INTRODUCTION

(ii) *The primary functions of the Army are:*

. . .

(G) To provide forces for the occupation of territories abroad, including initial establishment of military government pending transfer of this authority.

(iii) *The collateral functions of the Navy and Marine Corps include the following:*

. . .

(E) To establish military government, as directed, pending transfer of this responsibility to other authority.

—U.S. Code of Federal Regulations, Title 32, vol. 2, sec. 368.6

The U.S. military has historically paid little attention to the nature and requirements of counterinsurgency and stability operations. Missions pitting the U.S. military against insurgents, or forcing it into stabilization tasks and policing duties abroad, have tended to be dismissed as beyond the military's remit or as "lesser-included" operations.[1] The emphasis has instead been on achieving primacy against the armed forces of nation-states, involving an anticipated adversary shaped and operating very much like the U.S. military itself. This prioritization of "high-intensity" or "conventional" war has remained even though the U.S. military has faced "unconventional" or "irregular" challenges at a greater frequency and in campaigns of greater duration and cost.[2] Indeed, even the major combat operations waged by the United States have often preceded or involved a less conventional phase, entailing postconflict stabilization or state-building.[3] Notwithstanding these historical trends, the U.S. military has—in its doctrine, education, training, and, more broadly, its culture—prioritized the destruction of military targets far above the different means of creating or consolidating a new political order.[4]

Counterinsurgency and stability operations share certain characteristics that make them particularly problematic and that explain to a large degree why the U.S. military has sought to avoid such missions. In these campaigns,

the military effort is but a subset to the much more complex task of building and strengthening a new political compact, an objective that can require years if not decades, is prone to setbacks, and depends as much on local conditions as on the actions of the intervening force. Stability operations will also typically involve reconstruction activities, the provision of basic services, and the establishment of governance. Although these tasks are best conducted by civilian and humanitarian agencies, the frequent inability of the latter to operate in insecure conditions has and will yet force military troops to assume responsibility for these areas as well, alongside the provision of security.

Militarily, foreign and local forces are confronted with "asymmetric" or "irregular" armed threats: guerrillas, insurgents, or rebels that are indistinguishable from the population among which they operate and appear only for short instances to conduct an attack. Effective operations require identifying, locating, and closing in on an elusive adversary—a demanding challenge, even more so in a foreign land where the language barrier is high, the local police structures are weak, and the loyalties of the population are split. Whereas the U.S. military is certainly not lacking in firepower, the use of force in urban settings risks large-scale destruction and the disaffection of the local population and can easily be counterproductive. Even when precise and discriminate, however, the physical elimination of insurgents will have little meaning unless it occurs alongside a comprehensive strategy that can alienate the insurgency group, minimize its support, and prevent it from attracting fresh recruits—a challenge far more demanding than locating and striking targets.

No wonder, then, that the U.S. military has sought to steer clear of these complex operations. The fundamental problem with this stance is that it confuses the undesirability of these missions with an actual ability to avoid them. This proclivity has unnecessarily complicated the U.S. military's, *malgré tout*, repeated engagements with both counterinsurgency and stability operations. As retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters wrote in 1999, "One way or another, we will go. Deployments often will be unpredictable, often surprising. And we frequently will be unprepared for the mission, partly because of the sudden force of circumstance but also because our military is determined to be unprepared for missions it does not want, as if the lack of preparedness might prevent our going."[5]

The flaws in the U.S. military's logic were made clear in the early years of the War on Terror, when it failed to anticipate and then struggled to contain the "postconflict" instability that came to characterize both Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Though the setbacks faced by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq cannot be understood monocausally, it is generally recognized that the U.S. military was itself inappropriately prepared and configured to carry out the stabilization tasks

that both of these campaigns demanded. In Iraq in particular, this factor contributed, both directly and indirectly, to popular disenchantment and resentment of the U.S. mission and, ultimately, to a rise in violence directed against the occupying forces and the political institutions that they had put in place.[6]

Following this unanticipated rise in low-level violence, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) launched a number of initiatives to improve the armed forces' ability to conduct counterinsurgency. A military more adept at stabilization, it was reasoned, would be able to establish the conditions in Iraq necessary for a U.S. withdrawal from this troubled campaign. In the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, some also perceived a stability-operations capability as enabling the U.S. military to intervene in weak or failing states, seen as offering sanctuary to terrorist organizations. To others still, the reorientation was justified simply as providing the military with a means of consolidating its future combat victories, to "win the peace" as well as the war. Whatever the motivation, the reorientation soon gathered momentum: departmental instruction, concept papers, training exercises, organizational changes, and doctrinal field manuals emerged, all relating specifically to counterinsurgency and stability operations.

The reforms and restructuring within DoD and the armed services suggested a potential turning point in the history of the U.S. military. By that very fact, the reorientation necessarily also challenged the institution's orthodoxy and culture. Throughout its history, it has been an axiom of the U.S. military that it does not sacrifice in any significant way the pursuit of conventional primacy for the sake of "lesser" tasks. For the U.S. military to "learn counterinsurgency," DoD would need to overcome this institutional hindrance, which has blocked earlier instances of organizational learning. In other words, it would need to embrace change from the top down; treat and prioritize stability operations as an integral slice in the spectrum of operations; prepare and train its soldiers to conduct such campaigns; and, most important, tackle the challenge of counterinsurgency without trying to define it as something more manageable than what it really is.

This book offers an assessment of DoD's efforts to transition to a new strategic environment during the early years of the War on Terror. It focuses on three broad questions. First, what steps did the U.S. military take in this period to improve its ability to conduct stability operations? Second, how effective were these measures in prompting institutional learning? Finally, how can one best account for the particular level of success experienced as part of this learning process?

The focus throughout is on counterinsurgency and stability operations, but the learning process under scrutiny has far wider implications. Indeed, this is the study of how the United States military has transformed itself for

modern wars: engagements that, whether irregular or conventional, will in virtually all cases carry a certain complexity for which the counterinsurgency learning process is particularly relevant. Certainly, when ground troops are involved, they will need to operate in urban settings, interact with civilian populations, fend off various irregular adversaries, and understand the local political and social environments—that is, the type of knowledge, skills, and awareness that are also called for and emphasized in counterinsurgency theory. This more than anything is what makes the learning of counterinsurgency so important, particularly for a military with global expeditionary ambitions.

The study follows in the footsteps of previous studies of the U.S. military's learning of counterinsurgency, such as Douglas Blaufarb's *The Counterinsurgency Era*, which assessed the efforts of the U.S. government to develop a capability for counterguerrilla warfare in the 1960s, and Richard Downie's *Learning from Conflict*, which examined the U.S. military's development of doctrine for "low-intensity conflict" during the 1970s and 1980s.[7] The current period of learning coincides roughly with George W. Bush's tenure as U.S. president—an eight-year period in which DoD transitioned from an exclusive focus on high-intensity combat to the growing realization that counterinsurgency presented a critical challenge. Although arguably more targeted and significant in scope, this learning process has yet to undergo a similarly systematic analysis.

One problem in assessing a more recent learning process is, of course, that insufficient time has passed to enable a definite statement on where the U.S. military is heading. In recognition of this fact, the aim of this study is not to determine whether the U.S. military had, at the time of publication, "learned counterinsurgency." Nor is the primary aim to prophesy about the eventual outcome of a most probably never-ending process of change. Instead, the focus is on the achievements and challenges of DoD's *initial institutional response to unforeseen strategic and operational challenges.* Close scrutiny of the institutional encounter with stability operations reveals the first steps of a possible reorientation and the immediate tendencies and assumptions to have marked this process. Through this assessment, it is possible to determine whether there were not signs, even in the early stages, of a learning process compromised in both orientation and ambition.

A recurring theme in this narrative is the concept of "learning"—a seemingly simple abstraction that can gain unforeseen complexity in the context of a vast organization such as the U.S. Department of Defense. The meaning and implication of organizational learning is examined in detail in chapter 1, which also seeks to frame the reorientation under review. Even though extensive elaboration on definitions and terminology is usually an uninspiring point at which to start, the discussion of stability operations and of counterinsurgency is notorious for its semantic ambiguity. Because im-

precision of terms and meaning has in the past served to distort or deviate institutional learning, it is imperative to set out exactly what type of innovation is needed and, as importantly, why.

Another recurring theme is the tension between the U.S. military's retention of conventional primacy and its development of a counterinsurgency capability. Merely positing stability operations as a "gap" in U.S. military know-how is misleading, for it suggests that the competence to conduct these highly challenging missions can simply be added to the range of tasks already under the U.S. military's control. Quite aside from the need to reallocate finite resources, the learning of stability operations would also require deep-rooted cultural reform—particularly given the U.S. military's singular focus on high-intensity combat throughout history. By tracing the U.S. military's troubled relation with counterinsurgency, chapter 2 illustrates the great friction involved in transforming an institution that has actively sought to avoid stability operations into one that is to perceive them as equal in importance to major combat operations. The chapter also looks at two previous attempts, both unsuccessful, by the U.S. military to institutionalize a counterinsurgency capability, first in the 1960s and then in the 1980s. The analysis points to specific tendencies that have subverted previous learning processes and that may yet exert a powerful influence today.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the motivation for the U.S. military to revisit the topic of counterinsurgency at the dawn of the War on Terror. The analysis examines the U.S. military's attitude toward counterinsurgency and stability operations at the turn of the twenty-first century, framed here as a function of its interpretation of the 1990s' peacekeeping operations and, to a lesser extent, the Vietnam War. The chapter then traces the process by which counterinsurgency emerged as an important preoccupation to the U.S. military, focusing on the initial effect of the September 11 attacks and the later impact of operational experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Chapter 4 provides an account of how DoD's reorientation toward counterinsurgency and stability operations fared in the 2004–2005 period—the moment at which the reorientation truly took off. Central to this account is a group of personalities within the military—a "COIN community"—who were, due to their experience and against a backdrop of changed strategic circumstances, given positions where they could influence the wider institution. At the same time, this period of flux also illustrates the friction involved in changing priorities and upsetting established norms.

Chapter 5 assesses DoD's 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), a major review of defense policy. This document is held as representing the prevailing priorities of the institution, and a close analysis is therefore provided of its treatment of counterinsurgency and of stability operations. Along with the provisions and assumptions relating directly to such missions, the focus is also on the implications of two concepts introduced in

the QDR: "irregular warfare" and "support for stability, security, transition, and reconstruction (SSTR) operations."

Chapter 6 engages with the U.S. military's learning of counterinsurgency during 2006. The worsening security conditions in Iraq during this year gave continued meaning to the learning of counterinsurgency, translating into a number of initiatives related to these types of missions. This process culminated in the publication of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency field manual in December 2006. The chapter assesses the conceptualization of counterinsurgency presented in this publication and examines its value in furthering the U.S. military's understanding of these types of campaigns. The chapter concludes with an examination of how the field manual came to inform the U.S. military's strategy in Iraq.

With the launch of Operation Fardh al-Qanoon in February 2007, the U.S. military embarked on a comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign to bring stability to Iraq. The notion of the U.S. military directing its troops to conduct counterinsurgency was in itself revolutionary. Yet, the new operation, what came to be called the "surge," would be a mixed blessing for the future of counterinsurgency as a U.S. military priority. Chapter 7 assesses the origins of the "surge," its outcomes on the ground, and the effect of this change in strategy on the U.S. military's ongoing institutionalization of counterinsurgency.

With the U.S. military having released an interservice counterinsurgency field manual and also conducting counterinsurgency operations "by the book" in Iraq, chapter 8 assesses whether this moment can be seen as the beginning of a U.S. military "counterinsurgency capability." The analysis concludes with an overview of two of the most fundamental variables in the configuration of a military force—its defense budget and force structure—and the steps taken to reorient each in line with the demands of counterinsurgency and stability operations.

To what extent did this moment signify institutional learning and innovation—a break with the U.S. military's historical tendency to marginalize counterinsurgency within its training, education, doctrine, and resource allocation? How effective was the U.S. military as a learning institution during these years? These questions are addressed in the conclusion, which also identifies the factors determining the particular level of success experienced in this reorientation. This concluding chapter also offers a prognosis of the future of counterinsurgency as a U.S. military priority, an analysis that draws heavily on the likely fallout of the U.S. military's engagement in Iraq and the impact of this experience on the Pentagon's future stance toward counterinsurgency.