

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Manuscript 3303

Why the Afghan and Iraqi Armies Collapsed: An Allied Perspective

Colin D. Robinson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Why the Afghan and Iraqi Armies Collapsed: An Allied Perspective

Colin D. Robinson
©2024 Colin D. Robinson

ABSTRACT: Rather than military factors, American and Western liberal ideas (ideological views) and politics explain many of the obstacles faced in rebuilding the Afghan and Iraqi Armies. Liberal ideas largely determined what options the coalition would use. Ideological factors help explain democratization and reconstruction challenges, partner leaders with divergent aims, military-cultural factors and the Western combat focus, politicization, corruption, and nepotism. This article reviews the differences between Western liberal democracies and partner states, the politics of counterinsurgency, and army accounts. This article will assist US practitioners in security cooperation, institutional capacity building, and security assistance.

Keywords: liberal peace, Afghan National Army, Iraqi Army, security sector reform, security force assistance

Within two years of the September 11 attacks, the United States found itself with substantial military forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. An enormous amount of foreign ideas and resources flowed into both countries. Security was crucial to any sustained reconstruction, so new armies were established in both countries. The two states became the largest examples of the West trying to rebuild armies amid counterinsurgencies (though from 2004 the process in the Democratic Republic of the Congo bears some similarities). Ensuring that both new forces were effective was crucial. At the higher strategic level, this process mostly became institutional capacity building, operationally and tactically, rebuilding efforts shaded into security force assistance

Both armies “mirrored” the fundamental features of the Anglo-American armies shepherding their rebirth. They were intended to be all-volunteer and virtually all light infantry. Making them all-volunteer cut across the Afghan and Iraqi previous conscript heritage of more than 70 years and their heavily

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Major Kyle Atwell of Sosh, who suggested I rewrite my *RUSI Journal* article for a US audience; Professor Tom-Durrell Young, Defense Security Cooperation University; Colonel Frank Sobchak (retired); Professor Bryan Watters, Cranfield University, previously with Civilian Police Assistance Training Team; Roger Mac Ginty for the liberal peace; and Dr. Paul Clemence at the New Zealand Command and Staff College Library. Also the two anonymous reviewers, who have my warm thanks; Theresa Hitchens, who first suggested I write for *Parameters*; and Ann Fitz-Gerald, who helped start me on this path more than a decade ago.

mechanized history. Without strong foundations in their own histories, these mirror-image characteristics dissolved after US withdrawal. In Iraq's case, more than a third of the army collapsed within four years of the United States leaving; in Afghanistan, the whole state and army dissolved as the Taliban swept across the country. These failures echo the 1991 collapse of the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan and the fall of South Vietnam in 1975. I have never found a contemporary case in which an outside liberal-democratic power that chose to fight an insurgency with its own forces in a big way has won. Indeed, such wars may not be "winnable."¹

Several quick postmortems of varying quality followed the defeats in both countries. Corruption, theft, and tribal characteristics were often highlighted. Some US and allied shortcomings were discussed. Following the hasty exit from Afghanistan, a bipartisan Afghanistan War Commission is now gathering momentum in Washington, DC. Yet, while Carl von Clausewitz said commanders must "know the character, the feelings, the habits, the peculiar faults and inclinations of those" they commanded, thus far, thorough self-reflection on US and allied traits has been uncommon.²

The role of classical liberal thought, the "liberal conscience," is little considered when explaining Western military outcomes since 2001. Nonetheless, when its effects on Western attempts to build strong, effective, and accountable armies in conflict-affected states are considered, it explains many of the failures, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Liberal Worldview

The politics that drive people are crucial. The Department of Defense is only the standard-bearer for the United States—its government, people, and ideas—as a whole. The Founding Fathers' most important values—individualism, freedom, democracy with limited government, resistance to tyranny, reason, rationality (and, thus, progress), and justice—are classical liberal values. Classical liberalism prizes the individual and their rights, liberty, reason, and the consent of the governed. The existence of a state is fundamental. Western states are animated by their liberal conscience. Justice and reason should prevail. War is an aberration, but fighting wars may advance progress and justice. Using the word *liberalism* is not intended to highlight a left-wing viewpoint. Right-wing American politics also argues for freedom, justice, and resistance to tyranny, but with different priorities.³

Ideas influence technical decisions. For example, it was decided to change the Afghan and Iraqi Armies from conscript to all-volunteer forces. Political decisions influence an enormous number of technical processes.

It was not immediately obvious that rebuilding the Afghan or Iraqi Armies would involve exporting America's fundamental classical liberal values. If a clearly anarchist or communist idea such as a state takeover of all private enterprises was advocated as part of US assistance to partner armies, it would be instantly and clearly seen as part of an ideological agenda. Conversely, a bedrock classical liberal idea, such as ensuring all offenders against military law received a fair trial (flowing from the liberal idea of justice), is not identified as ideological. It is accepted, endorsed, and advocated—and strongly—as part of the natural order. This is because classical liberal values have so permeated US culture that their influence is hard to separate from Western civilization in general.⁴

Yet, in Afghanistan and Iraq, other values reigned supreme, and classical liberalism had hardly been seen before. Their politics, history, and culture were very different. When a determined America arrived, especially, perhaps, in the zeal of Ambassador L. Paul Bremer in Baghdad, a clash of values, and resistance, was inevitable.

Neither Afghanistan nor Iraq had any experience with liberal democracy. Instead, Afghanistan had seen war since 1977; Iraq, political turbulence and military intervention in politics dating to the 1930s, and Saddam Hussein's dictatorship since 1979. Politics were dominated by violent winner-take-all confrontations.⁵

When the new Afghan and Iraqi armies were created, almost all Western military features were adopted. They were to be all-volunteer, well trained, and mostly light infantry. These new features meant fundamental change, as both had previously been conscript, heavily mechanized forces with uneven levels of training and motivation. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates later acknowledged that “too often we tried to build the Afghan force in our own image, not based on a more sustainable indigenous design.” Yet, building and training indigenous armies in the image of the US Army ranked “high on the list” of failed counterinsurgency practices. The mirror-image approach created an addiction to US support. The advisory function was given little importance, and personnel were poor quality. Development of logistics functions in Iraq and Afghanistan was almost literally an afterthought.⁶

Without solid foundations in their own heritage, these mirror-image characteristics did not last. National factional struggles were imported into the new security forces as they were created. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki began

to politicize all security forces, damaging their effectiveness. Iraqi falsehoods about their own effectiveness often deceived US personnel, and after the US withdrawal, the Iraqi Army lost much of the professionalism it had tried to instill. When the Islamic State's very small forces attacked, a third of the army collapsed, and two more divisions were badly mauled. As it was rebuilt, the army was supplemented by the Iranian-influenced Popular Mobilization Forces militias. By 2016–17, US military personnel concluded, "Afghan security forces . . . cannot succeed—or function—without . . . international[s]." Then, the entire Afghan Army and government dissolved with the Taliban advance in 2021. Neither army remained a strong, centralized force structured on Western liberal lines.⁷

Four Key Problems That Led to Large-Scale Collapse

Why did this collapse happen? Chance, friction, and technical program errors played a role, yet ideological and political choices set the overall conditions. Four key commonalities substantially affected these depressing outcomes.

1. The politicians and warlords in the two states had little or no interest in classical liberal democracy, including politically unified national institutions, government ministries, and militaries.
2. Afghanistan's and Iraq's education, health care, and other civilian agencies, worn down by constant repression and strife, could not provide anything like the preparation the US Army or Marines depend upon.
3. Western armies ultimately focus on regular warfare against organized opponents. Their culture, indoctrination, and internal politics have developed to meet that mission. They have never been intended, and are not well suited, to recreate social groups with very different values.
4. Corruption, nepotism, patronage, and politicization—neo-patrimonial dynamics, in academic terms—are real hindrances.⁸

"They Don't Want What We Want": Survival and Power, Not Liberal Policies

First, no important leaders in Afghanistan or Iraq had any particular commitment to liberal democracy. Westerners focused on achieving political settlements and emphasized holding elections. Regardless, no binding force impels cooperative politics to build stable nations. Bedrock liberal ideas—

that loyalties should be transferred from the illiberal clan or *qawm* to the state—were at the roots of both interventions. The United States and its allies created dilemmas about whom the Afghan and Iraqi peoples might trust by forcefully advocating a switch from clan or *qawm* loyalties to liberal ideology's loyalty to a sovereign state. Habits of violence were hard to break, and the stakes were far too high. Hamid Karzai's government in Afghanistan came to be seen as fundamentally corrupt. Beyond Afghanistan's presidential palace, the most powerful warlords and other strongmen used a variety of violent and coercive tactics to advance their interests.⁹

The same patterns developed in Iraq after 2003. A political free-for-all, often dependent on violence, replaced Saddam's tight control. Sunni-Shia relations broke down, extremism and resentment against foreign forces rose, and, in response, Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish communities became inward looking, arming to protect themselves from the others. Iraq's economics ministries "systematically [withheld] services from Sunni citizens while lavishing Western aid on programmes that benefited only Shias." Pakistani influence destabilized Afghanistan, while covert Iranian activities disrupted Afghanistan and Iraq. Finally, the insurgents had no interest in classical liberal ideas.¹⁰

Any sudden conversion to liberal-democratic processes would have been completely out of character. So, while surface forms changed, the underlying nature of often-violent politics did not. Warlords and political party leaders had little faith in democracy, so they perverted the new armies to suit themselves. Al-Maliki's government "became an instrument of sectarian warfare, . . . dominated by Shia militias which persistently prevented US forces from going after known Shia terrorists." In Afghanistan, political interference fanned ethnic factionalism. Unstable ethnic balancing damaged merit-based appointments—illiterate people were repeatedly placed in senior positions. Very different motivations meant, in turn, that neither strong governments, nor the strong civilian bodies that they create, existed to support the new armies.¹¹

Key Preparatory Institutions Were Insufficient

Western states evolved strong governments that needed and slowly created the institutions necessary to support effective armies. Over hundreds of years, the vast majority of the European states that existed in the 1600s disappeared through war. As they repeatedly mobilized for war, the successful survivors evolved the supporting agencies that are vital to Western armies. Most Western European states also became genuine democracies (with upsets and aberrations, such as Germany from 1933 to 1945). Their military effectiveness developed to serve democratic aims and became dependent certain liberal-democratic features.

Today, democratic armies in Europe and North America cannot be effective without other bodies being effective:

- functioning democratic political systems;
- policing and justice systems to ensure social compliance and the habit of that compliance in recruits;
- well-functioning education systems to provide quality recruits;
- health systems to ensure recruits are healthy; and
- many other functions in different ways.¹²

Most of these supporting bodies evolved through *external* wars. The successful surviving states established a “monopoly of violence” across their entire territories. Bureaucracies were created to raise and train large conscript armies. These bureaucracies grew into civilian life, building roads and providing services like education. The American Civil War produced many similar effects (for example, the Legal Tender Act of 1862 led to the creation of a national currency for the United States).¹³

Afghanistan and Iraq were created differently, the product of lines drawn on maps by colonizers. They were wracked by *internal* wars. Arguably, no central authority capable of seizing the “monopoly of violence” across all of Afghanistan has ever existed. States like Iraq have dissolved into violence when strongmen-rulers like Saddam were removed. War did not force either government to create an effective army (or bureaucracy) with the alternative meaning the state might disappear. Instead, their frontiers generally stayed the same, while rebellious minorities like the Kurds remained. Overambitious boundary lines insufficiently supported by strong authorities, however, were pushed farthest in Africa. Soon after US efforts to re-raise the Afghan and Iraqi armies started, a similar plan, to create 18 brigades, began in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Later, the same type of collapse occurred when the new force was called on to defend Goma.¹⁴

When the US military arrived, Afghan and Iraqi government agencies were feeble, biased, or nonexistent. Afghan and Iraqi citizens often had little faith in their national governments, sometimes for decades. Building liberal democracies and free markets was also a tall order. This type of social engineering in “historically minute time frames” had little success since the Cold War ended. American sponsorship of key politicians attracted repeated criticism. Weaknesses in schools, hospitals, policing, and elsewhere badly harmed efforts to rebuild

the military. Recruit belief in the nation varied wildly, health often suffered due to lack of resources, and schooling had been disrupted. As a result, the potential for soldiering was often significantly diminished.¹⁵

The Decisive Battle—Combat Focus

Western armies focus on winning decisive battles against other armies that stand and fight. Other activities are secondary. Advisory tasks remain outside the main focus—high-intensity armored and mechanized combat. The US Army has “rarely given sufficient priority” to advisory teams for foreign forces.¹⁶

This lack of priority is underlined by how long it took to set up specialist advisory units after 2001. Sixteen years after the war in Afghanistan began, and three years after the transfer of military responsibility to the Afghan authorities, specialist security force assistance brigades were created. Despite advocacy stretching back to 2007, however, no separate administrative branch was formed, which would have raised the status of combat advisers. Advisers would only shift in and out of security force assistance units, rather than be permanently part of a branch. Ideally, the most experienced soldiers would staff the brigades, to ensure they could give good advice. To ensure the brigades’ ranks were filled, however, the Army offered automatic promotion for volunteers, suspending professional military education requirements. In May 2021, the 5th Security Force Assistance Brigade had “its ranks stacked with poor performers with disciplinary baggage.” Adviser jobs were not seen as career enhancing. Cash bonuses had to be offered to transfer into a brigade, and while the general supervising the brigades has now been made equal in rank to the “line” division commanders, the post hardly has the same prestige.¹⁷

Western armies’ indoctrination builds teamwork and adherence to orders. The initial training focus is toward a positivist, optimistic approach so that a platoon leader is ready to lead 30–40 soldiers over the “last hundred yards,” using hand-to-hand fighting, if necessary, to seize enemy positions. Officers are honed toward “gripping” a situation and taking action. British Army doctrine explicitly describes action as better than inaction. The resulting, often forceful personalities are attuned toward *breaking* things on the battlefield, however, not slow consensus building to *make* things in a starkly different culture. Choosing the dominant Western all-volunteer force option, rather than conscription, meant potential soldiers with key skills often found better-paying civilian jobs. As a result, Afghan and Iraqi soldiers often needed significant skill

development to operate effectively. Results were patchy and frequently disrupted. Foreign army officers were often tempted to take over and do tasks themselves.¹⁸

On September 11, 2001, the US Army had an officially approved counterinsurgency doctrine, though with some flaws. But it did not have a manual or existing terms for rebuilding an army from scratch. Comparable experiences in South Vietnam and South Korea were forgotten or set aside. The nearest applicable doctrine was foreign internal defense, which Special Forces used to help host states against insurgency. Nevertheless, the mostly “Big Army” soldiers tasked with overseeing the rebuilding processes had little or no foreign internal defense knowledge. The new security force assistance doctrine helped fill this gap at the tactical level. The strategic-level, organizational mechanics of creating whole new armies—now often termed institutional capacity building—were far less emphasized. Logistics and maintenance were developed late in Afghanistan and built to mirror US practices, and the United States provided most logistics in Iraq for many years. Institutional support structures were built late, ad hoc, or ignored. They had been hardly considered before 2001.¹⁹

Doctrine like security force assistance is frequently treated as a technical field, and doing so helps soldiers master the chaos of war. Repetition is the mother of clarity, and constant training improves execution and calms fears. Technical approaches are used to instruct soldiers on how to employ weapons. For example, there is a field manual on how to use an M2 Browning machine gun. To clean, clear, load, and fire a machine gun, one can preset routines and achieve fixed, predetermined outcomes. An engineering approach leads to controllable outcomes.²⁰

The problem with treating many military activities as preset and technically achievable becomes clearer when one looks at tank company tactics field manuals. These manuals outline specific actions to maneuver tank companies to achieve success. Nonetheless, a 14-tank attack is not clearing and elevating a machine gun. Friction, human error, and plain luck can make or break it. It is not a malleable, controllable outcome. The same type of technical approach is visible, to some extent, at brigade-level, division-level, and higher-level doctrine. For example, Brigadier General Huba Wass de Czege, author of the 1980s AirLand Battle doctrine worried that some contemporary field manuals were taking “an engineering approach” to war. Technical inputs can fail because persuading other people is necessary—not just manipulating weapons in certain sequences. It is also nearly impossible to explain or predict how technical inputs

will alter recipient countries' social processes or individual behaviors. Training programs almost never change the recipients' values.²¹

Well-entrenched power players bitterly resisted Western attempts to seize control, and often succeeded (and continue to do so). They almost always succeeded because of the strength of personal connections, despite frequent technical or material disadvantages.

Personal and Familial Connections Defeated Institution Building

The coalition's failures testify to strong motivations of people to act for family, friends, or other personal connections—patron and client networks, in academic terms. Professionalism became meaningless; patronage and corruption grew. Patronage networks affected senior Afghan Army appointments until the final moments. Afghan National Army supplies sales were often mentioned “as a major factor in demotivation.” Rumors emerged of Afghan Army personnel involvement in the drug trade and positions being sold for cash. Soldiers sold Military equipment. For al-Maliki in Iraq, the security forces’ “hard-won-professionalism . . . meant they could not be trusted to do his bidding . . . [and] he began to systematically politicize [them] to ensure [they were] wholly subservient to his will.” After the US withdrawal in 2011, “political, tribal and family favouritism expanded out of control. The most senior positions in the military were run by unqualified persons . . . many focused on avoiding work and making money through corruption.” These incompetent senior officers also stopped training the troops. The eventual result was large-scale collapse.²²

Recommendations

Many often-theoretical ideas have been discussed above. What relationship do they have to soldiering where the rubber hits the road? What can this article contribute for curious captains, majors, lieutenant colonels, or senior noncommissioned officers, who are now frequently focused on Russian battalion tactical groups, not insurgents?

Our liberal values help explain much of our armies' successes—and failures. Western armies may almost always be superior in the tactical fight, but at the strategic level, many influential power players, almost always men, around the world do not share our liberal values. Western domestic constituencies understand little of this reality. If the problems were more tactical, they would have been more fixable. American and British reluctance to reflect on the successes and failures in Afghanistan and the almost hasty turn toward the new Russian regular threat risk repeating the willful forgetting of Vietnam.

Nevertheless, the demand for irregular deployments will probably increase as the century continues. Worldwide political reluctance to take major steps to fend off climate change will result in natural disasters and conflict, weaken many allies and partners, and likely lead to an increase in deployment requests.²³

The Federal Government

The first set of recommendations sits at the national level. The first, second, and fourth factors identified above are not best addressed by the Department of Defense—neither by the military departments nor combatant commanders. Neither have much expertise in these matters. They are better addressed by other parts of the federal government.

When Western military expeditions (or UN peace operations driven by the same liberal ideas) are dispatched, they face a vast gap in understanding and, often, sustained resistance. The political problems that spark expeditions are often left half finished. Influential power players in these places fear reforms that will reduce their power.²⁴

A first change seems obvious and has already been partially implemented. Do not go. Fewer interventions should be launched. Robert S. McNamara regretted his actions looking back at Vietnam; Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, and Colin Powell working for him, tried to limit interventions. There was diminished enthusiasm for an international security force to Libya. British Chiefs of Defence Staff have described trying to fend off such expeditions, including to Zimbabwe. With much greater knowledge, France tried to influence events in the Sahel with significant forces since 2013, but political changes in 2022–23 destroyed much of their efforts.²⁵

Second, the Department of State is present worldwide and has the US government lead for relationships with other nations. For many of these human rather than overhead-imagery problems, the Department of State is the reconnaissance asset already in place. There should be more consideration for, cooperation with, and resources for the Department of State. As Secretary of Defense James Mattis said, “if you don’t fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition.” The Department of Defense and, in effect, the Department of the Army should not lead these efforts. They should be backing off. “Militarizing” a challenge can go horribly wrong. These activities are not technical ones to be planned, managed, or solved. The impulse to write a program plan and push it through should be avoided at all costs.²⁶

The first course of action should be to initiate discussions with the correct bureau in the Department of State. The Department of State’s political knowledge

should shape and dictate the outlines of any military assistance or larger Army reconstruction program because it will have a significantly greater chance of achieving overall federal government goals. The more that indigenous partners shape activities, the more sustainable the results will be. After the program's outlines are set, it is perhaps the United States Agency for International Development that has a better chance of successfully implementing programs. The Department of the Army, combatant commands, or the Department of Defense should be just *one* US agency involved in such efforts. To achieve program success in different cultures, they should not be *leading*. The Department of State should virtually always *lead*. The United States Agency for International Development and the Department of Defense can *execute* under the Department of State's control. A well-executed example of this type of interagency program was the Bosnia Train and Equip Program of the late 1990s.²⁷

Third, if forces go overseas, expectations should be severely tempered; expecting strong Westphalian states is not realistic. More local input and listening more to locals' ideas—and less insistence on liberal ideas—will produce a more sustainable peace their way and waste less effort. The impact of an intervention will diminish over time, whatever Western actors do.²⁸

Fourth, if regional security is the paramount aim, then liberal programs can be obstacles. “Too often we arrive thinking we know better than the locals and [foist] on communities a series of programs they neither want nor need.” A clear example was the enlistment of women that led to one in eight female Afghan National Police officers being sexually abused. Refuges for battered wives were sometimes unwelcome in Afghanistan. Liberal ideas need only be pushed as far as they advance the overall aim. Are we only replicating our own models instead of choosing options that might work? Tribal, ethnic, “hybrid school,” and non-state solutions ought to be considered again and again.²⁹

The Military

Military departments, not civilian ones, are regularly asked to take on responsibilities more properly civilian in faraway lands or are called upon to “win,” despite formidable political compromises. Irregular warfare should be a major priority, which promotions and preparation should reflect.

Two major starting points for the US Army are clear. First, the US Army should prepare for regular, conventional, *and* irregular warfare, giving irregular tasks perhaps 40 percent of its effort. A framework for implementation is readily available: the 2005 directive prioritizing stability operations equally with combat. Second, personnel is policy. Promoting ready adapters to the senior ranks is vital. After Secretary of Defense Gates signed off on an unusual promotion list,

H. R. McMaster did attain the rank of general. Chief of Staff of the Army Raymond T. Odierno followed up on some of this in 2011–12, drawing up new rules for the Army’s promotion boards. Then momentum was lost, and, so, more needs to be done. For example, virtually no one is considering offering John Nagl reinstatement within the active Army at the rank of major general. The point is not the names of the individuals written above; it is that the Army needs people in the senior ranks who can adapt better.³⁰

What about institutional capacity building lower down the hierarchy? Here, a modified version of David Kilcullen’s “28 Articles” may prove useful:

- Fundamentally civilian responsibilities should be mentored by civilians. For uniformed officers, the focus should be on the higher-level personnel because the military works by hierarchy. A lower-level focus may just build more capable human rights abusers.
- Get to know one’s turf—the country, government, and previous military and security assistance efforts, grievances, and history—as much as possible.
- Unorthodox, innovative approaches (as mission command allows) can be very effective and will sometimes be vital.
- Balance the potential conflict between your instructions, what the partner headquarters wants, and needs for one’s specific area of operations or task (derived from article 22). What approaches will produce sustainable effects—even if they are not quite what our values would prefer? What will the result look like if one imagines the effects after five years? Will the mission be closer to success?³¹

Conclusion

Much of the world’s influential decisionmakers do not share the Western liberal conscience. Many have bitterly resisted Western attempts to impose liberal solutions. The general Western aim in the developing world is regional stability, preventing large-scale conflict. Climate change will increasingly make Western activities in the developing world harder and, long term, will force some sort of managed retreat. To achieve regional stability, it will often be best to reduce program aims that are too obviously, plainly, liberal.

The crucial importance of ideas—liberalism and its values—underpinning the whole approach taken by the US Army and its close partners to irregular operations has hardly been grasped. This article focuses on the strategic level and draws heavily from the political science literature. To help chart a better way forward, several areas of future study could be explored profitably: confirmation of this research at the operational and tactical level, from much more on-the-ground data; division- and brigade-level confirming cases across Afghanistan and Iraq; an examination of related challenges, such as United Nations peace operations, with the large-scale army reconstruction effort in the Democratic Republic of the Congo an obvious first choice; and the study of liberalism's effects on police and paramilitary assistance programs.

What are the potential consequences of ignoring the failures canvassed in this article, most starkly clear in the collapse of US and allied hopes in Afghanistan in 2021 and in South Vietnam in the early 1970s? If the US Army does not change its habits of thinking, it risks further large-scale failures. Just over 25 years after South Vietnam was lost, the Army was drawn into what became another large-scale counterinsurgency fight in Afghanistan. Thousands of US lives were lost, with many more wounded, to say nothing of Afghan and allied casualties; trillions of dollars were spent; and now, many returned veterans are left to wonder if their comrades' deaths really counted for anything. If the Army does not change itself, it risks repetition—in a century in which Chinese and Russian power may exact much more of a price than the consequences that followed Afghanistan. For example, in southern Somalia, repeating the current failed approach over and over again brings Islamic insurgents there within striking distance of repeating the Taliban's large-scale victories. The US Army needs to take irregular warfare much, much, more seriously, if it wants to avoid future defeats.

Colin D. Robinson

Dr. Colin D. Robinson lectures on defense leadership and management at Cranfield Defence and Security, Shrivenham, United Kingdom. He began his tracking of Operation Enduring Freedom while at the Center for Defense Information in Washington, DC, in 2002. He has worked for the New Zealand Ministry of Defence, the New Zealand Defence Force, and the United Nations, has assisted in military advisory efforts, and, academically, was attached to Massey University in New Zealand, the University of Liberia (2016–17), and the eSchool of Professional Military Education, United States Air Force Air University (2020–22).

Endnotes

1. David Fitzgerald, *Learning to Forget: US Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 52–53; and Fred M. Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 168. [Return to text.](#)
2. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J. J. Graham (London: Nicholas Trübner, 1873), book 2, chap. 2, para. 45, <https://clausewitzstudies.org/readings/OnWar1873/BK2ch02.html>. This is the obsolete Graham translation, but the point remains clear whichever translation is used. [Return to text.](#)
3. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Ware [Herts]: Wordsworth Abridged Edition, 1997), book 1, chap. 1, pg. 24; Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 26–27, 31–34; Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, Adelphi Paper 379 (Abingdon, UK: Routledge for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2006), 35; and Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience*, rev. ed. (London: Hurst, 2008). [Return to text.](#)
4. Heywood, *Political Ideologies*, 26. [Return to text.](#)
5. Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007). [Return to text.](#)
6. Stephanie Cronin, “Building and Rebuilding Afghanistan’s Army: A Historical Perspective,” *Journal of Military History* 75, no. 1 (January 2011): 79–80; Denis Steele, “Building an Armored Division from Scratch, Scrap, and Trust,” *ARMY Magazine* (September 2006); Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 569; Kalev I. Sepp, “Best Practices in Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review* (May–June 2005): 11, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/PDF-UA-docs/Sepp-May-June-2005-UA.pdf>; Colin D. Robinson, “What Explains the Failure of U.S. Army Reconstruction in Afghanistan?,” *Defense & Security Analysis* 34, no. 3 (2018): 251, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2018.1500756>; Donald P. Wright and Timothy Reese, *On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign: The United States Army in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM May 2003–January 2005* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press / US Army Combined Arms Center, 2008), 463–64; and Antonio Giustozzi, *The Army of Afghanistan: A Political History of a Fragile Institution* (London: Hurst, 2016), 163–69. [Return to text.](#)
7. Kenneth M. Pollack, *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 166–68; Tom Durrell-Young, Defense Security Cooperation University, Washington, DC, comments on draft manuscript, January 2024; Norman Ricklefs, “The Iraqi Military, The US-Led Coalition and the Mosul Operation: The Risk of Snatching Defeat from the Jaws of Victory,” *Small Wars Journal* (website), December 22, 2016, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-iraqi-military-the-us-led-coalition-and-the-mosul-operation-the-risk-of-snatching-defeat>; Mitchell Prothero, “Iraqi Army Remains on Defensive as Extent of June Debacle Becomes Clearer,” McClatchy DC (website), July 14, 2014, <https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24770476.html>; Martin Loicano and Craig C. Felker, “In Our Own Image: Training the Afghan National Security Forces,” in *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, ed. Aaron B. O’Connell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 109; and Anatol Lieven, “Opinion: Why Afghan Forces So Quickly Laid Down Their Arms” *Politico* (website), August 16, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/08/16/afghanistan-history-taliban-collapse-504977>. [Return to text.](#)
8. Colin D. Robinson, “Why Did Rebuilding the Afghan and Iraqi Armies Fail?,” *RUSI Journal* 167, nos. 4/5 (December 2022): 26–39, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-journal/why-did-rebuilding-afghan-and-iraqi-armies-fail>. [Return to text.](#)
9. Thomas J. Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 338–43; and Romain Malejacq, *Warlord Survival: The Delusion of State Building in Afghanistan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020). [Return to text.](#)
10. International Crisis Group, *Unmaking Iraq: A Constitutional Process Gone Awry*, Middle East Briefing no. 19 (Amman/Brussels: International Crisis Group, September 2005), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/unmaking-iraq-constitutional-process-gone-awry>; and Kaplan, *Insurgents*, 210. [Return to text.](#)
11. Kaplan, *Insurgents*, 210; and Giustozzi, *Army of Afghanistan*, 141–42. [Return to text.](#)
12. Charles Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” in *Collective Violence, Contentious Politics, and Social Change: A Charles Tilly Reader*, ed. Ernesto Castañeda and Cathy Schneider (New York: Routledge, 2017). [Return to text.](#)
13. James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 444–47. [Return to text.](#)

14. Christopher Cramer and Jonathan Goodhand, "Try Again, Fail Again, Fail Better? War, the State, and the 'Post-Conflict' Challenge in Afghanistan," *Development and Change* 33, no. 5 (2002): 898; Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Denis M. Tull, "The Limits and Unintended Consequences of UN Peace Enforcement: The Force Intervention Brigade in the DR Congo," *International Peacekeeping* 25, no. 2 (2018): 174, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2017.1360139>. **Return to text.**
15. Robert Egnell and Peter Haldén, "Laudable, Ahistorical and Overambitious: Security Sector Reform Meets State Formation Theory," *Conflict, Security & Development* 9, no. 1 (2009): 47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678800802704903>. **Return to text.**
16. Brian Bond, *The Pursuit of Victory: From Napoleon to Saddam Hussein* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3–4; Antulio J. Echevarria II, "An American Way of War or Way of Battle?," US Army War College Press, January 1, 2004, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1290&context=articles_editorials; and John A. Nagl, *Institutionalizing Adaptation: It's Time for an Army Advisor Corps* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, June 2007). **Return to text.**
17. Nagl, "Institutionalizing Adaptation"; Meghann Myers, "Army Offers Automatic Promotions to Security Force Assistance Brigade Volunteers," *Army Times* (website), October 11, 2017, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2017/10/11/army-offers-automatic-promotions-to-security-force-assistance-brigade-volunteers/>; Steve Beynon, "Inside One of the Army's Most Chaotic Brigades," *Military.com*, *Yahoo News* (website), May 10, 2023, <https://news.yahoo.com/inside-one-armys-most-chaotic-200305278.html>; and Christopher Woody, "The Army Wants to Send Its Newest Units Worldwide, but the Top Watchdog in Afghanistan Says It's Struggling to Find Enough Troops to Do the Job," *Business Insider* (website), September 5, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/army-considering-deploying-sfab-to-africa-asia-despite-troop-concerns-2019-9>. **Return to text.**
18. Daniel R. Lake, "Technology, Qualitative Superiority, and the Overstretched American Military," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 71–99, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA571012.pdf>; and Giustozzi, *Army of Afghanistan*. **Return to text.**
19. Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance, "JCISFA SFA Planners' Guide for FSF Force Development," draft, October 15, 2009, chap. 1, pg. 9, lines 57–58; Colin Robinson, "Where the State Is Not Strong Enough: What Can Army Reconstruction Tell Us about Change Necessary to the OECD DAC SSR Principles?" (PhD diss., Cranfield University, November 2011), <https://dspace.lib.cranfield.ac.uk/bitstreams/8ad9084f-d71a-401c-b408-e55fbd661c9d/download>; Giustozzi, *Army of Afghanistan*, 164–69, 192; and Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, vol. 1, *Invasion, Insurgency, Civil War, 2003–2006* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2019), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/386/>. **Return to text.**
20. See Robert M. Gagne, "Military Training and Principles of Learning," *American Psychologist* 17, no. 2 (1962): 83–91, <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/h0048613>; and Library of Congress, "United States Army Field Manuals: A Resource Guide and Inventory – Series 23: Basic Weapons," Library of Congress (website), n.d., <https://guides.loc.gov/us-army-field-manuals/series-21-41series-23>. **Return to text.**
21. Kaplan, *Insurgents*, 162; Egnell and Haldén, "Laudable, Ahistorical and Overambitious," 47; and Gary Felicetti, "The Limits of Training in Iraqi Force Development," *Parameters* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 71–83. **Return to text.**
22. Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan*, 379, 409; Giustozzi, *Army of Afghanistan*, 183; Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 167; and Michael Knights, *The Future of Iraq's Armed Forces* (Baghdad: Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, March 2016), 18, <https://www.bayancenter.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/The-future.pdf>. **Return to text.**
23. Conrad C. Crane, "From the Acting Editor in Chief," *Parameters* 53, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 5, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol53/iss1/7/>; and Hew Strachan, back cover comments, Ben Barry, *Blood, Metal, and Dust* (Oxford, UK: Osprey, 2020). **Return to text**
24. Georg Sørensen, "A Different Security Dilemma: Liberals Facing Weak and Failed States," chap. 4 in *A Liberal World Order in Crisis: Choosing between Imposition and Restraint* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011). **Return to text.**

25. Robert MacNamara with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 332; Walter LaFeber, “The Rise and Fall of Colin Powell and the Powell Doctrine,” *Political Science Quarterly* 124, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 71–93, <https://www.psqonline.org/article.cfm?IDArticle=18392>; Gates, *Duty*, 510–13; David Richards, *Taking Command* (London: Headline, 2014), 333; Cole Moreton, “Lord Guthrie: ‘Tony’s General’ Turns Defence into an Attack,” *Independent* (website), November 11, 2007, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/lord-guthrie-tony-s-general-turns-defence-into-an-attack-399865.html>; and Cyril Bensimon et al., “The Insurmountable Failure of France’s Strategy in the Sahel,” *Le Monde* (website), November 4, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/11/04/the-insurmountable-failure-of-france-s-strategy-in-the-sahel_6226447_4.html. [Return to text.](#)
26. Dan Lamothe, “Retired Generals Cite Past Comments from Mattis while Opposing Trump’s Foreign Aid Cuts,” *Washington Post* (website), February 27, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/02/27/retired-generals-cite-past-comments-from-mattis-while-opposing-trumps-proposed-foreign-aid-cuts/>; and Professor Tom Durell-Young, comments on draft manuscript, January 2024. [Return to text.](#)
27. Christopher J. Lamb, Sarah Arkin, and Sally Scudder, eds., *The Bosnian Train and Equip Program: A Lesson in Interagency Integration of Hard and Soft Power* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2014). [Return to text.](#)
28. Hanna Leonardsson and Gustav Rudd, “The ‘Local Turn’ in Peacebuilding: A Literature Review of Effective and Emancipatory Local Peacebuilding,” *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 825–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1029905>. [Return to text.](#)
29. David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (London: Hurst, 2010), 47; this author’s personal experience in East Africa, 2021–22; discussions with United Nations staff member of the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan, first half of 2015; European police adviser, Nairobi, November 2021; and Lou Pinget, “Policing, Security Sector Reform and the Rule of Law: More State, More Security?,” *International Peacekeeping* 30, no. 1 (2023): 57–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2022.2144251>. [Return to text.](#)
30. Kaplan, *Insurgents*, 122. [Return to text.](#)
31. Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 30–44; and retired British brigadier general with extensive service in Africa, 2008–9. [Return to text.](#)



DSSPACE

<https://dspace.org/>

Why the Afghan and Iraqi armies collapsed: an allied perspective

Robinson, Colin D.

2024-08-29

United States Army War College Press

<https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.3303>

Robinson CD. (2024) Why the Afghan and Iraqi armies collapsed: an allied perspective. The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters, Volume 54, Issue 3, Autumn 2024, Article number 7