

H. Thomas Hayden: Classic Counterinsurgency Not Working in Iraq

May 19, 2005



[Email this page to friends](#)



[RSS feed](#)

[Have an opinion on this column? Sound off in the [discussion forum](#).]

Post [World War II](#) anti-colonial insurgencies and the Mao Tse-tung inspired communist People's Revolutionary Wars had many characteristics in common. The communist organizations of the vanguard party, mass organizations, fronts, local guerrillas, main force units, and agitation-propaganda were seen from Malaysia to [Vietnam](#) to El Salvador. This is not in Iraq.

There are very few lessons learned from previous successful counterinsurgencies that apply to [Iraq](#). The only areas that have not changed much over the years is the importance of counter-guerrilla operations and training the indigenous population for local security and Special Forces operations.

There are at least four major groups of insurgents and other criminals in Iraq, and all have different goals and objectives. The first are the remnants of the Ba'athist Party and the Republican Guards who may be conducting a ruthless indiscriminate insurgency and whose objective is to create chaos and foster a desire to return to the dictatorial but relatively peaceful Ba'athist rule. The second are the criminals whose only objectives are crime and making a living through kidnapping, robbery, and assassination. The third are the Islamic fundamentalists that want a theocracy like Iran. The fourth are the [Al Qaeda](#) like-minded groups who foster an Islamic Jihad to kill and destroy any form of cooperation with the US.

In analyzing the difference in the occupation mentality of the L. Paul Bremer III regime, and this lack of any type of counterinsurgency strategy, it is clear that today there is a Three Block War paradigm in Iraq,

SHOCK & AWE :: MULTIMEDIA CENTER



Video: Coming Home

A salute to our troops. This is a music video montage of images from Iraq and troops coming home. [Enter S&A!](#)

[We Need Submissions! Click Here!](#)

About H. Thomas Hayden



H. Thomas Hayden recently concluded over 35 years of service, which included the Agency for International Development, the Marine Corps, defense industry and the Pentagon. His specialties

are Intelligence, Counterinsurgency Operations, Counter-terrorism, and Joint Concepts Development and Experimentation. His Marine Corps assignments have included command of two separate battalions; AC/S G-2, 4th MARDIV & AC/S G-2 FMFEurope; Branch Head, HQMC, Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC); Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for SO/LIC; and, Senior Program Analysts at HQMC with the Joint Staff and DoD at the Pentagon. Overseas assignments included Vietnam, Japan & Okinawa, Europe, Central America, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, Somalia, Singapore, Philippines, and Colombia. He has an MBA (Pepperdine) and an MA in International Relations (University of Southern California). He has written two books and is working on a third.

[Thomas Hayden Article Archives](#)

[Sound Off!](#) - Have an opinion about this article? Visit the discussion forum.

Related Links

[Military Opinions Index](#)

[Global War on Terror](#)

Get \$1000 a Month!

Your service may have earned you great education benefits

and classic counterinsurgency will not work in all cases.

The Three Block War, a concept first enunciated by General Charles C. Krulak, USMC, former Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, is seen when you have one of your military units doing humanitarian or reconstruction operations on one block, military units doing counter-guerrilla or security operations on another block, and a unit fighting a conventional war on a third block.

Just last week, the [U.S. Marine Corps](#) pronounced its week-long conventional attack, Operation Matador, against heavily armed insurgents near the Syrian border in the area of Obeidi, Iraq, successfully completed. It was reported that Jihadist volunteers would come across the border from Syria, collect weapons, and after receiving training, be sent into the cities of Iraq. Reportedly over 150 militants were killed, 40 captured and many wounded escaped back across the Euphrates River into Syria. The villages of Rommana, Karabilah and Obeidi had long been reported as a staging point for the Abu Al-Zarqawi branch of Al Qaeda. This was the conventional part of the Three Block War. However, this type of military operations can often do more damage than they do good.

Meanwhile while it was over reported that many insurgent attacks were staged across Iraq that killed or wounded hundreds of Iraqis, little attention is being paid to the second block -- the counter-guerrilla operations that are being fought by Iraqi forces with U.S. assistance. When L. Paul Bremer III unbelievably disbanded the entire Iraqi military and police forces, he created a vacuum that has taken a long time to fill. Training Iraqis to fight the insurgents was lost on earlier U.S. regimes and a major part of any Iraqi counter-insurgency strategy has to be to train Iraqi trainers to do the job for themselves. This is the second block of the Three Block War.

One lesson learned in Vietnam was the Marine Corps' Combined Action Program (CAP). CAP was a very successful effort to place a Marine rifle squad with a Vietnamese Popular Forces Platoon. The U.S. armed forces in Iraq are using this technique by placing more U.S. advisors and U.S. personnel with indigenous Iraqi forces. Iraqis are conducting more and more counter-guerrilla operations.

U.S. strategists have finally recognized that training Iraqi military and police forces to fight the insurgents is far better than infidel occupation forces, which more often than not have offended Islamic sensibilities.

Reconstruction, humanitarian assistance, and nation building is third element in the Three Block War. However, as T. E. Lawrence said long ago, it is better for the local population to get it 80 percent right than for the visitors to get it 100 percent right. Rebuilding the Iraqi economic infrastructure that had deteriorated during the Hussein regime and was damaged or destroyed during the early days of the invasion is taking much longer than it should have. Jobs and a better life, more than military might, will make the insurgents position more untenable every day.

▼ advertisement

you great education benefits.
Get up to \$1000 per month to pay for your undergraduate, graduate or technical degree.

[Find out about military-friendly schools today.](#)

James Bennet, in a story in *The New York Times*, "The Mystery of the Insurgency," May 15, 2005, noted that in searching for parallels to the Iraqi insurgency, several have compared the insurgents to the

violent anarchists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The anarchist movement attracted many among the alienated and uprooted that could not find a place in modern society, and found camaraderie in like-minded terrorists.

Bennet also noted that while some news reporters and political pundits accused the US of being slow to apply lessons learned from earlier counterinsurgency campaigns, it seems no one has ignored the lessons of history more decisively than the Abu Al-Zarqawi insurgents themselves. The radical Jihadists in Iraq are showing little interest in winning hearts and minds among the people of Iraq, in building legitimacy, or in articulating a better program beyond expelling the Americans. They have not found a single charismatic leader, developed no alternative to the current elected government nor established a political wing to front for the insurgents. The insurgents are killing civilians indiscriminately in addition to more predictable targets like elected or appointed officials of the new government.

Cognitive transformation is the best chance for a successful major change in the American counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq. The [U.S. Army](#) and Marines are now conducting extensive language, religion, cultural and social norms training in pre-deployment activities for all Americans going to Iraq.

While the insurgents were give a free ride in the propaganda arena in the early years of the war, even some in the U.S. news media are beginning to realize the major impact that can be made in their reporting on the Islamic extremist.

Newsweek magazine on Sunday, May 15, 2005 said it erred in a May 9 report that said U.S. interrogators desecrated the Koran at Guantanamo Bay, and apologized to victims of deadly violence sparked by the article. "We regret that we got any part of our story wrong, and extend our sympathies to victims of the violence and to the U.S. soldiers caught in its midst," Editor Mark Whitaker wrote in the magazine's Monday, May 16, 2005 edition. A little late for that.

The chances of conducting a viable counterinsurgency campaign in the Three Block War in Iraq is looking more remote every day with the continued sectarian strife and the lack of cooperation between the Shi'ites, Sunnis, and Kurds. Iraq may never be a single state again and the only possibility for the future may be a loose federation before a civil war.

An exit strategy for Iraq is simple: complete the turn over of all security and counterinsurgency operations to Iraqis, assure the election of a formal government with fully functioning public services, and assist in rebuilding the nation. Then get out.