

# Low Intensity Conflict And American Strategy In The 1980s

by

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In a recent issue of *Conflict Quarterly*, Richard A. Gabriel observed that the initial defense policy thrust of the Reagan administration has concentrated on the "two least likely employment scenarios" — a limited/general nuclear war or a conventional war in Europe — while neglecting preparation for the "types of war that the United States is likely to be called upon to fight in the next two decades."<sup>1</sup> While it is critical that the U.S. re-establish the credibility of its strategic and NATO deterrents, it is true that in the international arena of the 1980s the U.S. is more likely to be confronted by a series of unconventional challenges and problems in the highly unstable non-Western, non-industrialized world.

These situations, recently labeled "low intensity conflicts," could take the form of rural or urban guerrilla wars, civil wars, separatist movements, communal violence, insurrection, coup d'état, or terrorism, to identify the most frequently used tactics.<sup>2</sup> To respond effectively to such challenges, the United States will require a range of both *military and non-military assets* not found in our conventional military capabilities. It is on this point that Gabriel comes to the crux of the problem: "American forces today lack the doctrine, tactics, experience and even manpower to fight a successful unconventional war in El Salvador or anywhere else."<sup>3</sup> Since the withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973, an integrated U.S. unconventional response capability (composed of both *military and non-military assets*) has been non-existent. This is not surprising, given the American military's long-term propensity for avoiding unconventional warfare strategy, as well as the post-Vietnam constraints placed on American foreign and military policy. However, the effects of not developing appropriate assets may be very costly, especially as the Soviets and their satellites and surrogates have been deeply involved in promoting low-intensity conflicts.

This article will examine three issues arising from Gabriel's article: one, the impact of the Vietnam war on the American political and military establishments; two, the kind of military and non-military assets and strategies the U.S. must develop if it is to be prepared to respond effectively to low-intensity conflicts in the 1980s; and three, the potential political constraints the Reagan administration may face if it decides to deploy such capabilities.

## **Impact of Vietnam on the US Political-Military Establishments**

The 1970s were characterized by an inverse relationship between Soviet growth and American decline in capacity to project power and employ it in low-intensity conflicts.<sup>4</sup> The most frequently cited reason for this American disinclination to employ military power is attributed to the disillusion-

ment resulting from our Vietnam experience. This frustration led to a revulsion within the American regime toward extending power and employing force in international politics, overturning a foreign policy consensus which had existed since the second world war. It is to these "lessons of Vietnam" and the constraints they have placed on U.S. foreign and defense policy that we now turn.

In the foreign policy sphere, disillusionment over the American involvement in Vietnam led to a complete reappraisal of U.S. policy. This resulted in the rejection of two important principles: one, that East-West conflict was the major cause of the tension in world politics; two, that the permanent nature of this conflict compelled the U.S. to pursue a policy that contained Soviet ambitions. Central to this second theory was a strong and flexible military capability that could be employed, when necessary, to parry the power projection of the Soviets or their surrogates. In effect, the "utility of force" was recognized and accepted as the primary means for containing the Soviet commitment to the permanency of conflict with the West.

These developments, in turn, had secondary impacts. For many scholars and analysts, responsibility for the cold war was now attributed, in large part, to the United States. Additionally, the Soviets were no longer viewed as a revolutionary-imperial power, but as a nation whose intentions were the same as those of other nations in the international system. This led to support for a policy of détente and consequently, de-emphasis of the traditional calculations of military power, preparedness, and willingness to employ it. This was all passé, for détente signalled the emergence of an international order based on pluralism and economic interdependence.

While the Nixon-Kissinger doctrine laid the foundation for détente and a new American foreign policy, it was the Carter administration that sought to fashion a human rights-based policy that would address the multitude of economic, social, and political problems facing all nations. For both administrations, the problem of motivating the Soviets to play an active role in this new international order was to be accomplished by providing them with economic incentives they could not resist (i.e., grain and technology). That the Soviets were receptive to such inducements was due to "moderating" tendencies believed to be at work in the Soviet regime. These were said to include:

1. A willingness to be bribed or persuaded into adopting a far less conflict-oriented framework for the conduct of foreign relations.
2. An acceptance of arms control as a crucial means of defusing a major source of East-West tensions.
3. A tendency for Soviet foreign and defense policies to be modified benignly as the scientific-industrial revolution increased the bargaining power of technocratic elites/interest groups/pressure groups, and as a simple consequence of the aging of the regime. Time would therefore be on the side of the West.
4. Agreement that war between the Soviet Union and the United States could not serve Soviet interests.<sup>5</sup>

An important sign of this moderation was the fact that the Soviets not only agreed to take part in SALT negotiations, but actually signed a treaty limiting the deployment of strategic weapons.<sup>6</sup>

If the rejection of post-war foreign policy grew out of disillusionment with American involvement in Vietnam, the foundation for our post-Vietnam foreign policy was derived, in part, from certain new theories of world politics that were proposed during the last decade. For the creators of these theories, many of whom found their way into policy circles, power politics gave way to a new version of a theme whose roots can be traced to 18th century Enlightenment optimism, 19th century liberalism, and 20th century Wilsonian idealism.<sup>7</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine these in detail, the basic premise assumes that traditional power politics has run its course and is being replaced by an international system characterized by economic interdependence.

The penetration of this theme into Carter foreign policy is readily apparent. One has only to recall the emphasis placed on the North-South dialogue, détente, human rights, and economic interdependence. This penetration was equally apparent in the area of defense policy, where administration officials argued that military force was rapidly declining in utility. This was especially true in the area of low-intensity warfare.

It should not be surprising that the political lessons drawn from the Vietnam experience also directly affected the military lessons derived by the United States. The result was a significant revision in the scope of U.S. military strategy, force posture, and contingency planning.

Following its withdrawal from Vietnam, the U.S. reduced its military manpower by 35%, altered its force planning doctrine, developed the "total force", and increased its reliance on nuclear weapons.<sup>8</sup> Pre-Vietnam force planning had been predicated upon the assumption that the military would be prepared to fight two major wars and one minor contingency simultaneously (2½ wars). Since 1970, U.S. doctrine has been based on the assumption that we would never have to wage more than one major and one minor war at the same time (1½ wars).<sup>9</sup> Presumably, this minor war included those types of conflict the Pentagon referred to as "limited contingencies" (requiring the deployment of irregular paramilitary forces). However, given the declining number of American forces deployed abroad, its shrinking international base structure, increased reliance on weapons for high intensity warfare, and domestic public opinion, the possibility of a sudden American power projection into a low intensity conflict seemed increasingly remote. In fact, it was rather uncertain precisely what types of "limited contingencies" fell within the boundaries of the "one-half war" concept.

How did such doctrinal shifts affect force structure and capabilities? According to Theodore Shackley, the United States's ability to conduct low-intensity actions "has withered into virtual uselessness."<sup>10</sup> The appropriate assets for conducting such operations can be divided into three categories: one, economic development and military assistance programs; two, intelligence personnel skilled in paramilitary and other clandestine

procedures; and three, specialized military units trained in counter-insurgency and unconventional warfare methods. An examination of the current U.S. inventory will demonstrate the impact of this doctrinal shift on our capacity to conduct low-intensity warfare.

To begin with, significant cutbacks in security and development assistance were enacted during the 1970s. Ironically, as U.S. security assistance programs were steadily decreasing, Soviet employment of such tactics was rapidly accelerating.<sup>11</sup> The importance of such assistance in Third World conflicts is exemplified in the recent Soviet sea and airlift of arms to Ethiopia in 1978.<sup>12</sup> The U.S. began to seriously scale down its commitment to security assistance programs under the Nixon doctrine, and this process was accelerated as a result of the mid-1970s Congressional assault on these programs. Additionally, Congress began to stipulate that those who did receive such support had to conform to U.S. human rights standards. The Carter administration lent executive support to such stipulations after 1976.

Cuts in security assistance were accompanied by reductions in security assistance personnel. For instance, the number of Military Assistance Advisory Groups (MAAG) deployed abroad was significantly reduced. These were replaced by much smaller Military Training and Technical Assistance Teams. Funded entirely by Foreign Military Sales and International Military Education and Training Program funds, these lacked the scope and complexity of the MAAG units.

The various forms of development aid the U.S. provided to Third World nations during the 1960s was also severely restricted in the 1970s. If the 1960s was the "decade of development" in which the U.S. employed such assistance as an instrument of foreign policy in the struggle for the Third World, the 1970s saw drastic revisions.<sup>13</sup> Foreign aid was no longer to be linked to American strategic and political objectives or carefully targeted through bilateral dissemination. Instead, it was now to be channeled through such multilateral assistance agencies as the World Bank group.<sup>14</sup> As with security assistance, in bilateral cases conformance with U.S. human rights standards was a prerequisite.

A second important unconventional warfare asset, the paramilitary and counterinsurgency elements of the Central Intelligence Agency, also experienced significant reductions. After 1947, the CIA maintained a significant paramilitary capability, primarily tasked for counterinsurgency operations. During the 1960s, this was employed primarily in Southeast Asia.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, it was used in support of guerrilla warfare operations, as well as for furnishing covert military assistance to unconventional foreign forces and organizations.

During the 1970s, the CIA became a central target in a comprehensive and critical review of American foreign policy. Roy Godson notes that this "centered largely around real and alleged American intelligence abuses, and particularly violations of American civil liberties by American intelligence agencies."<sup>16</sup> Attention was also directed at the U.S. covert action policy during the cold war, including paramilitary operations.<sup>17</sup> The end

result of these investigations was a decision on the part of the Carter administration to drastically weaken the covert action capability. This decision had important organizational and personnel ramifications for the CIA, the extent of which is spelled out by Shackley: "budgetary pressures, particularly under Admiral Stansfield Turner's stewardship of the intelligence community, forced drastic personnel reductions and maintained equipment inventories at levels below what are necessary to sustain the third option (paramilitary operations), if it were selected for implementation."<sup>18</sup> In sum, according to a former senior CIA official, "covert action in the late 1970s shows all the hallmarks of a dying art form."<sup>19</sup>

Finally, reductions also weakened the Special Forces, the third critical element in a unified unconventional warfare capability. From a high of over 9,000, the size of the Special Forces declined to approximately 2,000, following their 1971 withdrawal from Vietnam.<sup>20</sup> Recently, they have increased to three 1,400-soldier groups stationed in the United States. However, according to one expert, serious problems still remain:

"There are serious shortages . . . particularly in officers, communications personnel, and medical specialists. First term enlisted personnel are filling non-commissioned officer positions and many positions are filled one or two grades below authorizations. As a result, although this low-intensity capability is deployable, some skill levels are below those desired. Language capabilities are particularly lacking. . . . Two additional limitations on the capabilities of Special Forces deserve note. The first is the difficulty of attracting trained officers for second and third Special Forces assignments. . . . The second concerns training priorities for Special Forces units. Current training places top priority on the employment of Special Forces teams in unconventional warfare in a general war environment."<sup>21</sup>

The declining size and changing role of the Special Forces strongly reflects the post-Vietnam decision to avoid low-intensity conflict.

What are the ramifications of these developments? It could be argued that such doctrinal and force structure decisions send signals to our allies and potential allies, as well as to our adversaries, about the commitment of the United States to respond to those unconventional conflicts that threaten its interests. In fact, the developments described above might be construed as a unilateral commitment by the U.S. to refrain from defending interests in those parts of the globe where we might confront an unconventional enemy. The political and organizational depth of this reluctance to develop a coherent and coordinated policy for such situations is reflected in the now flawed Rapid Deployment Force (RDF). Originally tasked to respond to a range of challenges spanning irregular, paramilitary, limited and conventional conflict, the scope of the RDF has continually narrowed since its inception. In February 1981, Thomas Etzold suggested that "it would be difficult if not impossible to use elements of the RDF in the Southern Hemisphere, and in large portions of Asia, the Pacific, and even the Indian Ocean."<sup>22</sup> It is designed mainly to block any Soviet advance towards the Persian Gulf.

This then was the situation at the beginning of the Reagan term. Whether the new administration will alter these developments remains to be seen. We now turn to consideration of options for improving the U.S.'s capability in low-intensity conflict.

### **Prerequisites for Unconventional Warfare**

The U.S. must correctly assess the nature of the various low-intensity conflict situations most likely to threaten its interests. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to identify each of the possible forms of unconventional conflict, Sam Sarkesian has listed the following categories: Employment of Force (noncombat); Surgical Operations; Guerrilla I (weapons assistance teams, police training, advisory teams); Guerrilla II (special forces teams, cadre for indigenous forces); Guerrilla III (integration of U.S. combat units & indigenous forces); Vietnam Type situations.<sup>23</sup> Principally, this categorization covers those situations in which the U.S. would assist a friendly government confronted with an unconventional conflict. However, Shackley has recently suggested that the U.S. should prepare for involvement in both insurgency and counterinsurgency situations. According to Shackley, the U.S. role is too frequently confined to the latter — assisting friendly regimes to endure. Given the unconventional conflict environment of the 1980s, he argues the U.S. may find it necessary to assist guerrilla movements such as the Afghan resistance or UNITA in Angola.<sup>24</sup>

In view of the complexity and diversity of these forms of conflict, the U.S. cannot prepare for all contingencies. Robert Tucker has recently observed that the U.S. is “in the throes of a far reaching change in the nation’s foreign policy. . . a period of withdrawal. . . has come to an end. If it is to be succeeded by a period of an America everywhere resurgent and activist, we will only risk jeopardizing interests that are critical to the nation’s security and well-being.”<sup>25</sup> This underlines the importance of accurate threat assessments and of a flexible and responsive military training machine. Strategy and capabilities must be geared for specific situations, whilst retaining flexibility. The assets necessary for developing “response packages” fall into three categories. How they are configured strategically will depend on the specific situation.

#### **1. Economic and Military Assistance Programs.**

The bilateral economic assistance programs should be re-established. Over the last ten years the U.S. has drastically reduced these programs, opting instead to channel such support through international multilateral assistance agencies. As a first step in developing capabilities for responding to unconventional challenges, foreign economic assistance should be redirected for use in a bilateral manner. Many conflicts are, in part, rooted in the underdeveloped economic and social environment characteristic of Third World nations, which may lead to internal breakdown. Consequently, economic development assistance, if applied appropriately, is an important part of any counter-insurgency-civic action program. This would be true for Guerrilla I-III categories. Beyond assisting friendly governments

threatened by internal war, U.S. commitment to such programs sends signals to both friendly and unfriendly governments. Recent statements by Secretary of State Haig,<sup>26</sup> as well as Congressional support for President Reagan's foreign aid appropriation bill,<sup>27</sup> indicate that the administration is committed to employing such assistance in a bilateral fashion. Whether it is indicative of a recommitment by the U.S. to respond to unconventional challenges is unclear at this time. Additionally, the Reagan administration's support for military security assistance should be extended, either in the form of military equipment, or training teams, or both. Unlike the long-term objectives of economic development aid, security assistance is designed to address short-term security problems. This will require a renewed commitment by the U.S. Army to language and cultural education as well as civic action techniques.<sup>28</sup>

2. **Intelligence Assets.** Various paramilitary intelligence assets constitute a second important part of an American capacity to conduct unconventional war. The CIA's clandestine service once maintained such an organizational structure and skilled paramilitary personnel. However, these assets were largely dismantled during the general assault on the CIA that took place during the latter half of the 1970s. The end result of this, according to one former expert, has been the severe dilution of "CIA's ability to handle this task. . . The limited capability that now exists is not adequate to meet the challenge of the 1980s."<sup>29</sup> To respond to unconventional conflicts in the 1980s, these paramilitary intelligence assets should be re-established, albeit under close political control. There must be skilled personnel and an organizational structure within which the techniques of insurgency and counterinsurgency can be employed, if the current administration chooses to exercise this option. While the intelligence contribution will vary according to the type of conflict, as well as on the basis of its stage of progression, the most important ingredient is skilled personnel who can "develop irregular warfare concepts, test new techniques for conducting operations, plan force structures, recruit, train and equip indigenous forces."<sup>30</sup> While it is relatively easy to re-establish economic and security assistance programs, the re-structuring of the CIA's paramilitary assets may prove difficult and time-consuming. However, if the U.S. is to maintain an effective unconventional capability, this should be undertaken. It must not be at the expense of intelligence gathering capability, which remains the most important single task in all counterinsurgency work.
3. **Military Forces.** As the intensity of the unconventional conflict escalates, the U.S. may have to consider introducing military forces. To prepare for this, the Special Forces (SF) should be upgraded. To begin with, the SF mission must be re-focused primarily for organizing, advising, and assisting either friendly government or resistance forces in unconventional techniques. Necessary actions include re-emphasizing specific area, cultural and language training for priority

regions, removing career disincentives and overcoming manning shortages, and shifting the emphasis of officer training so that unconventional warfare is seen as a legitimate and vital role for a modern army. If U.S. military commitment to such a conflict expanded beyond the SF, counterinsurgency would once again be everyone's role. If the French, British and other armies can train for global *and* unconventional war, there is no reason why the U.S. Army should not do likewise. Without such a change of training emphasis, SF will not attract and keep officers for second and third tours, and unconventional warfare will remain outside the Army's definition of contingencies for which to be prepared.<sup>31</sup> Finally, U.S. military assets should continue to include forces for raids and special operations of a "surgical" nature, such as the Israelis at Entebbe and the French in Shaba in 1978. The failed Iranian rescue operation demonstrated the importance of such specialists, as well as the formidable demands made upon them. Close liaison with clandestine forces should be fostered, for operational efficiency and to avoid departmental rivalry.

### **Political Constraints and Limitations**

The role of force in the American foreign policy of the 1970s was characterized by restraint and disenchantment. During the same period, the Soviets operated under the purely pragmatic restraint of avoiding no-win situations: whenever they saw a profitable opening, they took it. The Soviets demonstrated a sophisticated politico-military capacity to conduct low-intensity conflict. Mainly through surrogates and advisers, they have been able to influence events in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and South-East Asia.

In the international security environment of the 1980s, the United States is likely to encounter various unconventional challenges to its interests. Accumulating the means with which to meet such challenges is entirely within our capability. But unless the national will is also mobilized, such forces might remain unused or, worse still, they might fail in their missions. American military intervention continues to weigh heavily on the minds of important political actors, as well as on the general public. This has most recently been apparent in the growing opposition to U.S. involvement in El Salvador.<sup>32</sup>

If the Reagan administration is to establish and employ such a politico-military strategy, it must develop public support for it. This will not be easy, in the aftermath of Vietnam. Prior to the late 1960s, such support could have been rallied on the basis of the foreign policy consensus. However, in the 1980s this no longer exists. Although President Reagan has recovered support for a renewed U.S. defense effort, this may not extend to the type of interventionist operations that may be called for if we are to pre-empt or defeat similar Soviet tactics. The moral issues are often cloudy; the "enemy" usually takes the form of a peasant guerrilla army rather than Soviet troops; the interests at stake, taken one area at a time, are difficult to describe as absolutely vital. And, perhaps more significant



still, the American public has no confidence in our ability to succeed in such endeavours. The spectre of our being drawn, deeper and deeper, into an open-ended military disaster lies close to the surface of the American psyche. These are relevant concerns, but they do not remove the other danger, that by doing nothing to halt the Soviets in the low-intensity field we may end up isolated in a hostile world, deprived of raw materials and energy. Perhaps greater attention should be given to the lowest end of the spectrum of conflict, to the pre-emptive use of aid and advice, to the clandestine, to the psychological, and to the use of proxy forces. America has to face these difficult issues and, in debating them, a new consensus may emerge.

### Footnotes

1. Richard A. Gabriel, "No Light in the Tunnel: Can U.S. Unconventional Forces Meet the Future?," *Conflict Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1981), pp. 4-8.
2. See George K. Osborn and William J. Taylor, jr., "The Employment of Force: Political-Military Considerations," in *U.S. Policy and Low-Intensity Conflict*, edited by Sam C. Sarkesian and William L. Scully (New Brunswick, N.J., 1981), pp. 20-24.
3. Gabriel, p. 4.
4. W. Scott Thompson, *Power Projection* (New York, 1978), pp. 7-8. Thompson identifies two components of power projection: one, the "Capacity to develop an infrastructure of influence ranging from 'treaties of friendship' . . . to an active alliance system. . . the prepositioning of forces and equipment, the deployment of a worldwide naval support system, the development of reconnaissance capabilities, and the expansion of command and control communications"; two, the "capacity to inject appropriate instruments of influence and force over distances into rapidly changing violent (or potentially violent) situations in order to protect or further develop the major power's infrastructure."
5. Colin Gray, *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Age* (New York, 1977), p. 9.
6. This point of view is presented in John Newhouse, *Cold Dawn: The Story of SALT* (New York, 1973). For a rebuttal to this see Thomas Wolfe, *The SALT Experience* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).
7. For a discussion of these developments see E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Year Crisis* (London, 1951).
8. Lawrence Korb, *The Fall and the Rise of the Pentagon* (Westport, Conn., 1979), chpt. 2.
9. National Security Decision, memorandum, 3, quoted in John Leacocos, "Kissinger's Apparatus," *Foreign Policy*, no. 1, (1971), p. 25.
10. Theodore Shackley, *The Third Option* (New York, 1981), p. 19.
11. Thompson, op cit.
12. Steven David, "Realignment in the Horn: The Soviet Advantage", *International Security*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1979), pp. 69-90.
13. For an interesting discussion of the use of aid in such a manner, see Klaus Knorr, *The Power of Nations* (New York, 1975), chpt. 7.
14. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston, 1977).
15. Douglas Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era* (New York, 1977).

16. Roy Godson, ed., *Intelligence Requirements for the 1980s: Elements of Intelligence* (New York, 1979), p. 17.
17. See U.S. Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Hearings*, vol. 7 (Washington, 1976).
18. Shackley, pp. 19-20.
19. Hugh Tovar, "Covert Action", in Godson, op cit., p. 67.
20. Elliot Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), p. 25.
21. Howard Graves, "U.S. Capabilities for Military Intervention", in *U.S. Policy and Low-Intensity Conflict*, p. 74-75.
22. Thomas Etzold, "Happy Birthday RDF — and No Happy Returns", *Washington Post*, 22 Feb. 1981.
23. Sarkesian and Scully, pp. 6-7.
24. Shackley, op cit.
25. Robert Tucker, "The Purposes of American Power", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 59, no. 2 (1980-1981), pp. 241, 274.
26. U.S. Department of State, *Security and Development Assistance* (Washington, 1981), p. 3.
27. "House Votes 1st Foreign Aid Funds Since 1979", *Washington Post*, 12 Dec. 1981.
28. For background on civic action see Edward Glick, *Peaceful Conflict* (Harrisburg, Pa., 1967).
29. Theodore Shackley, "The Uses of Paramilitary Covert Action in the 1980s" in Roy Godson, ed., *Intelligence Requirements for the 1980s: Covert Action* (New York, 1981), p: 157.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 158. For a detailed discussion, see Shackley's *The Third Option*.
31. See Donald Vought, "Preparing for the Wrong War", *Military Review*, vol. 57, no. 5 (1977), pp. 16-34.
32. According to a March 1981, Gallup survey, only 2% of the American public thinks the U.S. should send troops to El Salvador to help the government, while less than one in five mentioned providing economic assistance (19%), military supplies (16%), or military advisors (18%). Cited in the *Washington Post*, 26 Mar. 1981, p. 2.