

Taking the Offensive: The Utility and Limitations of Raiding

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American participation in nation-building campaigns has heavily embedded the interrelated concepts of counterinsurgency (COIN) and stability operations into the framework of American strategy. The prewar failure to plan for stability operations in Iraq may become as admonitory to future policymakers as the appeasement of Hitler at Munich was to statesmen after World War II. Nevertheless, a contradictory strain of American strategy is steadily emerging that advocates the use of standoff firepower and strategic raids as an alternative to population-centric engagement. COIN critics charge that population-centric strategies are wasteful, spotlight America's weaknesses, and are politically unsustainable. In turn, they argue that various offshore raiding strategies draw on America's chief strength: the disciplined application of conventional military force.

What can broadly be considered raiding strategy deserves consideration as an alternative to global counterinsurgency. However, its utility is limited and must be bounded within a broader review of American grand strategy. This paper addresses the utility and limitations of raiding and punitive expeditions. Both raiding and global counterinsurgency are valuable approaches in pursuit of strategic goals but should not be elevated to the centerpiece of national security policy--especially in light of underdetermined grand strategy.

Raiding in Theory and Practice

Raiding has a long and distinguished role in strategy. Historian Archer Jones states that the two foundational military strategies are *raiding* strategies used as a "transitory presence in hostile territory to make a hostile incursion," and *persisting* strategies employed to put "significant portion of [opposed] territory under the adversary's control." Jones, in turn, juxtaposes these strategies with methods of force depletion: destroying the enemy's forces directly ("combat strategy") or wearing down the opponent by depriving them of needed resources ("logistic strategy").¹ Combinations of both categories create comprehensive military strategies.

Methods of raiding have differed throughout history. Some raids punish an adversary by devastating civilian infrastructure, while others target the opponent's armed forces. Raids in war have featured highly mobile forces venturing deep into the opponent's operational and strategic depths. The Civil War, for example, featured countless deep cavalry raids against railroads. The famous 1864 raid on Washington D.C. by Confederate General Jubal Early took on strategic importance, although

its long-term impact on the war's outcome was marginal at best. General Robert E. Lee sent the 2nd Corps under the Command of Jubal Early, a force of only 12,000 men toward D.C. While the Union army ultimately compelled them to retreat, Early's troops achieved some victories along the way causing confusion and consternation amongst the Union army.

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Raids can be one-off events designed to achieve a single effect or sustained confrontations designed to wear down an adversary through successive operations. Some states extensively employ raiding to attrite terrorists and militant groups - the U.S. and Israeli policies of targeted killings are examples of such an approach.

The modern idea of the “strategic raid” has come to be equated with rapid, decisive operations like the conventional campaign of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. However, a true strategic raid in the classical sense refers to a self-contained tactical or operational mission executed by self-sufficient elements against a target of strategic importance. Leadership targeting, the bombing of strategic facilities, and other such missions are commonly included under the classical category of the “strategic raid.”ⁱⁱ The semantic confusion may be due to the fact that Donald Rumsfeld and other advocates of military transformation marketed and designed IRAQI FREEDOM as a high-tech variation on the classic punitive expedition.

However, punitive expeditions, because of their large scale, are not equivalent to raids. Punitive expeditions are military campaigns, not transitory events. Still, they are sometimes lumped together with raids because their objectives tend to be very limited in scope. Punitive expeditions, a mainstay throughout military history, were common occurrences during the “savage wars of peace” of the 19th century and early 20th century. These military campaigns were mainly carried out to enforce writ, open trading routes, and punish the periodic act of defiance against great power authority.ⁱⁱⁱ In the translated American 1862 edition of Antoine-Henri Jomini's *Summary of the Art of War* there is a section on “descents”—large naval punitive expeditions with limited aims.^{iv} Some have pointed to the 19th century counter-raiding campaign against Barbary pirates as an early template for the Global War on Terrorism.^v Such analogies, however, are unpopular because they suggest a connection to colonial warfare and are consequently unpalatable to modern audiences.

Some supporters of raiding propose a modern variation on the punitive expedition using a range of tactics and platforms. Bernard Finel, a Senior Fellow at the American Security Project, proposes that the U.S. should “adopt a national military strategy that heavily leverages the core capability to break states and target and destroy fixed assets, iteratively if necessary. Such a strategy — which might loosely be termed ‘repetitive raiding’ — could defeat and disrupt most potential threats the U.S. faces.”^{vi} This is a different concept than the 19th century punitive expedition, but there are definite continuities.

Other supporters of raiding argue that air power and other forms of standoff firepower constitute an American asymmetric advantage over all adversaries.^{vii} While airpower’s advantages have been heavily oversold in the past, Edward Luttwak is correct to note that air power can be used to disrupt and destroy an opponent’s operational cadre.^{viii} George Will, an opinion columnist, famously proposed that the U.S. could combat terrorist organizations with rapidly deployable special operations forces, drones, and cruise missiles based offshore. An offshore approach would involve sporadic airstrikes that could target Taliban forces that have concentrated in geographic regions prior to an attack.^{ix} This is not a new concept either; the idea of controlling unruly regions through standoff firepower

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was used by the British in the form of “air control” of tribesmen in post-World War I Iraq. Suppression by airpower, however, had mixed results overall. Historian James S. Corum suggests that while many people have been fascinated by the Interwar Royal Air Force’s application of air control, it was never as efficient as advertised.^x

The military and CIA heavily rely on drones and special operations forces to kill terrorists and militants in what has been called “The Gap” or “Global South.” It is difficult to evaluate the efficacy of drone and direct action killings because of the differing nature of the theaters of operation in which they are employed. Additionally, the vagueness of American grand strategy and even in some cases regional strategy makes it difficult to evaluate these approaches quantitatively. Thankfully, the New America Foundation has facilitated future research into the Waziristan “air control” operation by building up a database with information on drone strikes.^{xi} A combination of qualitative and quantitative methodology can be used to yield more definitive conclusions about the efficacy of the controversial drone killings.

In a similar vein, Israel has extensively utilized tactical raiding coupled with operational and strategic deep raids. Israel has also employed punitive expeditions

in Lebanon in 1982 and 2006, the West Bank in 2002, and Gaza in 2008-2009. Historically, Israel also participated in the French and British punitive expedition against the Suez Canal in 1956. Evidence indicates that the strategic payoff for these operations has also been mixed. As Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff pointed out in *Foreign Policy*, American strategic commentators may misinterpret Israeli strategy.^{xii} We should also be careful not to extrapolate Israeli success or failure with raiding and punitive expeditions to analyze our own situation since Israel enjoys advantages we do not when engaging in operations inside its own territory and operating in neighboring regions. Control and isolation of the battlefield in an environment such as 2008-2009 Gaza is unlikely to be replicated in any American expeditionary contest.

Evaluating Raiding and Punitive Expeditions in American Strategy

What is the nature of the strategic problem we face? This is a question so broad and contentious that it cannot be answered realistically in a single essay. A mushy consensus view is emerging that is, while mostly unobjectionable, also analytically limited. The *Joint Operating Environment 2010* (JOE) notes in its section on military operations that the United States will face a bifurcated future security challenge with non-state actors assuming a higher prominence than before. The document also echoes other assessments by arguing that trends such as persistent urbanization and the growth of the global media will complicate military operations. “Hybrid” enemies will use asymmetric weapons and strategies to contravene America’s conventional advantage. Command and control warfare and physical attacks against intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and command and control networks will occur. States and non-state actors with “anti-access” weapons will threaten control of the global commons. The chief U.S. logistic challenge will be deployment to distant theaters of operations. Taken together,

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these observations represent the conventional wisdom of American defense policy.^{xiii}

While many of these statements are sound, the problem is that the analytical implications of this consensus can be interpreted to support a baffling variety of proposed operations, strategies, and force structures. Nor are the themes voiced in consensus documents necessarily new. Discussions about urban warfare have been ongoing since the early 1990s, with prominent Joint Urban Warrior exercises in Chicago in 1998 and San Francisco Bay in 1999. The prolific irregular warfare analyst Robert Bunker has edited nearly a decade’s worth of academic books dealing with non-state threats. In Bunker’s volumes, researchers have accurately identified emerging opposing force (OPFOR) operational and tactical concepts before they became well known.^{xiv} Chinese “anti-access” threats have also been extensively

analyzed in RAND Corporation studies such as 2007's *Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications for the United States*.^{xv}

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If we look farther back we can see an even greater continuity of research into what we consider modern threats. Fifty years earlier, the French strategist *General André Beaufre* used the concepts of “exterior” and “interior” maneuver to address a problem that many American strategists

would find very familiar. Beaufre divides “indirect strategy” into “exterior” and “interior” maneuvers. Both of these maneuvers are integrated parts of the indirect campaign that should be used when resources are limited. The first maneuver provides “maximum freedom of action” in the international arena while paralyzing the enemy through psychological, economic, or diplomatic means like negotiations and propaganda.^{xvi} Once exterior cover has been obtained, interior maneuver is then executed in the geographic area of question to achieve a policy-driven objective. Beaufre argued that the enemy would respond by utilizing strategies ranging from a short but violent attempt to affect a *fait accompli* to protracted guerrilla warfare.^{xvii} This concept, while inelegant, is eerily prescient in the context of present discussions about American strategy and asymmetric warfare, as well as attempts to discuss combinations of irregular and conventional warfare.

Those who argue for an emphasis on raiding and punitive expeditions are wise to point out that COIN can be wasteful and may not utilize America’s strategic advantages. The United States is a maritime power that finds sustaining expeditionary forces in far-off environments logistically difficult. COIN also does not allow U.S. military forces to exploit our advantages in firepower, airpower, or large-unit maneuver. It does not take a strategic genius to realize that COIN is difficult to sustain politically as well, since domestic support is a perennial problem in democracies. Critics of COIN protest that it is based on outdated theoretical models. Frank Hoffman, for example, has noted that modern irregular conflict defies the often simplistic 1960s Maoist revolutionary model involving guerilla war tactics. However, American COIN theory heavily extracts from this model to describe the contemporary battlespace.^{xviii} While “classic” COIN is still painfully difficult, modern insurgency is likely to be more fractured and feature more protracted political problems that proscribe a more limited American approach.^{xix} Conversely, the

“whole of government” approach is more aspiration than reality, although civilian and military policymakers have in recent years called for a more robust civilian sector. It remains to be seen, however, whether these calls for change and policy shifts will be successful in bolstering “whole of government” capacity in counterinsurgency and what is generally referred to as “complex operations.”

However, even modern COIN thinkers agree that the American approach to counterinsurgency needs to be dramatically overhauled. For example, Dr. David Kilcullen, who was COIN advisor to Condoleeza Rice and to General David Petraeus, argues that neither counterterrorism nor traditional counterinsurgency is the appropriate framework to fight the enemy we face^{xx} Mark Safranski observes that Kilcullen’s own ideas for dealing with “accidental guerrillas” are a kind of indirect strategy emphasizing low-visibility, low-cost engagement that uses foreign proxies as the chief tool whenever possible.^{xxi} Absent a few partisans of the previous administration, most American defense thinkers seem to agree that non-military tools such as policing, intelligence, and public diplomacy are a better means of handling modern security problems than the direct application of military force. Debate over counterinsurgency strategy seems to center more on the legacy of the Iraq War and the current way forward in Afghanistan. It does not reflect a desire to engage in yet more massive nation-building campaigns.

On the other hand, raiding and punitive expeditions also have their own problems. Projection of power requires intelligence. However, the intelligence provided to strategists and policymakers is frequently inaccurate. The failure of the strategic raid on the Dora Farms in 2003 and the accidental targeting of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 illustrate this point. The problem of developing intelligence from offshore will become more pernicious as forces must navigate and operate in developed environments. While air strikes can be carried out from naval and air platforms, projection of landpower requires forward basing and cooperation from nearby states. This collaboration is easier said than done, as the fracas over Turkish noncooperation at the northern front of the Iraq invasion revealed. The “anti-access” challenge also requires, as Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr. noted, a more robust long-range strike capability and the enhancement of expeditionary warfare options for a more assured advance.^{xxii} More broadly, operational assumptions developed during both the operational renaissance of the 1980s and early 1990s and the Rumsfeld era should be challenged as the diffusion of military technology continues.

International norms have changed since the 19th century heyday of the punitive expedition. While it is important to understand that the costs of a negative international reaction to military operations are often overestimated, costs do exist. They may not be apparent immediately but they manifest themselves later on when multilateral cooperation is needed. Israel’s Operation CAST LEAD, which involved a wave of airstrikes and a short ground offensive on the Gaza Strip with the aim of stopping rocket attacks and arms smuggling into the territory, may have been

successful. However, the Goldstone Report, which harshly condemned Israel for killing civilians has lowered the Israeli Defense Force's freedom of action in the international arena. There are also thorny legal issues surrounding combat with non-state actors that have not been resolved satisfactorily, as the dispute over the Goldstone Report reveals.

The elephant in the room, of course, is planning for Phase IV (stabilization) operations in the case of a punitive expedition that fully incapacitates a nation's government. What should be the protocol for such a situation if long-term occupation and stabilization is ruled out? The Powell "pottery barn" rule^{xxiii} is not an infallible law, but is one that many will expect the United States to uphold should a punitive expedition unseat a "rogue state" government.

It is also difficult to reliably calibrate the level of force needed to accomplish limited objectives. Here, raiding runs into the same problems as the now-defunct doctrine of Effects-Based Operations (EBO)—problems of perception, misperception, and knowledge of our enemy (especially in a vastly different cultural context) make mirror imaging tempting. Political scientists endlessly dissected this issue during the Cold War and developed sophisticated formal models of adversarial behavior, but these calculations are likely to remain crude and impressionistic in policy practice outside the context of the bipolar system.

Even if we could develop a metric for the requisite amount of force to be employed, we would still encounter objections to raiding based on an awareness of political affairs and bureaucratic infighting. Defense pundits discussing proposed strategies seem to implicitly assume that the United States is a state with strong executive planning organs and a political culture capable of digesting sophisticated strategies; a kind of 21st century version of Moltke's Prussia. Instead, we live in a political culture more aptly chronicled by the creators of *South Park*. The executive branch, though highly powerful, is not known for its ability to carry out long-range planning. Moreover, the interplay of interest groups frustrates the execution of strategy.

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A Global “Indirect Approach” Synthesis/Questions of Grand Strategy

As an academic exercise, we can devise a possible synthesis of the approaches profiled here. As previously established, the current consensus on strategy among both COIN advocates and those favoring a broad kind of raiding strategy is that American power should be increasingly applied in an indirect fashion instead of through massive occupations. This is broadly compatible with the ideas advocated

by some realists, like an “offshore balancing” grand strategy and the paring back of strategic commitments.^{xxiv} With some effort, both raiding and punitive expeditions could be integrated with the “indirect” COIN theory put forth by those advocating a more pared-down global counterinsurgency effort. A synthesis of “indirect approaches” could heavily emphasize the traditional (and largely nonmilitary) Special Forces, police, and intelligence approaches to combating radicalism with high-end combat assets utilized for the “repetitive raiding.” In order to operationalize “repetitive raiding” capabilities, planners need to think strategically and operationally about modernizing the concept of the “descent” and punitive expedition. Additionally, the current drone/special operations direct action campaign needs to be subject to a means-testing before it drifts into policy inertia.

Mark Safranski argues quite perceptively that the lack of grand strategic foundations in current American foreign policy may ensure that any kind of military

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doctrine—COIN or anti-COIN—could be used to justify purposes at variance with its original intent. It is also useful to point out that both partisans in the COIN and anti-COIN debate seem to operate with an implicit framework that continuing global military operations are likely in the near future. The strategy or political aims behind such military operations, however, or the assumption that American participation in military operations is a permanent feature of the security environment, has not been explored in great depth. It is largely without dispute that 21st century operational conditions are associated with certain forms of conflict. But it is one thing to point out that slums in West Africa will be difficult for military forces to control and another to spell out in convincing detail the political rationale that would put American boots on the ground in Lagos.^{xxv}

We are unlikely to break any new ground in policy discussions about military operations without undertaking a review of the United States’ global posture, commitments, and our process of determining “vital interests.” While a rich but sometimes circular conversation ensues about military operations, tactics, and strategies, discussions of the deeper, foundational issues that explain the prevalence (or absence) of force in American grand strategy remain political landmines. One unfortunate result of this inertia is that nearly everything is seen as a “vital interest” that must be resolved through the application of military force. Bernard Finel correctly responded to criticism of his article on “repetitive raiding” by noting that while his military concept is narrow in application, we expect military operations to

solve too many of our foreign policy issues.^{xxvi} Observers such as *The Washington Post*'s Dana Priest have observed that one of the most important reasons for the impoverishment of civilian capacity is the structure of regional commands that adopt a role assumed more traditionally by diplomats.^{xxvii}

The correct answers regarding counterinsurgency, raiding, and punitive expeditions are likely to emerge when put in grand strategic context. It is our resistance to having an honest conversation about these foundational issues that keeps us in a loop of increasingly circular discourse over the use of force. These deliberations do not comprehensively address the premises by which certain operational or strategic approaches derive their explanatory power.^{xxviii} Until we inquire on a more abstract level, our strategic dysfunction is likely to continue regardless of whether our forces hobnob with tribes in Anbar or raid from offshore.

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^{iv} See Antoine-Henri Jomini, Capt. G.H. Mendell (trans), and Lt. W.P. Craighill (trans), 1984. *The Art of War*, New York: G.P. Putnam

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^{xi} See the database at counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones

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