



The idea of counterinsurgency is deader than Osama Bin Laden

Published: Wednesday, May 04, 2011, 9:17 PM Updated: Thursday, May 05, 2011, 7:53 AM



By **Paul Mulshine/The Star Ledger**

In his address to the 1962 graduating class at West Point, President John F. Kennedy told the cadets that the United States must not "become permanently dependent upon an ever-increasing military establishment." Instead, said Kennedy, the country needed "a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training."

Great idea. Unfortunately Kennedy was assassinated the next year and replaced with a president from Texas. And the past three presidents with ties to Texas have all made the exact mistake Kennedy warned against. Lyndon B. Johnson and both George Bushes threw big conventional armies into situations that quickly became quagmires.

The contrast between the two approaches could not have been more obvious after an elite unit, the Navy SEALs, dispatched Osama bin Laden the other day without losing a man. Meanwhile, our conventional forces remain bogged down in a couple of countries, losing men and blowing through billions while achieving little of strategic importance to the United States.

I discussed this with a couple of former Green Berets: Pat Lang, who served in the Vietnam War, and David Rittgers, who served in Afghanistan. Kennedy was the patron saint of the special forces, and Green Berets see themselves as continuing the tradition he espoused.

After Vietnam, Lang (see his blog [here](#)) spent a lot of time in the Mideast. His experience trying to figure out the endless complications of that part of the world led him to become perhaps the leading opponent of COIN, the acronym for counter-insurgency warfare.

There's a lively debate going on at the moment between the so-called COINistas and those such as Lang who believe the best defense is a good offense. Lang noted the advice Gen. Douglas MacArthur gave Kennedy in the years when Vietnam was heating up.

"MacArthur told John Kennedy that the one thing he shouldn't do is get bogged down in another war in the third world because it would bleed us to death," said Lang.

Lang is of the opinion that, had he lived, Kennedy wouldn't have been drawn into a counterinsurgency war using conventional forces. As for George W. Bush, he never really intended to get involved in a huge COIN exercise in Iraq.

"We invaded Iraq and no one could figure out how to deal with it," said Lang.

How we dealt with it was by converting our conventional army into a counterinsurgency army — which after finally sorting out Iraq

promptly got bogged down in Afghanistan, where we're spending \$2 billion a week to accomplish uncertain ends.

Rittgers, who's now with **the Cato Institute**, spent three years with the special forces in Afghanistan. After the 9/11 attacks, it made perfect sense to chase al Qaeda out of there, he said. "But we're now at war with at least three parties." Among them are tribal factions in far-off provinces that wouldn't be fighting us if we weren't fighting them.

"If we left Afghanistan, how many of those groups would export terrorism to inside American borders?" he asks. "What are they going to do, leave their homes, get visas and infiltrate the United States?"

Like Lang, Rittgers is of the opinion that the Mideast is just too messy for our conventional military forces to sort out. He notes that Ronald Reagan, for all his bellicose rhetoric, quickly pulled the United States out of Lebanon when it became obvious it was a quagmire.

"Most of what Reagan was doing was training cost-effective guerrillas to defeat Soviet proxy states," said Rittgers. "It was a very efficient way to go about doing things."

The smart money's on the insurgency side of a counterinsurgency war. Reagan bled the Soviets dry in Afghanistan and Nicaragua with small U.S. investment in insurgencies. As for his successor, George H.W. Bush, he bungled the transition in Afghanistan and also got us bogged down in Iraq for what is now 20 years and counting.

Lang is hopeful that recent personnel changes announced by President Obama may herald the end of COIN. Prominent COINista David Petraeus is going to the Central Intelligence Agency, which lacks any conventional forces, while current CIA Director Leon Panetta is headed to Defense.

"We've got the stage set here for some sort of switch in policy if Obama wants to do it," said Lang.

If he does, he could start by reading that speech from 49 years ago.

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