

A FAILURE IN CIVILIANSHIP TOO

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When you're in the military and your name is splashed across the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*, it's usually a bad sign. And it may yet turn out that way for Army LtCol. Paul Yingling, who wrote an article for last May's *Armed Forces Journal* ("A Failure in Generalship") that is capturing national attention among civilians and soldiers alike. In a damning indictment of flag officer leadership, Yingling claims that "America's generals have failed to prepare our armed forces for war and advise civilian authorities on the application of force to achieve the aims of policy."¹

According to *The Wall Street Journal*'s June 29th article, these comments from the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment's deputy commander have fanned the flames of debate within the officer corps and inspired intense discussion on wartime leadership. The whole episode points to an emerging fault line between generals with little combat experience and junior officers who have spent their entire careers in war zones.

Yingling's argument deftly jabs at the military establishment for taking the wrong lessons from Vietnam, and culminates in a right cross on the chins of flag officers he believes misled their civilian leadership about the nature and demands of 21st century warfare. The parade of generals who now claim they were against the Iraq War all along even though they were responsible for executing it begs the question: where was their voice when it could have made a difference? Or as Yingling puts it, "If the general remains silent while the statesman commits a nation to war with insufficient means, he shares culpability for the results.

Based on the success of recent counterinsurgency efforts in Anbar Province, which I observed firsthand as an embedded journalist, the war in Iraq provides the armed services with a unique opportunity to launch a true revolution in military affairs, led by officers of Yingling's generation who will be the generals and statesmen of the future. While their hard-won experience is still fresh in their minds, they can lay the foundations for a new military with counterinsurgency as its primary mission.

Hopefully some of them will also enter public life and become the statesmen Yingling refers to, men and women who can craft policies and mobilize popular passions to meet the next great struggle of the American Republic. This will mean persuading the American people to accept more unconventional wars of uncertain length – no easy task. As John McCain has learned from his own experience in defending our presence in Iraq, Winston Churchill was right when he said, "In battle you only die once, but in politics, many times."

¹ "A Failure in Generalship" *Armed Forces Quarterly*. LtCol. Paul Yingling, May 2007.
www.armedforcesjournal.com.

Generally Speaking

“A Failure in Generalship” puts the men with stars on their shoulders in the crosshairs for failing to prepare the military for unconventional wars like Iraq, as well as failing to advise their civilian bosses of the Army’s capacity (or incapacity) to fight such wars. All the more unforgivable, Yingling writes, because they had the example of Vietnam staring them in the face and yet drew the wrong lessons from it.

Taking away hindsight, what could we have reasonably expected from flag officers after 1975? The familiar criticism is that generals are always guilty of fighting the last war. That’s bad enough, but American generals have been fighting the last war since Korea, and the only time their conventional doctrine worked was in Desert Storm.

Yet a large standing army *was* necessary in Europe to deter the Red Army, and if you’re going to keep such a force you have to train it. A war with the Russians would have been conventional, at least for the first thirty minutes before it went nuclear, so American troops had to be trained to those standards. Once the Berlin Wall came down, however, all bets were off. The Vietnam-era generals could at least lay claim to a need for a conventional capability against the Soviet Union, but what excuse did the generals of the 1990s have?

A dozen years passed between the skirmish of the First Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq, and what did we train for? Combat against regular forces. Well, we got that – for the three weeks it took to march from Kuwait to Baghdad. In the 43 days of Operation Iraqi Freedom we lost 139 servicemen. In the 4½ years of fighting the insurgency there, that number has climbed to 3,500 and counting. Between the end of the Vietnam War and the start of the Iraqi insurgency, the single greatest loss of life suffered by the U.S. military was in Beirut in October 1983, when 241 Marines were killed by a truck bomb. So why on earth were we training to re-fight World War II – especially after 1991 – when events in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, East Timor, and elsewhere were tearing conventional military doctrine to shreds?

Some generals saw this conundrum at the time. Two of the better ones, Charles Krulak and Anthony Zinni, forecast the new demands irregular warfare would place on the armed services. Krulak trained his Marines to fight the Three Block War – a term he coined that referred to three city blocks, each of which would require leathernecks to exercise a different skill, be it warfighting, peacekeeping, or providing humanitarian assistance. General Zinni, chief of U.S. Central Command in the late ‘90s, made these comments at the Naval Institute just before his retirement in 2000:

Still trying to fight our kind of war, be it World War II or Desert Storm, we ignore the real warfighting requirements of today. We want to fight the Navy-Marine Corps Operational Maneuver from the Sea; we want to fight the Army-Air Forces Air Land Battle. We want to find a real adversarial demon – a composite of Hitler, Tojo, and Mussolini – so we can drive on to his capital city and crush him there. Unconditional surrender. Then we’ll put in place a Marshall Plan, embrace the long-suffering vanquished, and help them regain entry into the

community of nations. Everybody wants to do that. As a retiring CinC [Commander in Chief], I would love to do that somewhere before I step down – just find somebody for me!

But it ain't gonna happen.²

Indeed not. Krulak and Zinni did what they could to prepare the Corps for the 21st century, but even the Three-Block War, prescient as it was, assumed Marines would stay ashore for only a few months fighting it and then return to their ships. Most generals avoided preparing for “asymmetric warfare” like it was the plague, swearing they would never repeat the mistakes of Vietnam and get bogged down in another guerrilla war – a byproduct of their searing, painful experience there. As a result, they colluded in a monumental conspiracy of wishful thinking, believing that if they didn't train for unconventional war, they wouldn't have to fight one. In a doctrine that would later bear his name, Colin Powell crafted a very restrictive list of conditions he felt should be met before America committed military force abroad, and Krulak's entire tenure as Commandant of the Marine Corps was focused on returning the Corps to its roots as naval infantry.

Unfortunately for both these men, their respective doctrines are now gathering dust or, more appropriately, Iraqi sand. They were doomed to irrelevance anyway. Powell's conditions weren't his to make – that responsibility belonged to his civilian bosses. Krulak's commitment to ensure that Marines remained “soldiers of the sea” was fine if a war close to salt water lasted only six months, but then what? Were they supposed to languish at sea while their fellow ground-pounders in the Army took shrapnel from IEDs? Not likely.

“Senator, You're No Jack Kennedy”

But at least some of them were groping in the right direction, which is more than we can say for their civilian counterparts. I know this journal doesn't normally address political issues, but I will for two reasons: first, I'm a civilian, and second, I agree with Yingling's assessment that war is a social activity undertaken on behalf of the nation. It isn't just the province of generals. In fact, given civilian control of the military, it is first and foremost the province of policymakers, i.e. – politicians.

Yingling praises President Kennedy for identifying counterinsurgency as the future of warfare nearly a half-century ago. He possessed the most necessary quality of the counterinsurgent – empathy. He also had vision, and in his address to the graduating cadets of West Point in June 1962, he predicted what the newly minted Second Lieutenants might face on the battlefields of the future:

This is another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin – war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration, instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him...It preys on economic unrest and ethnic conflicts. It requires in those situations where we must counter it, and these

² General Anthony Zinni, Address to the U.S. Naval Institute. Annapolis, MD, March 2000. Pg. 5.

are the kinds of challenges that will be before us in the next decade if freedom is to be saved, a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training.³

Under Kennedy's urging, counterinsurgency programs at the School of Special Warfare that now bears his name were expanded (being a former naval officer, SEALs were among his favorites). The 16,000 advisors he sent to South Vietnam during his administration were dedicated to one of the counterinsurgent's two foremost tasks – building up host nation forces (the other is protecting the population). When Lyndon Johnson sent Marines ashore at Da Nang in 1965, it marked the official end to America's unconventional strategy and the beginning of the conventional phase that would end in ignominious defeat.

Yet here we are in Iraq, just beginning to grasp the kind of war one Commander-in-Chief identified for us 45 years ago. In the 1990s few politicians, least of all the President, were committed to moving the armed services to a post-Cold War posture. Instead, Bill Clinton's first contribution to national security was insisting that homosexuals be allowed to serve openly in the military. He made this pronouncement a few weeks before the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993 – al-Qaida's warning shot in its war against America. The deaths of eighteen Army Rangers a few months later in Somalia only cemented Clinton's opinion that military entanglements overseas were to be avoided at all costs, especially when it came to “nation-building.”

Nevertheless, two years later he decided to send U.S. troops to Bosnia to enforce the Dayton Peace Accords. Naturally there was grumbling from the generals. After all, they complained, they were soldiers, not policemen. In truth, they are whatever the Commander-in-Chief says they are. If that includes peacekeeping duties, then so be it – they should train as such.

But they rarely did. The Army's National Training Center at Fort Irwin and the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms continued to do brisk business, honing their conventional skills to a razor's edge. But what good was this training against Haitian rebels or Afghan tribesmen? Even when pitted against a standing army like Iraq's, destroying their conventional forces was always the easy part. Dealing with what comes after is the tough mission.

From 1992 to 2001, every operation the U.S. military took part in contained some aspect of irregular warfare, be it guerrilla fighting in Somalia, peacekeeping in Bosnia or humanitarian assistance in East Timor. Yet these were somehow viewed as distractions rather than as harbingers of the future. There was no real effort to restructure the force to meet what was clearly identifying itself as the future of warfare. Nor was there any real civilian direction to push the generals to do so, and without this oversight they were able to dive head first into the pool of wishful thinking with no political lifeguard to tell them otherwise.

³ John F. Kennedy, “Address to the Graduating Class of the United States Military Academy, West Point. June 6, 1962, pg. 2.

Foreign Policy magazine recently published their “Failed States Index” for 2007 – a list of the most politically and economically unstable countries in the world. Twelve of the top twenty are in Africa. American troops are fighting in two more of them (Iraq and Afghanistan), and have already intervened in four others at some point over the last two decades (Somalia, Haiti, Bangladesh, and East Timor). Only two have standing armies that could do any significant damage to U.S. forces in a conventional war (Pakistan and North Korea). All are at risk of falling into the familiar pattern of a failed state – disintegration, civil war, and economic ruin. The task of stabilizing some of these nations will inevitably fall to the U.S. military. Not all will give rise to robust insurgencies like Iraq, but interventions there will still require the same skills – reconstituting indigenous forces to keep order and rebuilding economic and political infrastructure to provide for the needs of the people.⁴

New Corps for New Wars

So what’s the solution? On the military side, force restructuring. A good way to measure this is to look at how the demands of combat have reorganized units in the field. For example, a plurality of American advisors to the Iraqi Army are tank and artillery officers. Clearly their original skill sets are not needed there, so why not make the Army and Marines meet the demand instead of the reverse? What is needed to fight a counterinsurgency? As always, basic infantry skills. Nothing new there. But two fields are badly underrepresented in today’s fight – military advisors and civil affairs personnel.

It’s time to reshape the Army and Marines around these core skills. Keep a few artillery and tank regiments active in case the need arose, but put the rest of them into infantry, advisor, and civil affairs corps. Thin out bloated fields like intelligence and add more active duty civil affairs personnel who can take part in humanitarian operations and be reinforced when needed by their reserve counterparts. The latter can hone their skills in civilian life as civil engineers, building contractors, or public utilities managers – all of whom are in high demand in humanitarian operations. Since foreign language proficiency is critical for counterinsurgents, throw open the doors to the Defense Language Institute (DLI) to any recruit who scores higher than 80 on the Defense Language Aptitude Battery. Linguist slots are currently reserved for members of the signals intelligence and interrogator fields. Why be so stingy? Send anyone who displays aptitude to DLI for at least six months of Arabic, Pashtu, Somali, Creole, or whatever other language is in high demand at the moment.

Another accusation LtCol. Yingling levels at flag officers is that they have consistently “failed to provide Congress with an accurate assessment of security conditions in Iraq.” Presumably he’s referring to the counsel service chiefs give to the White House and members of Congress. Anyone who has ever watched their appearances before the Senate and House Armed Services Committees on C-SPAN will recognize how public testimony can be a minefield for uniformed officers. Among other dangers, they must often guard against their words being inappropriately co-opted for a political agenda.⁵

⁴ “The Failed States Index,” *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2007. Pg. 8.

⁵ Yingling, “A Failure in Generalship.”

But what about their meetings with politicians behind closed doors? They can certainly be more candid in those circumstances, but according to Bob Woodward's account in his book *State of Denial*, senior officers remained mute when it came to asking for reinforcements to meet the Iraqi insurgency back in 2004 and 2005. Woodward puts the blame for this primarily on Donald Rumsfeld's overbearing presence at the Pentagon, saying he essentially browbeat flag officers into submission. Woodward recalls a conversation between Marine Generals Jim Jones and Peter Pace. The latter was being offered the Chairmanship of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and the former, an old friend, was asking him to think about it carefully. Jones warned Pace that "Military advice is being influenced on a political level" because the JCS had "surrendered" to Rumsfeld, telling Pace "You should not be a parrot on the secretary's shoulder."⁶

The 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act specifically authorized the JCS Chairman to be the President's chief military advisor, a relationship that was created with another micromanaging Secretary of Defense in mind. Like Rumsfeld, Robert McNamara rode roughshod over his service chiefs and neutered their ability to independently advise the President on the Vietnam War. That both were allowed to do this was the fault not just of the generals but also the Commander-in-Chief.

George W. Bush has allowed a valuable independent conduit to be shut off. Hopefully Robert Gates has revived this channel and is strong enough to recognize that the U.S. military's senior officer, a man with nearly four decades of experience in uniform, just might have something valuable to say to the President of the United States regarding military affairs. The more diverse the advice he receives, the better he can challenge the assumptions he is making. This is always a good thing, but especially so in wartime.

⁶ *State of Denial*, Bob Woodward. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006. Pg. 404.