United States of success early in the Vietnam War. Fortunately, General Creighton Abrams assumed command of operations in Vietnam in 1968, and he recognized that the population was the key to success. Abrams radically changed the strategy to embrace a “one-war battlefield” where “clearing, holding, and rebuilding” the population was the critical objective of all military and civilian



**Roman dictator Quintus Fabius Maximus (280 B.C.–203 B.C.) founder of the technique of protracted attrition warfare. General George Washington and Mao Tse-tung were students of Fabian strategy.**



Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University

**750 lb. all purpose bombs dropped during a U.S. Air Force B-52 operation against Viet Cong jungle targets in 1965 before the adoption of a clear, hold, and build approach to counterinsurgency. The destructiveness of such raids alienated public opinion during the war.**

forces in South Vietnam; in other words, Abrams fought a hybrid war. Significantly, there were adequate U.S. and South Vietnamese forces available, and America was not faced with the “mass and disperse” dilemma. Abrams’s new strategy had the salutary secondary effect of greatly reducing the impact of Chinese and Soviet materiel assistance to the insurgency in South Vietnam.

By the end of 1972 and the beginning of 1973, the war within South Vietnam had been essentially won, even in the face of major conventional attacks by the enemy out of their Cambodian and Laotian safe havens. These attacks were defeated with heavy enemy casualties, but, as mentioned earlier, massive internal political pressure on the U.S. Government forced it to withdraw in early 1973 under the fiction that South Vietnam would never solve its problems until we withdrew. However, even though the counterinsurgency war within its population had been virtually won, South Vietnam was far from able to defend itself in a conventional war against North Vietnam’s

20 battle-hardened, regular divisions without U.S. support. By then, Congress had prohibited this support by law. Also, Washington had never allowed its forces in Vietnam to block the avenues of potential attack within/from Cambodia and Laos. The prohibition against U.S. support and our failure to seal off South Vietnam against future North Vietnamese conventional attacks assured the South’s ultimate downfall in the spring of 1975.

This summarized history well illustrates both the genesis of a successful hybrid-war strategy and the potential political pitfalls of fighting hybrid wars. Our ongoing campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the recent Israeli-Hezbollah war in Lebanon, clearly indicate that we in the West—and I include the Israelis in this category—still do not understand how to fight

hybrid wars in which the enemy strives to protract war by conducting it within the population while simultaneously attempting to erode confidence at home and abroad as a precursor to military victory. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, our initially victorious conventional attacks created chaotic conditions that allowed stay-behind and outside forces to embed themselves within the population and, seemingly, to endlessly protract the war, thus alienating both the indigenous populations and those at home and abroad. Unfortunately, we created the conditions for protracted war through our own failures, largely by not heeding the lessons of the past.

Fortunately, in Iraq, although belatedly, we have started to use both the lessons of the past and the bitter experience of the present to adopt the hybrid war strategy of securing and stabilizing critical portions of the population and rebuilding the country from the bottom, up. As a result, success has started to replace failure and, though at great cost, we may be finally succeeding or winning in this war.

## Winning the Hybrid War

In a hybrid war, our strategic and operational challenges are the same: how to prevent an enemy from rising up and filling the governmental/services vacuum created behind our advancing forces. If we do not immediately fill this vacuum, we will almost certainly face a protracted insurgent war with the same chaotic features we are now facing in Afghanistan and did face in Iraq.

Of course, we should do extensive planning on how we will establish an indigenous host government, to include military and police forces, and how we will provide protection and essential services to the conflict population. The most critical initial problem in such a campaign will not be how to form a central indigenous government, but how to “clear, hold and build” (our modern doctrine has changed the Abrams-era “rebuild” to “build”).

In my book I coined the term “counter-organization” to answer the question of “how.” “Counter-organization” calls for us to destroy embedded insurgent organizations and their appeal to the populace by establishing better alternatives. The term is therefore much better suited to the hybrid-war context than anything offered in the new doctrine, which is predicated on having some form of local government and security forces in place. Thus, my proposed hybrid-war strategy would entail a “clear, control, and counter-organize the population” approach.

Counter-organization requires us to seize and maintain the initiative within the population battleground just as surely as we do on the conventional battleground. We must aggressively protect and care for the population. That means we have to “out-guerrilla” the guerrillas and “out-organize” the enemy within the population. We have to carry the war to the enemy by spreading insecurity within his ranks and avoiding it in the population and our own ranks. Clearing, controlling, and counter-organizing the population is the only way to seize the initiative in the human terrain.

In enacting this strategy, the communication of proper values will be critical. Counter-organization necessitates recruiting and training cadres from the local population and then organizing, paying, equipping, and instilling them with values adequate to their task. These values should not necessarily be our values; in fact, they should conform as much as possible to local mores. We must, however, reject

the practice of patronage and its attendant corruption so prevalent in many developing societies, ensuring instead that we promote such values as reliability, fairness, and some degree of selflessness in governing, protecting, and supporting the population. We have to maintain or, if necessary, reestablish the fabric of the society the insurgents seek to destabilize. Building stability by counter-organization, not just from the top down, but, more importantly, from the bottom up, is the way to success. In counter-organization, concentrating efforts and resources at the market-and-village level of the population is essential, since it creates a sense of legitimacy.

The current military term “strategic center of gravity” is the appropriate vehicle for thinking about the elements of success in hybrid wars. Clausewitz defined “center of gravity” as the “hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends . . . the point at which all our energies should be directed.”<sup>15</sup> What all this means for us is that to succeed in a hybrid war, we must first identify proper strategic goals (in military parlance, “strategic end states”), and then go about achieving them by directing all our energies toward accomplishing certain strategic objectives. In hybrid war, we will attain our desired end states only by—

- Conducting conventional operations that carefully take into account how destroying or neutralizing the enemy nation’s governmental, political, security, and military structures will play out in the longer term.
- Clearing, controlling, and counter-organizing the indigenous population through a values-oriented approach that fosters legitimacy.
- Winning and maintaining support for the war on the home front(s) and in the international community. Doing so means maintaining legitimacy and avoiding losses through incompetence.

The results of the Indochinese and Vietnam wars and, so far, the results of our present wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, clearly demonstrate that, unless ultimately corrected, failure to succeed in any of these three strategic arenas is likely to result in overall failure.

## One Battlefield

Considering the expected strategy of virtually all our potential enemies, we will have to be prepared to fight a hybrid war every time we deploy.

It matters not whether the initial conflict begins symmetrically. As evidenced in the world around us and in history, conventional wars are likely to develop major asymmetric components once one force occupies the land of another. At the same time, we will not be able to dispense with our conventional forces because hybrid war, by definition, will always contain a significant proportion of direct combat by conventional, or even nuclear force. In addition to developing greater flexibility, we will need to adopt a more holistic attitude to war, approaching the various battlegrounds as one battleground. Clearly, the conventional aim of defeating the enemy's combat forces has to be achieved at each stage in the campaign. But the decisive second and third objectives, predicated on the populations, must also be achieved.

Not surprisingly, the battle to achieve the third objective of gaining and maintaining public support requires different strategies, tactics, doctrine, and weapons than those used to control the physical and human terrain in combat zones. Competent strategic communications and the perception of moral legitimacy become the determining factors. Our current asymmetric enemies have, with a few exceptions, been much more successful than we have in influencing public perceptions. However, we can reverse this trend and control the moral terrain by judiciously executing our one-war "clear, control, and counter-organize" strategy.

That, of course, does not mean that success among the indigenous population is not decisive—success there is vital to establishing legitimacy and thereby maintaining home and international support. Knowing this, the enemy will often mount combat operations in the field hoping to give the impression that the intervening forces are losing, or at least not winning, and so influence both their enemy's home front and international public opinion. They expect a country to cut its losses and retreat strategically when public opinion sours. Evidence from Vietnam and Somalia has led them to such a conclusion.

Having adopted a hybrid-war strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq, our adversaries are pursuing goals that remain essentially the same as those of Mao and Fabians in other eras: wear down and wait out the enemy, any way you can. We should not forget that their methods are reminiscent of the way we

broke free from Britain in the 18th century—Mao was a great student of our Revolutionary War. Had the British understood counter-organization, things might have turned out very differently here in North America. This enduring commonplace is true, and it flies in the face of assertions from some modern military theorists who try to dissociate themselves from the lessons of the past, arguing that modern wars like those in Afghanistan and Iraq are different in that they are sectarian civil wars. This perspective misses the point.

The point is that all these wars were and are being fought within the indigenous, home front, and international populations at least as much as on the physical battlefields. Understanding that reality means understanding both the threat and the solution. By clearing, controlling, and counter-organizing the population simultaneously with our conventional operations, we can prevent not only insurgencies, but sectarian and civil wars as well. In all such cases, simultaneous achievement of the three strategic aims described above—target lethal force carefully; clear, control, and counter-organize



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**CPT Wendy Weinell, 490th Civil Affairs Battalion, 3d Brigade Combat Team, 3d Infantry Division, talks to some Iraqi children while on a routine humanitarian operation, 21 November 2005.**

the people; work the information operations—will lead decisively to achievement of strategic objectives and post-bellum success. Thus, from beginning to end, the focus of a campaign must be on aggressively securing and stabilizing the population in the occupied country. Secondly, there must be constant awareness of the need to maintain the support and assistance of the home front and the world community.

## Conclusion

We need to stop planning operationally and strategically as if we were going to be waging two separate wars, one with tanks and guns on a conventional battlefield, the other with security and stabilization of the population. Symmetric and asymmetric operations are critical, interrelated parts of hybrid war, and we must change our military and political culture to perceive, plan, and execute them that way. To become effective modern warriors, we must learn and retain the lessons of the past; we must strategize, plan, and conduct war under a new paradigm—hybrid war.

More than this, we have to change our political and military will. Some worry that after Afghanistan and Iraq we will not have the political and military will to execute, from the start, the sort of costly, complex strategy necessary to succeed in a hybrid war. There is certainly this danger. However, if our vital national interests are threatened, there are likely no good alternatives. Other observers have repeatedly called for negotiating settlements

with our adversaries. The problem is that the most dangerous of our enemies, such as Al-Qaeda, summarily reject a negotiated settlement as a violation of their religious law, punishable by death; and most of the others have made endless negotiations, backed by hybrid war—or the threat of it—which they think they can win, a principal pillar of their strategy. Past history and present experience have vividly demonstrated how such strategies have repeatedly eroded our national interests.

Like it or not, political-military will or not, statesmen and Soldiers should understand the threat posed by hybrid war. Together, we must develop coherent strategies to avoid or counter such wars, and, if the nation's vital national interests are threatened, we must learn how to fight one successfully. However, if we do not have the political and military will to fight the hybrid war with the right strategy and resources to support it, we had better not fight it. That is, in itself, a vital national interest. **MR**

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## NOTES

Epigraph: George Santayana, *The Life of Reason [1905-1906], Volume I, Reason in Common Sense*.

1. "Seemingly" because all wars are potential hybrid wars. Rarely in history have wars ended purely as what we today like to call "conventional."
2. Field Manual 3-0, *Full Spectrum Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008).
3. Mao Tse-tung, *On the Protracted War*, vol. 2, *Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1954) 180.
4. John J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War—The Strategy of Counter-Insurgency* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1967), 30. Originally published in 1966 by Faber and Faber in London, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War* was republished in 2005 by Hailer Publishing, St Petersburg, FL.
5. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1989), 595-96.

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