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A Century of Small Wars Shows They Can Be Won

By MAX BOOT

After a series of smashing military victories, the president declared the war over. Yet far from giving up, the forces resisting American occupation switched to guerrilla tactics. Isolated sentries were killed by assailants who pretended to be friendly civilians. Patrols in the countryside ran into booby traps. One carefully staged ambush wiped out half an infantry company. American forces responded with harsh countermeasures that led to charges of brutality.

That may sound like a portrait of today's Iraq, but it actually describes the Philippines a century ago. Having kicked out the Spanish in 1898, the United States decided to keep the archipelago for itself. Many Filipinos resisted American rule. President William McKinley thought the struggle was over by early 1900, when the regular Filipino armed forces were routed, but the resilient insurrectos proved him wrong.

The United States eventually won, but it was a long, hard, bloody slog that cost the lives of more than 4,200 American soldiers, 16,000 rebels and some 200,000 civilians. Even after the formal end of hostilities on July 4, 1902, sporadic resistance dragged on for years.

There is no reason to think that the current struggle in Iraq will be remotely as difficult. But the Philippine war is a useful reminder that Americans have a long history of fighting guerrillas — and usually prevailing, though seldom quickly or easily.

Many lessons of those counterinsurgencies were set down in "The Small Wars Manual," written by a group of Marine Corps officers in the 1930's. This book, which was reprinted in the 1980's, was intended to draw on the experience of leathernecks who had battled "bandits" (as the authors preferred to call all resistance movements) in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and elsewhere during the early years of the 20th century.

In contrast to major wars, the manual warns, "in small wars no defined battle front exists and the theater of operations may be the whole length and breadth of the land. . . . In warfare of this kind, members of native forces will suddenly become innocent peasant workers when it suits their fancy and convenience." Confronted with such elusive foes, the manual counsels a two-pronged approach to "establish and maintain law and order."

On the one hand, occupying forces must stay on the offensive against rebel groups, hunting them down wherever they hide. "Delay in the use of force . . . will always be interpreted as weakness," the authors warn. On the other hand, the manual is keenly aware of the limits of firepower in an ambiguous environment.

"Peace and industry cannot be restored permanently without appropriate provisions for the economic welfare of the people," they write. They also warn that the "hatred of the enemy" usually inculcated among combat troops is entirely inappropriate during an occupation. Brutal repression — of the kind carried out by some American soldiers who used a torture technique called the "water cure" to extract information from Filipino suspects — only creates more recruits for the rebels. "In small wars, tolerance, sympathy and kindness should be the keynote to our relationship with the mass of the population."

However skillful they are in the application of carrots and sticks, the manual teaches, American troops cannot win a permanent victory by themselves: "Native troops, supported by marines, are increasingly employed as early as practicable in order that these native agencies may assume their proper responsibility for restoring law and order in their own country."

American troops followed this advice with a great deal of success in combating insurgencies from the Philippines to, in more recent years, countries like El Salvador. So did the British in postwar Malaya.

In Vietnam, by contrast, *The Small Wars Manual* was conspicuously neglected. Gen. William Westmoreland tried a conventional big-unit approach, with disastrous consequences. The relations of American soldiers with civilians were not, for the most part, characterized by "tolerance, sympathy and kindness." Nor did the Americans turn over the fight to "native troops . . . as early as practicable."

Of course, the biggest problem in Indochina was outside the army's control. The guerrillas operating in South Vietnam had a virtually impregnable base in North Vietnam. That made it impossible to isolate the battlefield, as the United States Navy had been able to do in the islands of the Philippines.

In Iraq, American forces may also find it difficult to cut off the insurgents they now face, since the country shares long borders with Syria and Iran, both hostile to the United States. From Washington's standpoint, the good news is that both countries should be much more vulnerable to American pressure than North Vietnam was, because they lack a superpower patron.

In many respects, the American campaign in Iraq has been straight out of *The Small Wars Manual*. Security sweeps in Sunni areas of central Iraq are combined with efforts to reopen schools and hospitals. This is not bleeding-heart humanitarianism but, as the manual reminds us, a vital step to winning hearts and minds.

Achieving that goal also requires that American troops avoid the sort of excesses committed in the Philippines. Brig. Gen. Jacob Smith was court-martialed for ordering his men to "kill and burn" indiscriminately — a case as shocking in its day as the My Lai massacre in Vietnam was.

While the behavior of American troops in Iraq has been for the most part exemplary, one area where they have lagged is in using indigenous security forces. In the early years of the 20th century, United States occupiers generally set up constabularies trained and led by Americans but made up of local enlisted men. Quasi-military organizations like the Philippine Scouts proved to be formidable instruments of counterinsurgency because their soldiers knew the local culture and language. This is especially important in fighting foes without uniforms, where the chief challenge is simply to identify the enemy. Small wars place a great premium on accurate intelligence.

As the Afghanistan experience shows, it will take a long time to set up a new military in Iraq. Until then, the occupation authorities will not be able to proceed to the last two sections of "The Small Wars Manual": "Supervision of Elections" and "Withdrawal."

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