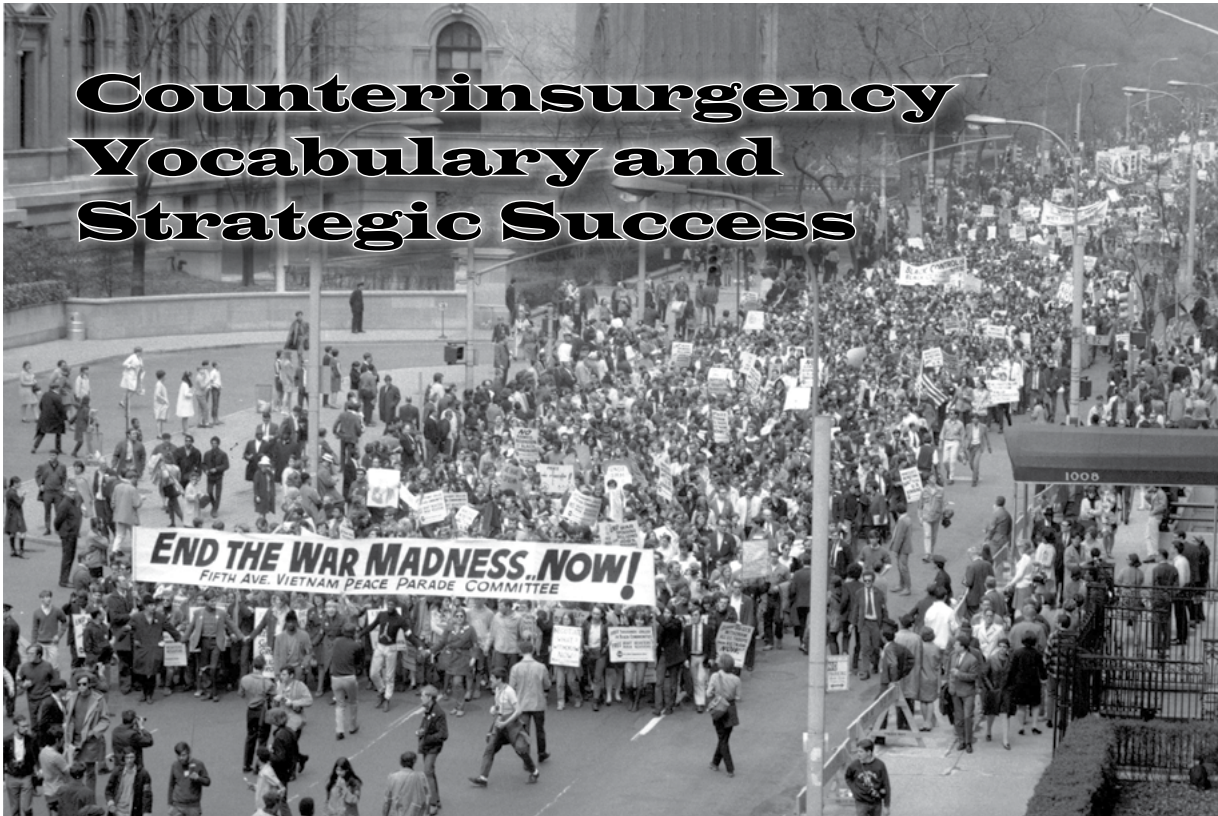


Counterinsurgency Vocabulary and Strategic Success



James Thomas Snyder

WESTERN GOVERNMENTS AND MILITARIES lack a basic vocabulary to articulate counterinsurgency strategy, process, and success to their publics. The domestic public is a strategic battleground in counterinsurgency, and Western governments must fight for support at home as well as abroad.

Insurgents wreak havoc not only to maintain control over indigenous populations but also to dislodge foreign forces by alienating international public support for those forces.¹ Current counterinsurgency doctrine recognizes this; in fact, this was understood in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and outlined in the Weinberger Doctrine of 1984, which articulated strategic objectives “supported by the widest possible number of our citizens.”² Although many scholars focus on the tactical and leadership failures that led to the loss of the Vietnam War, the collapse of political support in Congress after the public abandoned the war made a winning strategy impossible.³

Osama bin-Laden famously argued that the American and allied withdrawal from Lebanon and Somalia demonstrated that a collapse of public support follows U.S. casualties, proving that tactical setbacks can have strategic consequences.⁴ Indeed, the media often relate public opinion to major military events, and terrorists attempt to exploit their strategic effects.⁵

Political support for a conflict historically cannot survive if public support for it drops below 50 percent. When more than half the population opposed the war in Vietnam in 1967, public support for the conflict never recovered (Figure 1). Similarly, after 2007, support for the war in Iraq collapsed and never recovered despite the extraordinary success U.S. and Iraqi counterinsurgency forces

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PHOTO: Protesters against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War march down Fifth Avenue in New York City, 27 April 1968. (AP PHOTO)

Mistake to Send Troops to Vietnam?

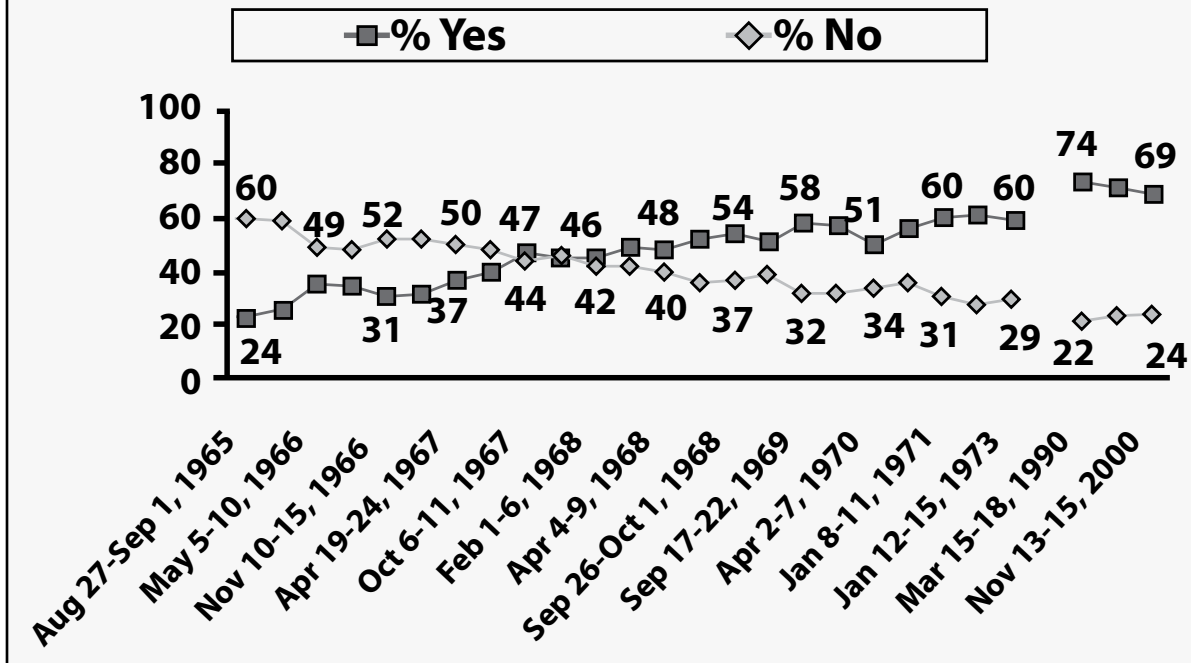


Figure 1. Gallup poll on Vietnam.

achieved. Nevertheless, just as with Vietnam, public frustration with Iraq can have strategic consequences: it suggests an Iraq War fatigue that makes extended or emergency commitments elsewhere far less likely. Public opinion has not yet reached this point for Afghanistan, but the possibility of its doing so makes the subject of this article imminently critical (Figure 2).

Insurgencies are different from conventional warfare in part due to their lengthy duration. In the modern era, the average successful insurgency has lasted 12 to 15 years.⁶ By comparison, the Second World War lasted five years for Great Britain and four years for the United States, and the “shooting phase” of the Korean conflict lasted only three years. More recently, conventional warfare has lived up to its “high-intensity” reputation in the Six Day War (1967), the 38 days of air strikes followed by the 100-hour liberation of Kuwait (1991), the 78-day war over Kosovo (1999), the two-month capitulation of Afghanistan (2001), the three-week conquest of Iraq (2003), and the five-day war in Georgia (2008). Major combat seems to start dramatically and stop just as quickly.

These wars of major combat also share a neat and ultimately misleading narrative structure: a surprising start, dramatic combat, and violent conclusion. The narrative of World War II is the *ur*-narrative. Dozens of movies and documentaries during the past 60 years have helped shape the public’s basic understanding of the normative concept of warfare: bad nations commit aggression, good nations reluctantly fight back, and through force of arms, the enemy submits to unconditional surrender. The inevitable intimacy that occurs when nations fight—and the years-long post-war occupations that have occurred in Japan, Korea, Germany, Austria, Iraq, and the Balkans—fall inconveniently away from this tidy storyline. When war fails to fit the *ur*-narrative, we lack the tools to understand and articulate it.

We must develop these tools because insurgencies and other wars among the people are the normative reality of warfare.⁷ Messy insurgencies, occupations, and efforts at nationbuilding dominate military operations, but they don’t dominate our public’s shared understanding of modern warfare.

Even the short wars cited above led to sticky wars among the people. Israel is still living with the messy consequences of its occupation of territory after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The two wars over Iraq have not ended. Assuming U.S. withdrawal from Iraq at the end of 2011, the combined conflicts and monitoring and enforcement operations will have lasted 20 years. NATO remains in Kosovo more than a decade after the war with the former Yugoslavia. After taking over from NATO in 2004, European Union forces remain in Bosnia 16 years after the Dayton Peace Accords.

We must uncouple the current fights from words and expressions associated with conventional warfare and with past, mostly unsuccessful, insurgencies. Conventional warfare has left us with a standard vocabulary readily understood by the public: *fight, win, victory, prevail, front, battle, line, surrender, exhaust, campaign, destroy, kill, attack, prisoner, assault, casualty, flank, shell, comrade, death, loss, ally, enemy, push, retreat, crush, and smash*. These are vivid, intense words that also accurately represent, rather than euphemistically distort, high-intensity warfare. Words not directly associated with violence can be considered positive, even in the case of those like *loss, surrender, and retreat*—provided they occur to the enemy.

Unfortunately, commonly understood words relating to Western militaries and insurgencies are almost entirely negative: *quagmire, exit strategy, defeat, failure, guerrilla, terrorist, police action, coup, resistance, insurgency, search and destroy, hearts and minds, pacification, intervention, attrition, withdrawal, pullout, timeline, transition*.

This situation has left us with a dearth of vocabulary to describe the fight we are in or to rally public support for a long war. We find it difficult to place tactical setbacks and defeats in a strategic and political context, or even to define and articulate success.

Compare our current predicament with Winston Churchill's expansive vow to the House of Commons with its inclusive, stirring rhetoric: "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."⁸ The rallying calls evoked recently do not resonate with the public like Churchill's did. Compare General David Petraeus's remarks in a recent interview: "There's no hill to take and flag to plant and proclamation of victory. Rather it's just hard work."⁹

The uniquely political aspect of counterinsurgency poses a particular challenge to articulating progress, explaining setbacks, and maintaining

Thinking now about U.S. military action in Afghanistan that began in October 2001, do you think the United States made a mistake in sending military forces to Afghanistan, or not?

■ % Yes, made a mistake ■ % No, did not

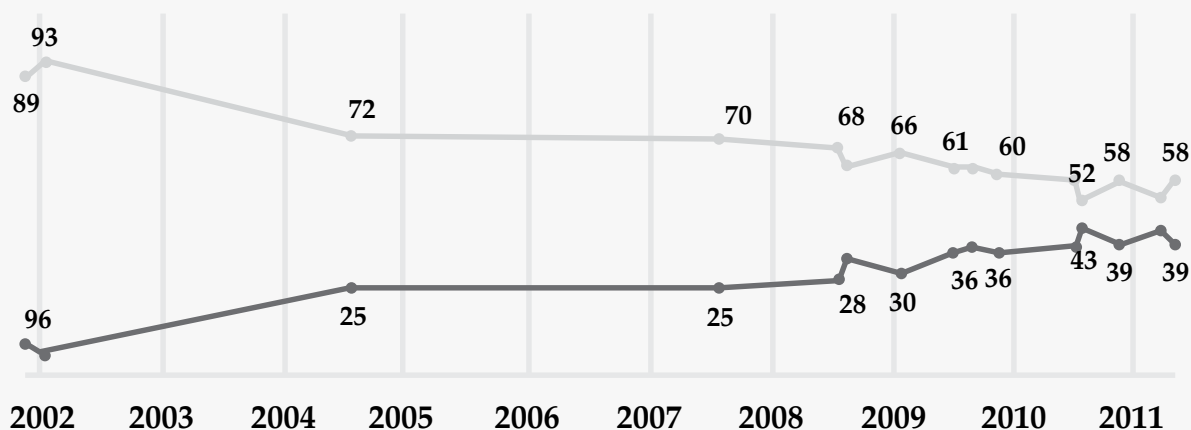


Figure 2. American public opinion on Afghanistan.

support for long-term operations. Common political expressions either relate too similarly to conventional warfare—*campaign, fight, win, coalition, victory, triumph, enemy, defeat*—or they appear entirely alien and even inappropriate to the context of warfare—*cooperate, co-opt, reach out to, join, reconcile, stand with, work together, ally, friend*. Clichés compound this problem. Political figures often use clichés to make their actions sound more vigorous than they are—*rolling up our sleeves, standing shoulder to shoulder, getting down to work, finding common ground, working hard*—but do little to articulate reality.

In counterinsurgency as in democracy, politics is essential.¹⁰ Indeed, counterinsurgency reminds us of the wisdom of Clausewitz's famous observation that "war is politics by other means." Politics is an intense, energetic, intimate human activity, but unfortunately, it appears entirely ephemeral to an outsider. Finding, articulating, and assimilating a real and robust vocabulary to describe political actions, achievements, and obstacles is like the "slow boring of hard boards," in the words of sociologist Max Weber.¹¹ But doing so is vital to explain the difficult work and unsteady progress of counterinsurgency.

The Bush and Obama administrations corrected themselves in the way they communicated by eliminating vocabulary associated with conventional warfare. The next step we should take is to change the direction and tone in discussing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with the public. General Petraeus, in particular, applied a specific lesson from the war in Vietnam to speak honestly about the challenges of insurgency, and not to inflate expectations for success, but to reduce them in order to maintain understanding, if not necessarily support, among the American public for the current war.

As James H. Willbanks, director of the military history department at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, noted in an opinion article written during the anniversary of the Tet Offensive:

To dampen antiwar sentiment, [President Lyndon] Johnson and [General William] Westmoreland encouraged what turned out to be false expectations about our prospects in Vietnam, and this colored Americans' perception of the Tet offensive, stretching the president's credibility gap to the

breaking point. A tactical victory became a strategic defeat and led to the virtual abdication of President Johnson. General Tran Do of North Vietnam acknowledged that the offensive failed to achieve its objectives, but noted that the public reaction in the United States was "a fortunate result."

Gen. David Petraeus . . . is a student of the Vietnam War whose doctoral dissertation at Princeton was titled "The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam." Clearly, he internalized those lessons, because, in discussing the surge and the progress of the war in Iraq, he has studiously avoided building undue expectations and has repeatedly said that there will be tough times ahead.¹²

Indeed, Petraeus' guidance for Afghanistan was explicit on this point: "Manage expectations. Avoid premature declarations of success. Note what has been accomplished and what still needs to be done. Strive to under-promise and over-deliver."¹³

It is one thing to purge public discussion of particular language, and even to alter the basic approach, but what national security communications professionals need, on a daily basis, is a fundamental tool—a vocabulary—to articulate the current struggle in a way that makes immediate sense and has an instant impact with the Western public that must support the fighting for it to be successful.

To my mind, current messaging relating to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan does not make an immediate impact with the public and may contribute to declining support. Here are some examples.



GEN David Petraeus testifies on Capitol Hill before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Afghanistan, Washington, DC, 9 December 2009.

(AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)



A protester holds a placard with pictures of Americans who have died in the war in Iraq at a demonstration by various activist groups calling for an end to U.S. involvement in Iraq, Philadelphia, PA, 18 June 2003.

First, an excerpt from a 2007 *Economist* article quoting General Sir David Dannat, former British Army Chief of Staff:

[T]he generals plead for more time. They point to Iraq's Anbar province, where Sunni tribes are turning against al-Qaeda. In Afghanistan, says Britain's General Dannatt, "strategic patience" is essential. American officers quote internal studies showing that it takes nine years on average (and often much longer) to defeat insurgencies. Yet perseverance is no guarantee of victory; many campaigns have taken as long, if not longer, to lose.¹⁴

Next, excerpts from a speech delivered by President Barack Obama on 1 December 2009, as he announced his decision to change strategy in Afghanistan:

Now, let me be clear: None of this will be easy. The struggle against violent extremism will not be finished quickly. We must reverse the Taliban's momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government.

Our overarching goal remains the same: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Finally, comments by Afghan President Hamid Karzai at the NATO Summit in Lisbon, Portugal, in November 2010:

We are confident that the transition will succeed, to the Afghan authority, leadership and ownership because I found today a strong commitment by the international community. This strong commitment by the international community will be matched by determination and hard work by the people of Afghanistan. The two combined will give us the results of an effective, irreversible and sustainable transition.¹⁵

Expressions the British general used such as *strategic patience* have little utility because they are terms of art. In popular application, the term *patience* is a passive concept: patience is not active; it does not achieve anything. To apply a sports metaphor, patience does not win a marathon. *Stamina* and *endurance* do.

Table 1—Words: *endurance, stamina, pressure, gain, loss, obstacle, disappoint, encourage, progress, benchmark, goal, build, construct, overwhelm, positive, flood, reinforce, bolster, energy, dogged, resolute, strong-willed, single-minded, common purpose, methodical, mass*

Table 2—Expressions: *give our friends a fighting chance, build up our friends, break down our enemies, strengthen our friends, reconcile our adversaries, destroy our enemies, leave the country stronger than we found it, make friends of enemies, friends in the fight, constructing capabilities*

The President's *reversing momentum* and *denying ability* are the grammatical equivalent of achieving negatives: at best, they reach a zero sum. As to *disrupt, dismantle, and defeat*, does this occur concurrently or progressively? Finally, *sustainable transition* means nothing to the lay audience; it is unquantifiable policy jargon. It has no substance.¹⁶

In ideal circumstances, we might select a vocabulary and test it with focus groups in a controlled environment and across target audiences (in different countries).¹⁷ This is both extremely expensive and time-consuming. Alternatively, we can start to apply and test new words and rhetorical concepts, beginning a discussion among professionals about how best to gain and maintain support with the public.

The lists in Tables 1 and 2 are by no means exhaustive. They intend to begin a discussion, to encourage experimentation. It is hard to come by the perfect expression that is both easy to remember and accurately summarizes a policy, strategy, or

event. Not every day do we get something as clear and accurate as "clear, hold, and build."

In the meantime, it is important for communications professionals to—

- Speak and write plainly and literally, without euphemism.
- Use simple, linear examples, citing cause and effect.
- Connect tactical successes to larger, strategic progress without inflating expectations.
- Avoid jargon, acronyms, theory, and speculation.¹⁸

My former colleague, Jamie Shea, the NATO spokesperson during Operation Allied Force, once noted, "A media campaign will not win you a war. But a bad media campaign can and will lose you a war."

A new approach to communicating counterinsurgency to Western publics has the added benefit of being more open, transparent, and honest with the committed citizens of our democracies who bear the burden, carry the cost, and ultimately decide the direction of the long war. **MR**

NOTES

1. U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), para. 3-98.

2. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, "The Uses of Military Power," speech before the National Press Club, 28 November 1984.

3. See reference to GEN Creighton Abrams' 1969 campaign plan referring to diminished public support in John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For discussion of tactical and leadership failures see, e.g., Andrew Krepinovich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (Boston: Harcourt, 1999); and H.R. McMaster, *Derelection of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

4. Peter Bergen, "Bin Laden's Lonely Crusade," *Vanity Fair*, January 2011.

5. For example, the 2004 attacks on the Madrid transit network had the terrorists' intended effect of ending Spain's military commitment to the conflict in Iraq. Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 287.

6. Sebastian L.V. Gorka and David Kilcullen, "An Actor-Centric Theory of War," *Joint Force Quarterly* (1st Quarter 2011).

7. GEN Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

8. Winston Churchill, address to the House of Commons, 4 June 1940.

9. Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "GEN David Petraeus says Afghanistan war strategy 'fundamentally sound,'" *The Washington Post*, 15 August 2010.

10. "So intricate is the interplay between the political and the military actions that they cannot be tidily separated; on the contrary, every military move has to be weighed with

regard to its political effects and vice versa." David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 5.

11. Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," *The Vocation Lectures* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 93.

12. James H. Willbanks, "Winning the Battle, Losing the War," *The New York Times*, 5 March 2008.

13. GEN David H. Petraeus, United States Army, "COMISAF's Counterinsurgency Guidance," Headquarters, International Security Assistance Force/United States Forces-Afghanistan, Kabul, Afghanistan, 27 July 2010.

14. "After smart weapons, smart soldiers," *The Economist*, 25 October 2007.

15. NATO Summit Press Conference, 20 November 2010, Lisbon, Portugal.

16. Other examples of "sustainable transition" can be found in official documents and statements such as NATO Summit Declaration, Lisbon, 20 November 2010, para. 4 and 5; "Afghanistan's transition to greater responsibility for its own destiny requires realignment of aid with priorities, Security Council told," United Nations Security Council Press Release, SC/10142, Department of Public Information, News and Media Division, New York, 22 December 2010; and Thom Shanker, "Petraeus Finishes Rules for Afghan Transition," *The New York Times*, 10 August 2010.

17. Frank Luntz, *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear* (New York: Hyperion, 2008).

18. Indeed, readers should consult George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" and "Propaganda and Demotic Language," easily available on the Internet and both robust rearguards for clear, robust language against the unceasing assault by leaden, bureaucratic verbiage that constitutes most political discourse.