

REVIEW ESSAY

Low-Intensity Conflict

Corr, Edwin G., and Stephen Sloan, eds. *Low-Intensity Conflict, Old Threats in a New World*. Boulder and Oxford: Westview, 1992.

Joes, Anthony James. *Modern Guerrilla Insurgency*. Westport, CO and London: Praeger, 1992.

Odom, William E. *On Internal War. American and Soviet Approaches to Third World Clients and Insurgents*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992.

All definitions of war are (or should be) political, none more so than the notion of “absolute war” identified by Clausewitz, or the twentieth-century usage “total war.” The mutability and negotiability of such definitions is rather well expressed in the label “conventional war,” but the step across to “unconventional war” brings a wholly different order of fluidity. The essence of the problem addressed by any study of what may be called middle-level political violence is how events which do not fit conventional categories can be usefully understood and reacted to. Many people have recognized that accurate labelling is a crucial condition of understanding and action, but nobody has succeeded in pinning a clear label to a concept of that conflict which is neither war nor peace. Many more or less inspired attempts have been made: “invertebrate war,” “small war,” “irregular war,” “protracted war,” “sub-war,” “internal war,” and recently “uncomfortable war” are versions or modifications of the master concept. (At the other end of the war spectrum are terms such as “pacification” or “peacemaking” and peacekeeping.) Merely to list them, even without adding “insurgency” or “terrorism,” is to realize the dizzying range of phenomena involved. The moral relativism of terminology like terrorism has been universally recognized (at least by scholars), but it may not be so clear that an equivalent problem underlies an apparently less value-saturated dichotomy like “regular/irregular.” Indeed it affects even the strictly quantitative terminology of “small war,” since there has always been uncertainty about the scale used: whether geographical, numerical, organizational, political, or (we might say) munitional. The term “irregular,” being doubly relative – encompassing all that which is not perceived as regular – probably cannot carry any definite connotations. For this reason it may be the best available term for the kind of fighting characteristic of insurgency.

In the end, however, it may well be felt that a generic label is inappropriate to such disparate phenomena. The originality of Frank Kitson’s conceptualization of “low intensity operations” lay in its powerful sense of the underlying unity of counterinsurgency campaigning, tempered by undogmatic flexibility of method.¹ “Low intensity” was an arresting phrase which identified the mental adjustment which Kitson’s own army had found so difficult in a sequence of conflicts – Ireland,

Palestine, Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, Ireland again. This location in British experience may have limited the impact of Kitson's concept.² A decade passed before it emerged on the other side of the Atlantic, and in the process it was significantly altered – if not robbed of its analytical distinctness. By the mid-1980s the formulation “low intensity conflict” was placed in a spectrum containing not only high but also medium intensity conflict.³ The fact that both Gulf wars, for instance, were placed in the middle of this spectrum (along, presumably, with both world wars), with only all-out nuclear war at the high end, shows that “intensity” was being registered principally as destructive capacity – a seductively (and deceptively) straightforward line of measurement. Initialized inevitably – but again with a loss of thought-inducing resonance – as LIC, the formulation became political rather than operational:⁴ a declaration that the USA was seriously engaging in wars other than the cold superpower war – above all the struggle for the “Third World.” In 1986 the Secretary of State urged the need to “come to grips with the intellectual challenge of ambiguous warfare.”⁵ But to what end, and with what effect? Was this, as some critics suggested, merely a charter for a neo-imperialist interventionism?⁶

The collection edited by Ambassador Corr and Professor Sloan starts from the premise that “relaxation of superpower tensions has not created a peaceful world,” and that US security is vitally affected by the conflicts which persist. At the same time, “the definition of US interests and power is clearly undergoing a fundamental transformation,” as Senator Boren's preface suggests. Sloan thinks that these interests could be defined quite clearly but for the fact that US policy making is the product of bureaucratic contests “inside the Beltway” rather than of a global vision. He believes that Washington's “lack of unity of purpose” could be remedied by adoption of the “paradigm” of LIC proposed by Max Manwaring in a number of recent publications.⁷ Though he recognizes that the adoption of low-intensity conflict as a weapon in intra-governmental battles has deprived it of coherence, he thinks that the failure to reach agreement on a definition of LIC is no barrier to effective use of the Manwaring paradigm.

This lays a lot of weight on a rather fragile foundation. For, as one of Corr and Sloan's contributors, Thomas A. Grant, points out, Manwaring's “new analytical approach” hardly fulfills the comprehensive explanatory requirements of a paradigm – his six points (legitimacy, organization for unity of effort, external support for target government, reduction of outside aid to insurgents, intelligence, discipline and capabilities of government armed forces) being simply “principles of strategy” – “familiar truths, almost to the point of being truisms.” (p. 258) At best it can be seen as a “list of strategic priorities,” necessary indeed, but not a way of identifying the special ambiguities which make this kind of conflict so difficult to grasp.⁸ In part this may be due to Manwaring's narrowly realist vision of the “ultimate common goal” of all policy, which he sees as “survival in an anarchical world.”⁹ Surely there is more to the American dream – or almost anyone else's – than this?

But even if it is a truism, there can be no doubting the weight of Manwaring's central point – that effective government is the mainstay of that rather occult quality

“legitimacy,” so frequently invoked and so rarely quantified. All the case studies in this collection – covering Thailand, Guatemala, Ethiopia, Peru, Iran, Afghanistan, and El Salvador – buttress this point. The same may be said of the sensible account of *Modern Guerrilla Insurgency* offered by Professor Joes, which provides useful secondary studies of Greece, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Afghanistan. But the big question is: why are some governments better than others? The message that any rational “Third World” or “developing” government should draw from Joes’ book would be, carry out land reform. But this has been obvious to most intelligent observers since the first French Revolution. Any real-world policy has to deal with the fact that governments are commonly blind to their own best long-term interests (let alone the good of the people).

For instance, Joes offers the perfectly reasonable view that the French, “by carrying out land reform or by reducing those taxes and curbing those landlord practices that the peasantry perceived as unjust, might well have loosened or even severed the connection between the irreconcilable revolutionaries and the potentially very reconcilable peasantry” in Vietnam. (p. 120) Setting aside the slightly tendentious phrasing of the possible benefits, we are left with a daunting governmental agenda. Most governments of undeveloped societies – not least imperial administrations – find it impossible (if not unthinkable in the first place) to abandon their links with the landholding class. The project of working out peasant perceptions with acceptable accuracy is as difficult as the idea of giving way to peasant notions. And even when governments do do something right, they are likely to do something else wrong at the same time. Britain, for instance, confounded Karl Marx by setting a land reform in train in Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century. For a time, perhaps half a generation, it looked as if it had succeeded in loosening the connection between the irreconcilable revolutionaries and the peasantry; but then along came the 1916 rebellion and the IRA insurgency. The argument, made a shade too vigorously by Joes, that the nationalism of the Viet Minh was bogus, and that nationalism was no insuperable problem for French rule, seems potentially misleading. (And it is intended to lead to the conclusion, offered in the next chapter, that the US could have won the war in South Vietnam.)

Like Corr and Sloan, and also General Odom, Joes is interested above all in the prospects for successful American intervention in insurgencies – “the heart of the matter,” as he finally admits. Here we come back to the vital issue: what is the ultimate object of policy? Joes laments “the reluctance of the electorate to distinguish in foreign policy between what is strategically effective and what is morally acceptable.” (p. 216) The underlying logic is that familiar proposition of *realpolitik* – that the public interest should be determined by experts, not the public; the main handicap to foreign policy is democracy. Familiar as it is to students of nineteenth-century states, this Bismarckian view remains nonetheless something of a puzzle in relation to the foreign policy of the USA, which has been uniquely committed to the promotion of democracy.¹⁰ Is this commitment merely cosmetic?

This awkward question is faced with unusual directness by General Odom in his thoughtful analysis of global superpower interventionism. As a whole, this

book does not quite work out right: its timing was a little unfortunate, necessitating a lot of (all too perishable) speculation about Soviet intentions. Analytically, also, the contrast between the tightly argued theoretical opening of the book, and the remaining two-thirds, which deals somewhat discursively with a set of case studies (the “American set,” as Europeans may think – El Salvador, Guatemala, the Philippines, the Middle East, southwest Asia) is not altogether satisfactory. But there are good things in it, such as his assertion – a stronger version of Manwaring’s finding – that the US “could probably drop all of its military assistance without any appreciable difference in the internal wars.” This is, as he says, “a rather shocking conclusion to reach in light of all the enthusiasm within the US military establishment for ‘low-intensity conflict’.” (p. 201) He offers frank recognition that often in US policy (as toward Iraq in the 1980s) “higher principle was subordinated to larger strategic purpose” (p. 170) – though he seems ambivalent about whether this was a good or a bad thing.

The core of his account of intervention is an exploration of the prospects for the growth of stable democratic structures in societies lacking the developed middle class which, historically, generated the Western liberal model. In pointing out that democracy requires more than free elections, Odom reinforces the argument of Edwin Corr and Courtney Prisk that “most citizens and thinkers of the developing world ... attach a broader and deeper meaning to democracy [than Robert Dahl’s]. They see it as a means not only to freedom but also to improved economic well-being and justice.” (p. 239) Odom’s underlining of the slow evolution of the material conditions for democracy is important, as is his honest uncertainty about the relationship between order and growth. Good government and economic growth rest principally on law and order, and democracy – there can be no doubt – is a product rather than a producer of such order: “many of the policy decisions essential to attain stability and social equity are virtually impossible for elected legislatures to make.” (p. 209) Thus “the most difficult dilemmas for American policy arise from trying to support stability and democracy simultaneously.” (p. 44) Internal war, of course, practically decides the issue: “stability has to receive the highest priority.” (p. 209) In these circumstances, it appears, the only recourse is into metaphor – “fledgling” democracies may remain permanently poised on the brink of flight.

Taken in all, these books present an urgent invitation to clarity of thought in face of “ambiguous” or “uncomfortable” conflicts. In so doing they echo one of Clausewitz’ most pungent insights: “the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish the kind of war on which they are embarking.” Historical study shows that this is also supremely difficult in the case of conflict which cannot be classified as either war or peace. What happens is all too often a clash between civil and military logic in which the direction of policy can be fatally lost. If Sloan is right, and low-intensity conflict remains a viable concept in spite of our failure (so far) to define it, it surely cannot remain so for long if that failure persists. There is a risk that “the challenge of ambiguity” will be used to skirt the politically awkward clarity and precision

without which concrete actions cannot be systematically organized. If the usage “low intensity” is to recover the sharpness it had in Kitson’s hands, an effort has to be made to fix the measurement of intensity itself, and to pin its operational significance. Amidst the plethora of war-words we find in these studies, one – “campaign” – is remarkably rare. Yet insurgency fighting is above all campaigning, the construction of a sequence of operations with cumulative effect. Like “warfare” (as distinct from war) it lays stress on continuity, and its use should perhaps be encouraged.

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Endnotes

1. Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations, Subversion, Insurgency and Peacekeeping* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971). The problem (for liberals in particular) lay in his application of “subversion” to a wide range of political activities.
2. In contrast to Sir Robert Thompson’s ubiquitous *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, Kitson’s book is rarely cited or referred to in US writings – the three books under review here are typical in this respect.
3. US Army, *Low-Intensity Conflict – Field Manual [FM 100-20]* January 1981; US Army, *Joint Low-Intensity Conflict Project, Final Report* (August 1986); Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh, eds., *Low Intensity Warfare. Counter-insurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), p. 6.
4. The argument that the operational key has got lost along the way is lucidly made by H.W.R Pike, “The Relevance of the Operational Level of War in Low Intensity Conflict,” *Low Intensity Conflict and Law Enforcement*, 1 no. 3 (Winter 1992), pp. 293-311.
5. George P. Shultz, “Low-Intensity Warfare: the Challenge of Ambiguity,” *Proceedings of the Low-Intensity Warfare Conference*, Department of Defense, January 1986, p. 10.
6. See M. Klare and P. Kornbluh, “Beware the Fatal Attraction of Small Wars,” *Los Angeles Times*, 28 March 1988, p. 7.
7. Max G. Manwaring, ed., *Uncomfortable Wars: Toward a New Paradigm of Low Intensity Conflict*, (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991); Max G. Manwaring and John T. Fishel, “Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency: Toward a New Analytical Approach,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 3 no. 3 (Winter 1992), pp. 272-310.
8. See the more demanding usage in D. Michael Shafer, “The Unlearned Lessons of Counterinsurgency,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 103 no. 1 (Spring 1988), pp. 57-80; *Deadly Paradigms: the Failure of US Counterinsurgency Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
9. The fact that he appears to attribute this Hobbesian view to Sun Tzu is all the more remarkable.
10. See the classically self-regarding view of American exceptionalism offered in Sam C. Sarkesian, *America’s Forgotten Wars* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1984), chap. 5.