

Counter-Insurgency to Counter-Terrorism

They did not know the simple things: a sense of victory, or satisfaction, or necessary sacrifice. They did not know the feeling of taking a place and keeping it, securing a village and then raising the flag and calling it victory. No sense of order or momentum. No front, no rear, no trenches laid out in neat parallels. No Patton rushing for the Rhine.... They did not have targets.... They did not know strategies.... They did not know how to feel... they did not know which stories to believe.... They did not know good from evil.

TIM O'BRIEN, *Going after Cacciato*,¹ 1978

While the British and French had embraced the interventionist role, the United States had been much more cautious. One reason for this was the shadow cast by the long war in Vietnam. The outcome troubled the collective conscience, not only about the desolation of Vietnam and the impact of a communist victory but also about American losses and the poor treatment of veterans. Those who had fought in Vietnam suffered pain and injury and yet could not even find comfort in having played some part in a heroic struggle. Too much of what had occurred was considered shameful. This traumatic experience became a vital reference point in American culture, reflected in novels and movies that shaped both memories about what this war had been about and expectations about what might happen if the US got involved in similar wars in the future.

The Vietnam War was a product of the Cold War but this aspect tended

to be missing from its various fictional representations. The only movie that came out while the war was at its height, and which did attempt to offer a rationale, was *The Green Berets*, directed by and starring John Wayne. This was unabashed propaganda. Wayne had asked for government support so that ‘not only the people of the United States but those all over the world should know why it is necessary for us to be [in Vietnam]’.² In order to arrange government help Wayne got involved in extended negotiations with the Pentagon who demanded that the war be portrayed fairly. This meant that by the time the film was eventually released in 1968 there were very few Green Berets (special forces) left in Vietnam and the war had become deeply unpopular at home. Wayne reprised his familiar role in Westerns as a decent but tough lawman, fighting outlaws. He added a ‘hearts and minds’ aspect, promising the Pentagon that the film would portray the professional soldier ‘carrying out his duty of death but, also, his extracurricular duties—diplomats in dungarees—helping small communities, giving them medical attention, toys for their children, and little things like soap, which can become so all-important.’³ Even with the Westerns the simple dichotomy between goodies and baddies was historically dubious. With this conflict it was even more problematic.

After the war was over, and Saigon had fallen to the communists, a number of movies appeared with a Vietnam theme which treated the actual fighting in an almost surreal fashion. The war served as a backdrop for stories that could have been set at different times and places. Michael Cimino, director of the *Deerhunter* (1978), which focused on Pennsylvanian steelworkers caught up in the war, described it as having ‘little to do with the American experience in Vietnam It could be any war. The film is really about the nature of courage and friendship.’ Francis Ford Coppola envisaged his *Apocalypse Now* (1979) as not necessarily political but ‘about war and the human soul’.⁴ Other movies were more realistic, but described the war at the micro-level, far from considerations of grand strategy, as tests of character more than policy. *The Boys in Company C* (1978) emphasised the dehumanising basic training and then the incompetence and callousness of the war. Its tag line was ‘To keep their sanity in an insane war they had to be crazy’. *Platoon* (1986), reflecting director Oliver Stone’s own experiences in Vietnam, described

the experiences of an infantryman, and was tagged with the line ‘The first casualty of war is innocence’. *Hamburger Hill* (1987) was about seizing a piece of ground at immense cost, only for it then to be relinquished. Its tag line was ‘War at its worst. Men at their best’. The cumulative effect was to reinforce anti-war sentiment. They were not just about the discomforts and pain of combat but the lack of evident purpose. Jane Fonda, the anti-war activist, recalled crying with veterans as they watched *Platoon* together. She told an interviewer: ‘A movie like this helps to insure that it [another Vietnam] will never happen again.’⁵

In 1984, reviewing a number of novels to emerge out of war experiences, C. D. B. Bryan identified a ‘Generic Vietnam War Narrative’. It started with an eager and patriotic young man arriving in Vietnam and soon filling a gap in a platoon.

In his platoon our young man meets Day-Tripper, who is stoned all the time; Rebel, the crazy white guy who loves killing; Juice, the cool black dude who can smell ambushes and booby traps; the Professor, who at some point will explain why Ho Chi Minh should never have been our enemy. And he meets Doc (or Bones), the conscientious objector medic; Bascomb, the psychotic company commander who gets fragged (that is, killed) by Day-Tripper, Rebel, or Juice; Bailey, the good sergeant whose life is saved by Day-Tripper, Rebel, or Juice; Williams, the young lieutenant who gets better with experience but is killed along with Doc (or Bones) near the end of the book. By the end of the book all the characters have been killed except the young hero (who is often the narrator) and either Day Tripper or Juice, who re-enlists.

Bryan described the iconic moments—the first patrol, with ‘the seductive excitement of a fire fight’, atrocities when innocent civilians are gratuitously killed, lots of helicopter moments, dope scenes, and ‘R&R in Saigon with Susie the bar-girl’. When the hero arrived home he found that he had become something of an embarrassment, and unable to get or hold down a job: ‘he has nightmares, smashes up a few things, misses his buddies still in ’Nam, and at the very end wonders what the hell it was all about. What did it mean? What good did it do?’ The point of this narrative was to chart ‘the gradual deterioration of order, the disintegration of idealism, the breakdown of character, the alienation from those at home, and, finally, the loss of all sensibility save the will to survive’.⁶

This was a war without happy endings.⁷ The movies and novels raised broader issues but the essential message was that the participants had all in some ways been left damaged. A common complaint about the books and movies inspired by Vietnam was that the Vietnamese, whether appearing as allies or enemies, spectators or victims, rarely appeared as rounded characters.⁸ Their portrayal was often as tricky and malevolent, undeserving of the effort that the United States was making on their behalf. The country appeared as the background for a variety of individual melodramas. The war was therefore remembered less as a cause and more as a backdrop to personal struggles and demons, for stories of survival and coping. The theme was casualty, not only in death, but in physical and psychic wounds. When, in 1978, the Vietnam memorial was unveiled in Washington, there was nothing to indicate what it was about other than a list of 57,692 war dead, giving them a degree of honour.

IF THERE WAS A STRATEGIC LESSON IT WAS CONFLICTS SUCH as Vietnam moved in circles rather than straight lines, lacking the moral clarity and military logic of previous wars. The idea that such wars were bound to be both frustrating and deeply unpopular was further reinforced by a brief but unhappy period in Beirut when a US peace-keeping mission got too close to the Christian government and was punished for its troubles by the radical Shia group Hezbollah, with a suicide car bomb in October 1983. This caused the deaths of 241 marines and undermined the will to continue. This was reinforced as American citizens began to be kidnapped, leading to withdrawal in early 1984.⁹ The US Secretary of State George Shultz and the Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger had been on opposite sides in the policy debate and after the US withdrawal they drew distinctive lessons. In October the pro-interventionist Shultz warned that the United States must not allow itself ‘to become the Hamlet of nations, worrying endlessly over whether and how to respond. A great nation with global responsibilities cannot afford to be hamstrung by confusion and indecisiveness’.¹⁰ In his riposte, Weinberger offered his own warning, this time of the dangers of getting too involved in what he called ‘gray area conflicts’. His tests for US engagement in these conflicts required that it be vital to national interests and a last resort, and that when combat troops

were used this should be ‘wholeheartedly, and with the clear intention of winning’ and with ‘some reasonable assurance of the support of the American people and their elected representatives in Congress’.¹¹

An attempted humanitarian intervention in Somalia reinforced Weinberger’s message. The collapse of Somalia’s government in early 1991 led to political chaos. A drought meant that the population faced starvation and disease as well as violence. A small UN peacekeeping force was unable to cope. In late 1992, in part as an alternative to getting involved in the developing crisis in the former Yugoslavia, President Bush sent a substantial force to provide security for the relief effort. Although President Bill Clinton inherited the mission without enthusiasm, he presided over an escalation as US forces became engaged in conflict with one of the warlords, General Mohamed Farah Aidid. In October 1993 an operation to capture some of Aidid’s aides in the capital Mogadishu went badly wrong as two helicopters were shot down by militiamen killing eighteen US soldiers, some of whose bodies were dragged through the streets of the city. Many hundreds of Somalis also lost their lives in the battle.¹² Although Clinton insisted at first that this incident would have no impact on the US commitment within a few months American troops were withdrawn.

Clinton drew the lesson that it was best to stay clear of African conflicts. Unfortunately the next test came with the vicious massacres engulfing Rwanda in 1994. Despite the evidence of genocide the US avoided any involvement. The appalling death toll later weighed heavily on the international (and Clinton’s) conscience.¹³ One study calculated that as few as 5,000 peacekeepers could have prevented much of the violence.¹⁴

Another who drew a lesson from the US withdrawal from Somalia, along with that of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, was Osama bin Laden, the leader of the Islamist terror group, al-Qaeda, based in Afghanistan. In a 1997 interview with CNN’s Peter Arnett he remarked

After a little resistance, the American troops left after achieving nothing. They left after claiming that they were the largest power on earth. They left after some resistance from powerless, poor, unarmed people whose only weapon is the belief in Allah the Almighty,

and who do not fear the fabricated American media lies.... The Americans ran away from those fighters who fought and killed them, while the latter were still there. If the US still thinks and brags that it still has this kind of power even after all these successive defeats in Vietnam, Beirut, Aden, and Somalia, then let them go back to those who are awaiting its return. [15](#)

His basic strategy was to inflict as much pain as possible on the US until they left the Middle East. On 11 September 2001 famous symbols of US power took direct hits from aircraft hijacked by members of al-Qaeda. The twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York were brought tumbling down while the Pentagon in Washington was badly damaged. The attackers, directed from one of the poorest of the world to one of the richest, employed one of the oldest of weapons—knives—to hijack the airliners and turn them into deadly instruments of carnage.

AT THIS POINT ATTITUDES CHANGED DRAMATICALLY. IT TURNED terrorism, largely seen as an exceptional irritant and occasional inconvenience, into a cause of national trauma. A previously unimaginable attack unlocked the most vivid imaginations. What would once have been dismissed as incredible now demanded to be taken seriously. Terrorism moved from a way of pushing otherwise ignored grievances onto the international agenda, as with hijackings of aircraft by Palestinian groups or attacks on US troops abroad, to a direct threat to homeland security. Past terrorism was violent and purposive, but it was hard to think of it as war. By contrast 9/11 was experienced as an act of war. It was an odd war that pitted a small band of Islamist extremists against a superpower. The political motives of the enemy received less attention than the opportunities available in open societies for those who wished to cause maximum havoc. Everything from energy facilities to food supplies could now be seen as a critical vulnerability.

Concern about what was at first called ‘Islamic Fundamentalism’ had been around from the 1980s, then largely associated with Iran, because of the stormy aftermath of the 1979 revolution. The term later fell out of use because it implied that the problem was extreme piety rather than a highly politicised form of Islam; eventually terms such as ‘Islamism’ or

‘Jihadism’ were more widely used. During the Cold War those of this persuasion had been seen as more threatening to atheistic communists rather than the West, which is why they had been supported in Afghanistan. The most extreme Sunni writers were clearly very hostile to Western ways, but it was not evident how this hostility might turn into war.¹⁶ Bernard Lewis warned in 1990 of the revival of ‘ancient prejudices’ leading to Muslim rage against the West.¹⁷ In his *Clash of Civilisations* (a term initially used by Lewis), Huntington cautioned that ‘this century-old military-interaction between the West and Islam’ could become more ‘virulent’.¹⁸ Anthony Dennis described how the collapse of communism had given fundamentalist Islam, led by Iran, an opportunity to fill the gap. He anticipated that ‘Islam in its violent, reactionary, fundamentalist form would continue to be the number one threat to world peace and the very survival of the human species’.¹⁹ The austere Wahhabism, promoted by Saudi Arabia, was fundamentalist but was combined with pragmatic policies towards the West. The radicals were largely devoted to harassing Arab governments, including the Saudis, as much as pursuing Western targets. Other than for the special circumstances of the Lebanese civil war, terrorism in the Middle East had largely been associated with the secular Palestinian cause.

In 1991 the plot of Tom Clancy’s novel *The Sum of All Fears* depended on a Palestinian group triggering a war between the United States and the Soviet Union by detonating a nuclear weapon (actually a lost Israeli device) in the Superdome, killing senior members of the US administration. In an afterword to the paperback version the next year he observed: ‘All of the material in this novel related to weapons technology and fabrication is readily available in any one of a dozen books.... The fact of the matter is that a sufficiently wealthy individual could, over a period of from five to ten years, produce a multistate thermonuclear device’.²⁰ In practice the technical difficulties were hardly trivial, even if sufficient fissionable material and capable engineers could be acquired, and there were obvious risks that would be faced by anyone trying to put a crude weapon together. Nor did it seem to fit with the strategies of most terrorist groups. Few seemed to need to cause mass casualties to make their political points.²¹ Weapons of mass destruction had not been

considered weapons of choice for terrorists. Their past priorities had been assumed to be getting ‘a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead’.²²

The pattern had begun to change in the 1990s, although this only came to be fully appreciated with hindsight, looking back after 9/11. They became integrated into the narrative of the ‘war on terror’ almost in the form of a *Star Wars* prequel. An earlier attack on the World Trade Center in 1993 made a limited impact because of the few casualties caused. Then al-Qaeda had attempted high casualty attacks—on the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and on the USS *Cole* from Yemen—but these had been away from the United States.²³ In February 2001, CIA Director George J. Tenet reported that the threat from terrorism was his priority, noting that terrorists were becoming ‘more operationally adept and more technically sophisticated’, looking at softer civilian targets as military targets came to be better protected. ‘Usama bin Laden and his global network of lieutenants and associates remain the most immediate and serious threat... capable of planning multiple attacks with little or no warning’.²⁴

A number of high-level reports had urged that attention be paid to the threat of weapons of mass destruction being used against unprotected American cities. The twin assumptions were that such weapons would be the best way to terrorise population centres but also that their use would most probably be organised and implemented by a capable state. Thus the Hart-Rudman Commission, which had identified ‘unannounced attacks on American cities’ as the gravest threat, also suggested that

terrorism will appeal to many weak states as an attractive, asymmetric option to blunt the influence of major powers. Hence, state-sponsored terrorist attacks are at least as likely, if not more so, than attacks by independent, unaffiliated terrorist groups.²⁵

North Korea and Iraq appeared as likely culprits, so that the most credible form of this threat was in fact a derivative of the standard scenarios used in defence planning.

There was all the difference between speculation about a potential threat, however plausible, from a panel of specialists and distinguished

figures and a frightful reality hitting unsuspecting people out of the blue. Inevitably on 9/11 thoughts immediately turned to Pearl Harbor, the last time American territory had been attacked from overseas and the moment that came to mind every time the US was caught by surprise. In the case of the 9/11 attacks there was a sharp psychological impact and anxiety about the possibility of further attacks. There was no risk of a defeat in any meaningful sense but there was a keen awareness of a new type of vulnerability. From the president downward, the message was that this ‘changes everything’ and all security issues had to be addressed with fresh eyes, so that the US was never caught out in such a way again. An image of future war had been opened up that was quite different from anything that had gone before.

INEVITABLY RADICAL ISLAM NOW LOOMED LARGE IN THIS IMAGE of future war. Huntington had already pointed to Islam as the most war-prone of civilisations. As this atrocity, and others attempted or succeeded, was undertaken in the name of Islam, this appeared to vindicate at least one reading of Huntington. For others this was a dangerous conclusion and every effort had to be made to show that the terrorists were not at all representative of mainstream Islam. Either way there was a surge in interest in whether the teachings of this religion were responsible for the conflict. More books were published on Islam and war in the aftermath of 2001 than had been published in all prior human history. Some 80 per cent of scholarly articles on the topic ever published also came after 9/11. This was another example of academia trying to catch up with a phenomenon that had caught it, along with government, by surprise. By comparison there was far less interest in Christian, Jewish, or Hindu approaches to war. When Islam was mentioned it tended to be in the context of extremism and violence.²⁶

Now all the issues connected with ‘weak’ and ‘failing’ states acquired a harder edge. The prompts to US action were far more profound than the humanitarian concerns of the early 1990s. Bin Laden’s intent behind the 9/11 attacks might have been to persuade the US to avoid entanglements in the Middle East. Given the responses to Beirut and Mogadishu this was not a wholly unrealistic expectation. Earlier, when mass-casualty

terrorism was a more abstract fear, it was noted that it might be wise to avoid further provoking the angry groups already making a nuisance of themselves in Middle Eastern politics.²⁷ In the aftermath of the attacks, however, with over 3,000 dead (and initial estimates much higher), the responses took the form of an unremitting display of US military capabilities. Offending regimes were toppled, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq, after the opportunity was taken in 2003 to overthrow Saddam Hussein.