

# The Long War: Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and more ahead

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*President Obama seems to be committed to continuing to fight.*

## Understanding the Long War

The concept of the “Long War” is attributed to former CENTCOM Commander Gen. John Abizaid, speaking in 2004. Leading counterinsurgency theorist John Nagl, an Iraq combat veteran and now the head of the Center for a New American Security, writes that “there is a growing realization that the most likely conflicts of the next fifty years will be irregular warfare in an ‘Arc of Instability’ that encompasses much of the greater Middle East and parts of Africa and Central and South Asia.” The Pentagon’s official Quadrennial Defense Review (2005) commits the United States to a greater emphasis on fighting terrorism and insurgencies in this “arc of instability.” The Center for American Progress repeats the formulation in arguing for a troop escalation and ten-year commitment in Afghanistan, saying that the “infrastructure of jihad” must be destroyed in “the center of an ‘arc of instability’ through South and Central Asia and the greater Middle East.”

The implications of this doctrine are staggering. The very notion of a fifty-year war assumes the consent of the American people, who have yet to hear of the plan, for the next six national elections. The weight of a fifty-year burden will surprise and dismay many in the antiwar movement. Most Americans living today will die before the fifty-year war ends, if it does. Youngsters born and raised today will reach middle age. Unborn generations will bear the tax burden or fight and die in this “irregular warfare.” There is a chance, of course, that the Long War can be prevented. It may be unsustainable, a product of imperial hubris. Public opinion may tire of the quagmires and costs—but only if there is a commitment to a fifty-year peace movement.

In this perspective, Iraq is only an immediate front, with Afghanistan and Pakistan the expanding fronts, in a single larger war from the Middle East to South Asia. Instead of thinking of Iraq like Vietnam, a war that was definitively ended, it is better to think of Iraq as a setback, or better a stalemate, on a larger battlefield where victory or defeat are painfully hard to define over a timespan of five decades.

I propose to begin by examining the military doctrines that give rise to notions of the Long War. The peace movement often adopts the biblical commitment to “study war no more,” but in this case it may prove useful to become students of military strategies and tactics. (Those wishing to become students of Long War theory should consult the bibliography at the end of this essay.)

1. The New Counterinsurgency Is a Return to the Indian Wars.

In a September 24, 2007 article in *The Nation*, "The New Counterinsurgency," I wrote that the Petraeus plan for Iraq was as old as our nation's long Indian wars. That thesis was confirmed in the writings of the neo-conservative Robert Kaplan, in his September 21, 2004, article in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Indian Country."

Kaplan is obsessed with the anarchy loosed on the world by post-colonial, tribal-based societies, and emphasizes the need for small wars carried on "off camera," so to speak. Kaplan approvingly quotes one US officer as opining that "you want to whack bad guys quietly and cover your tracks with humanitarian aid projects." The comparison Kaplan makes between today's Long War and our previous Indian wars is that the "enemies" were highly decentralized tribal nations who had to be defeated in one campaign after another. He realizes that conventional war against the Plains and western tribes was an unsustainable strategy and that the native people were overwhelmed by an inexhaustible supply of white settlers and superior technology like the railroad. Fighting the new Indian wars today, he advises, means "the smaller the American footprint and the less notice it draws from the international media, the more effective is the operation." In this sense, Iraq is a strategic setback for Kaplan, "a mess that no one wants to repeat."

## 2. Strategic Military Framework: The Fifty-Year Long War.

Like the Indian wars, winning the Long War will require taking advantage of the deep divisions that exist in tribal societies, along lines of religion, ethnicity, race and geography. The efforts of many Indian leaders to form effective confederations against US expansion never succeeded. On the other hand, US army strategies to pay tribes to deploy "scouts" who would inform on and fight other tribes were successful. The main strategy of the Long War is to attract one tribal or ethnic group to fight their rivals on behalf of the foreign occupier. Nagl accurately predicted that "winning the Iraqi people's willingness to turn in their terrorist neighbors will mark the tipping point in defeating the insurgency."

Counterinsurgency is portrayed to the public as a more civilized, even intellectual, form of war directed by Ivy League professionals, with a proper emphasis on human rights, political persuasion and protection of the innocents. Every civilian insulted by a door knocked down, it is said, is lost to the cause, thus creating a military motive to be respectful to local populations. The new Marine-Army counterinsurgency manual is filled with such suggestions.

But this "hearts and minds" approach downplays what Vice President Dick Cheney called the use of "the dark side." Before a local population will turn in its neighbors, to use Nagl's image, the occupying army must be seen as defeating those "neighbors," killing and wounding the alleged insurgents in significant numbers; weakening or destroying the infrastructure in their villages, and creating an exodus of refugees (in Vietnam, this was known as "forced urbanization," a term of the late Harvard professor Samuel Huntington). In the meantime, the population considered "friendly" is tightly guarded in what used to be called strategic hamlets and, in Iraq, became known as "gated communities": behind concertina wire, blast walls and watch towers, and with everyone subject to eye scanners. The lines between enemy, friendly and neutral in this context are fluid, guaranteeing that many people will be targeted inaccurately as "irreconcilable" sympathizers with the insurgents. Profiling and rounding up people who "look the type" will lead to detention camps filled individuals lacking any usable evidence against them. As one Taliban operative told the *New York Times*, perhaps over-confidently:

I know of the Petraeus experiment out there. But we know our Afghans. They will take the money from Petraeus, but they will not be on his side. There are so many people working with the Afghans and the Americans who are on their payroll, but they inform us, sell us weapons. (May 5, 2009) The truth is that conventional warfare by US troops against Muslim nations is politically impossible, for two reasons that suggest an inherent weakness. First, the local people become inflamed against the foreigners, creating better conditions for the insurgency. Second, the American people are skeptical of ground wars involving huge casualties, costs, and possibly the military draft. Counterinsurgency becomes the fallback military option of the unwelcome occupier. Counterinsurgency is low-visibility of necessity, depending on stealth, psychological and information warfare, both abroad and at home.

### 3. What Happened on the Dark Side in Iraq

In Iraq, the dark side first involved the 2003-2004 American-sponsored round-ups and torture, only leaked to the American public and media by a US guard in Abu Ghraib. In addition, as many as 50,000 young Iraqis, mostly Sunnis, have been held in extreme conditions in detention centers across the country (some of them now being released under the pact negotiated between Baghdad and Washington). Then there were the unreported, top-secret extrajudicial killings described chillingly in Bob Woodward's *The War Within*, which were so effective that they reportedly gave "orgasms" to Gen. Petraeus's top adviser, Derek Harvey. Woodward writes that these killings, in which the Pentagon was the judge, jury and executioner, based heavily on local informants, were "very possibly the biggest factor in reducing" Iraq's violence in 2007. It is likely that death squads were carrying out the revived version of a "global Phoenix program," as advocated by Gen. Petraeus's leading counterinsurgency adviser, David Kilcullen, in the *Small Wars Journal* (November 30, 2004). Jane Mayer, in *The Dark Side*, confirms that Phoenix became a model after 9/11, despite the fact that military historians called it massive, state-sanctioned murder, and clear evidence that 97 percent of its Vietcong victims were of "negligible importance."

It is far more widely known that Gen. Petraeus reduced the Sunni insurgency by hiring some 100,000 Sunnis, mostly former insurgents, to protect their communities and battle Al Qaeda in Iraq. This was in accord with the strategy proposed by another top Petraeus adviser, Steven Biddle, in 2006:

Use the prospect of a US-trained and US-supported Shiite-Kurdish force to compel the Sunnis to come to the negotiating table [and] in order to get the Shiites and the Kurds to negotiate too, it should threaten to either withdraw prematurely, a move that would throw the country into disarray, or to back the Sunnis. (*Foreign Affairs*, March-April 2006) Now those so-called "Sons of Iraq," first known as the "Kit Carson Scouts," are increasingly frustrated by the refusal of the US-supported al-Maliki government to integrate them into the state structure and pay them living wages. It is unclear what the future holds for Iraq as US troops begin to withdraw. Elements of the military, perhaps including Gen. Raymond Odierno, are known to be unhappy with the pace of withdrawal, and already are negotiating with the Iraqi government to delay the six-month deadline for redeploying American troops to barracks outside Iraqi cities. It is apparent that neither conventional warfare (2003-2006) nor counterinsurgency (2006-2009) have solved the fundamental problem of pacifying an insurgent nationalism which was mobilized by the 2003 invasion itself.

In Iraq, the US strategy was to speed up the Iraqi clock while slowing down the American one, Petraeus was fond of saying. That meant accelerating a political compromise between

Shi'a, Sunnis and Kurds in Iraq, along the lines of the 2007 Baker-Hamilton Report, while cooling American voter impatience with promises that peace was just around the corner of the 2008 elections. It was around this time that the Center for a New American Security was formed among Democratic national security advocates deeply worried that a voter mandate could end the war "prematurely."

The key operative in CNAS was Michelle Flournoy, who went on to vet Pentagon appointments for the Obama transition team and now serves as an assistant secretary of defense. Contrary to the views of many in the antiwar movement and Democratic Party, Petraeus's 2007-08 troop surge was successful in its political mission of sharply reducing both US and Iraqi casualties. However, the US military surge included the massive wave of extrajudicial terror chronicled by Woodward, as well as paying tens of thousands of Sunni insurgents not to shoot at American troops. Neither approach could be counted on to stabilize Iraq for long.

At the end of 2008, the Bush administration was forced to accept what the al-Maliki government described as "the withdrawal pact," according to which the United States would gradually withdraw all troops by late 2011. Since the US forces have not "won" the war militarily, there is little evidence that Iraq will become the stable pro-Western model some seek for their Long War. Even if another insurgency or civil war is averted, Iraq will be aligned with Iran's regional interests for some time to come. President Obama will be under serious pressure from US military officials in Iraq and their allies among the neo-conservatives in Washington, to delay his promised withdrawal or be accused of "losing" Iraq.

The Iraqi security forces now consist of 600,000 soldiers, including 340,000 members of a largely-Shi'a force often described as sectarian or dysfunctional. At present, the US continues to face the dilemma described by James Fallows in 2005:

The crucial need to improve security and order in Iraq puts the United States in an impossible position. It can't honorably leave Iraq—as opposed to simply evacuating Saigon-style—so long as its military must provide most of the manpower, weaponry, intelligence systems and strategies being used against the insurgency. But it can't sensibly stay when the very presence of its troops is a worsening irritant to the Iraqi public and a rallying point for nationalist opponents—to say nothing of the growing pressure in the United States for withdrawal." 4. The Long War Moves from Iraq to Afghanistan and Pakistan

The same counterinsurgency strategies are being transferred to Afghanistan and Pakistan, with US troop levels destined to reach 70,000 this year, bringing the overall Western force level closer and closer to the declining total in Iraq. In Afghanistan, the expanded American forces will concentrate on destroying the poppy fields and villages dominated by the Taliban in southern Kandahar and Helmand provinces, a resource-denial strategy from the Indian wars. Many Americans are expected to be killed or wounded in this effort to secure and inoculate the rural population against the Taliban. Many Taliban are likely to be killed along with along with local civilians, while the core cadre may retreat to redeploy elsewhere.

The Bagram prison is being massively expanded as a detention facility where President Obama's Guantanamo orders do not apply. Bagram now holds an estimated 650 prisoners who, unlike those in Guantanamo, have "almost no rights," including access to lawyers. "Human rights campaigners and journalists are strictly forbidden there," according to a January 28, 2009, report by Der Spiegel International.

According to a RAND report using World Bank data, Afghanistan has perhaps the lowest-ranking justice system in the world. "In comparison to other countries in the region—such as Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—Afghanistan's justice system was one of the least effective." Bagram is only one of many detention facilities that will be filled across the country; the Taliban "liberated" over 1,000 inmates, including 400 of their cadre, from a Kandahar prison just last year.

Counterinsurgency theory, based on the British experience in Malaysia, requires a period of ten to twelve years to impose enough suffering and exhaustion to force the population into accepting the peace terms of the dominant power. This is precisely the timetable laid out by Kilcullen before Sen. John Kerry's Senate Armed Services Committee on February 5:

[It will take] ten to fifteen years, including at least two years of significant combat up front.... thirty thousand extra troops in Afghanistan will cost around 2 billion dollars per month beyond the roughly 20 billion we already spend; additional governance and development efforts will cost even more.... [but] If we fail to stabilize Afghanistan this year, there will be no future. Kilcullen and others support the current plan to expand the total Afghanistan security forces from 80,000 to a total of 400,000 overall, costing \$20 billion over six to seven years.

In Pakistan, where torture and extrajudicial abuse also are prevalent, the US spent \$12 billion during the past decade on a [Musharraf] military dictatorship, compared with one-tenth that amount on development schemes. These policies only deepened the Muslim nation's anti-Americanism, alienated the middle-class opposition, and left the poor in festering poverty. In addition to these self-imposed problems, the Pentagon is engaged in a frantic uphill effort to change Pakistan's strategic military doctrine from preparation for another conventional (or even nuclear) war against India to a counterinsurgency war against the Taliban embedded amid its own domestic population, especially in the extremely impoverished federally administered tribal areas that border Afghanistan.

The likelihood of the United States' convincing Pakistan to view the domestic threat as greater than that from India is doubtful. Pakistan has fought three wars with India, and views the US as supporting the expansion of India's interests in Afghanistan, where the Pakistan military has supported the Taliban as a proxy against India. The Northern Alliance forces of Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks were strongly supported by India in 2001 against Pakistan's Taliban's allies, and the fall of Kabul to the Northern Alliance was a "catastrophe" for Pakistan, according to Juan Cole. Since 2001, India has sent hundreds of millions in assistance to Afghanistan, including funds for Afghan political candidates in 2004, assistance to sitting legislators, Indian consulates in Jalalabad, Herat and Kandahar, and road construction designed, according to the Indian government, to help their countries' armed forces "meet their strategic needs."

Polls show that a vast majority of Pakistanis view the United States and India as far greater threats than the Taliban, despite the Taliban's unpopularity with much of Pakistan's public. While it is unlikely that the Taliban could seize power in Pakistan, it may be impossible for anyone to militarily prevent Taliban control of the tribal areas and a growing base among the Pashtun tribes (28 million in Afghanistan, 12 million in Pakistan).

The remaining options begin to make the United States look like Gulliver tied down among the Lilliputians.

The US will demand that Pakistan's armed forces fight the Taliban, which the American military has driven into Pakistan. Pakistan will demand billions in US aid without giving guarantees that they will shift their security deployments in accord with Washington's will. The US will make clear that it will go to extreme lengths to prevent a scenario in which Pakistan's nuclear arsenal falls into the Taliban's hands. No one on the US side acknowledges that this spiraling disaster was triggered by US policies over the past decade.

## 5. The Quagmire of Crises

To summarize, the "arc of crisis" is turning into a "quagmire of crises." The current US military strategy in Pakistan is a contradictory mix of an air war by Predators combined with US special forces trying to organize a tribal war in search of Al Qaeda. US policies already have driven Al Qaeda out of Afghanistan, partly with covert support from Pakistan's army. As a result, both Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters have taken up havens in the remote wilderness of Pakistan's tribal areas. So far the US has budgeted \$450 million for the tribal-based "Frontier Corps" in the frontier region. This strategy has not only failed to prevent the Taliban from taking virtual control of the tribal region, but the effort has killed hundreds of civilians, provoked deeper public opposition, and driven the Taliban insurgency further east into Pakistan.

The US faces a military crisis which Secretary Hillary Clinton recently called "a mortal threat" to America's security, the possibility of Taliban or Al Qaeda's access to Pakistan's nuclear stockpile in the eventuality that the situation deteriorates further. This will trigger an intense political campaign to "do something" about the very threat that US policies have created.

The US and NATO can barely invade Afghanistan, which has 32 million people spread over 250,000 square miles, larger than Iraq. Pakistan, with 172 million people living over 310,000 square miles, simply cannot be invaded. But in a crisis, it is conceivable that American advisers, even ground troops, might be sent to occupy the 10,000 square miles on Pakistan's side of the border. That might result in an anti-American revolution in the streets across Pakistan.

So what has counterinsurgency achieved thus far? At most, a stalemate of sorts in Iraq after six years of combat on top of a brutal decade of sanctions. Nothing much in Afghanistan, where conventional warfare pushed Al Qaeda over the border into Pakistan. Nothing much in Pakistan, where the Pakistan army is resistant to shift its primary focus away from India.

Kilcullen's war plan for Afghanistan covers ten to twelve years, starting in 2009. The war on the Pakistan front is only beginning, meaning that the Obama administration is managing three wars within the Long War, not including secret battlegrounds like the Philippines or what may happen in Iran or Israel-Palestine, nor the controversial expansion of NATO to the borders of Russia, Iran, China and other hotspots along the Arc of Instability. Some in the intelligence community would even like to expand the "terrorist" threat to include the immigrant and drug routes through Central and Latin America as well.

Even if President Obama wishes to carry out a strategic retreat from "the sorrows of empire," he will be faced with significant pressure from elements of the military-industrial complex, and the lack of an informed public. The path of least resistance, it may appear to Obama in the short run, is incremental escalation (sending 20,000 additional Americans) while stepping up the search for a patchwork diplomatic fix. But incremental escalation can

be like another drink for an alcoholic, and even that strategy would require a stepping back from the doctrine of the Long War. Hawks at the American Enterprise Institute and their allies like John McCain and Joe Lieberman are pushing for victory instead of face-saving diplomacy.

The deeper sources of this crisis certainly involve the American and Western quest for oil, the historic inequalities between the global North and South, the West and the Muslim world. But it is important to emphasize the strategic military dimension, particularly the guiding strategic vision of a fifty-year war. The Long War now has a momentum of its own. The impact of the Long War on other American priorities, like healthcare and civil liberties, is likely to be devastating. Since most Americans, especially those supportive of peace and justice campaigns, are well aware of domestic issues and general issues of war and peace, it is important to begin concentrating on the great deficit in popular understanding, that the Long War is already here, building from the previous the cold war dynamic and the Bush era's nomenclature about the "global war on terrorism."

To be continued... thoughts on The Long Peace Movement.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY AND READINGS.

The older classics. For those with serious time, I would recommend Sun-Tzu and Carl Von Clausewitz for an introduction to opposing doctrines, still studied widely.

For the classic Western take on the Arab world, T.E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

The recent classics include Che Guevara and Mao Tse-Tung. On the Western side, I suggest the writings of Sir Robert Thompson on *Defeating Communist Insurgency*; Frank Kitson, *Low Insurgency Operations*; David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*; Robert Taber, *The War of the Flea*; and the lengthy but brilliant study of Algeria by Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace* (the cover of Horne's reissued book announces that it's "on the reading list of President Bush and the US military," and a blurb by the *Washington Post*'s Thomas Ricks that it should be read "immediately").

For immediate works of importance: John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (the phrase is from Lawrence); and David Petraeus, Nagl et al., *The US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (in collaboration with Harvard's Carr Center). A brilliant counterpoint to these works is William R. Polk's *Violent Politics* (see also his *Sorrows of Empire*).

Important books on Al Qaeda and Islam include Robert Dreyfuss's *The Devil's Game*; Jason Burke's *Al Qaeda*, Michael Scheuer's *Marching to Hell*; Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden*; and Ahmed Rashid, *The Taliban*.

Other critical books include Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire and Sowing Crisis*; Juan Cole, *Engaging the Muslim World*; Ahmed Hashim, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq*; Mamood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*; Tariq Ali, *The Duel*; and Rashid's *Descent into Chaos*.

To follow the counterinsurgency discussions among US security strategists, go to the [smallwarsjournal.com](http://smallwarsjournal.com) blog or the Center for American Progress.

*Tom Hayden is the author of The Other Side (1966, with Staughton Lynd), The Love of Possession Is a Disease With Them (1972), Ending the War in Iraq (2007) and Writings for a Democratic Society: The Tom Hayden Reader (2008).*

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