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## LEARNING NOT TO KICK WITH OUR ACHILLES HEEL: THE CASE AGAINST A COUNTERINSURGENCY-FOCUSED MILITARY

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Within the defense community, a debate is emerging over the wisdom of “balancing” the military by shifting focus toward irregular warfare. This paper argues that balance would only be prudent if the military is likely to continue primarily facing irregular conflicts, if current counterinsurgency doctrine can lead to success in future contingencies, and if increased focus on counterinsurgency will improve national security. Although the military will likely face future insurgencies, such contingencies threaten national security less than conventional wars, and there is little evidence that the military’s counterinsurgency doctrine will lead to future success. Moreover, balancing the military would degrade its conventional deterrence capabilities, thereby increasing the likelihood of conventional warfare. Therefore, while Iraq and Afghanistan should be the military’s immediate priority, reconstituting degraded conventional capabilities should be its next concern. The paper concludes by suggesting several measures that would improve the military’s irregular warfare capabilities without sacrificing conventional deterrence.

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“A misleading current narrative contends that the recent lowering of violence in Iraq is primarily due to the...application of so-called ‘new’ counterinsurgency methods... This hyper-emphasis on counterinsurgency puts the American Army in a perilous condition. Its ability to fight wars consisting of head-on battles using tanks and mechanized infantry is in danger of atrophy.”

-Lieutenant Colonel Gian Gentile  
(Dreazen 2008, A3)

“The larger concern, in my view, would be if our senior leaders allow our newly developed counterinsurgency capabilities to lapse, and like Gentile, focus instead on preparing the Army to fight the next ‘big one.’ After all, why worry about fighting real wars in the Middle East and South Asia when we can instead keep our military forces in the United States to fight imaginary ones?”

-Colonel Pete Mansoor  
(Mansoor 2008)

## I. INTRODUCTION

Although the initial invasion of Iraq demonstrated the U.S. military’s dominance in modern conventional warfare, its inability to defeat the ensuing insurgency demonstrated its ineffectiveness at fighting irregular warfare. Writing recently in *Foreign Affairs*, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates asserted that “the United States needs a military whose ability to kick down the door is matched by its ability to clean up the mess and even rebuild the house afterward” (Gates 2009, 31). Gates is correct that the military’s conventional capabilities far exceed its capacity to fight irregular warfare, but his assertion brings up a larger question: can the military better serve U.S. national security interests by reconstituting its capacity to fight conventional warfare or by formalizing its counterinsurgency capabilities?

The military’s experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have led the security community to reexamine which capabilities the U.S. military should focus on in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Gates is the most senior in a forum of strategists and military professionals who are currently debating what the future of warfare will look like and how the U.S. military can best prepare to meet likely contingencies. Much of the conversation has involved mid-level military officers, both active and retired, with significant combat experience

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as well as prestigious academic credentials. These warrior-scholars largely fall into two factions, which the media has dubbed the “Crusaders” and the “Conservatives” (Bacevich 2008). The two factions disagree not only about what the future of warfare might look like and how the military should prepare to meet that future, but they also subscribe to fundamentally divergent narratives about the causes of the recent decline in violence in Iraq.<sup>1</sup>

Crusaders view the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts as harbingers of 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare and believe that the military should plan accordingly. In their view, the decline in violence in Iraq was the direct result of the introduction of proper counterinsurgency strategy during what is commonly known as the *surge*. Crusaders argue that the military must make counterinsurgency a core competency or risk repeating history by having to relearn counterinsurgency concepts during future conflicts at the cost of significant blood and treasure (Bacevich 2008).

Conservatives, on the other hand, tend to see the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan as something of an aberration that has distracted the military from what it does best: fight conventional wars. Conservatives generally have less confidence than Crusaders in the military’s counterinsurgency capability, and argue that several factors beyond the change in strategy were responsible for Iraq’s recent decline in violence. Furthermore, they believe that the military can best serve national security interests by refocusing on its ability to effectively wage conventional warfare, thereby ensuring that it continues to deter potential competitors (Nagl 2009a).

This paper examines the merits of each faction’s arguments and proceeds to evaluate the military structure that would most benefit U.S. national security posture. It begins with a discussion of the Crusaders and the Conservatives, their disparate beliefs about how the military should be structured, and the differing assumptions that lead to these beliefs. It then assesses each of these assumptions in the context of political theory, the current state of the military, present and likely future threats to national security, and, where appropriate, recent case studies. The paper concludes that while irregular warfare concepts should factor into military planning, especially with regard to waging the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the military’s predominant focus should be on conventional warfare. Focusing too heavily on irregular warfare would weaken U.S. national security posture and could potentially increase the likelihood of both conventional and irregular conflicts in the future.

## II. CRUSADERS AND CONSERVATIVES

The debate between Conservatives and Crusaders is ultimately about what the focus of the military should be. Conservatives believe that the military should concentrate on preparing to fight *conventional warfare* (Mazarr 2008), while Crusaders advocate what they term a *balanced military*, in which the Army would spend significant resources preparing to fight *irregular warfare*. Within the confines of this debate, conventional warfare refers to major combat operations, while irregular warfare refers to operations designed to win the support of a local population while denying an enemy control over that population. Irregular warfare includes nation building, peacekeeping, and counterinsurgency, among other missions. Within this paper, the terms *counterinsurgency* and *irregular warfare* are used interchangeably, and *military* and *Army* are both used to denote ground combat forces. There is no disagreement over the role of the Navy and the Air Force; the debate is exclusively on the role of ground forces and focuses primarily on the Army, although the Marine Corps is sometimes included.

Among Crusaders there is some disagreement over the specifics of how a balanced military would best be structured (Feickert 2008). While some favor transforming a significant number of combat units into specialized irregular warfare units (Krepinevich 2008), others favor adding counterinsurgency to all ground combat units' core competencies, so that such units would be capable of waging both conventional and irregular warfare (McMaster 2008). Paradoxically, Crusaders have recommended policies, such as specialized counterinsurgency units, that are strikingly similar to those of Conservatives.<sup>2</sup> The difference, however, is largely one of scale. Crusaders generally agree that the military's ability to wage conventional warfare should be matched by its ability to fight irregular wars, whereas Conservatives believe that the military's predominant focus should be on conventional warfare. Irregular conflicts should be avoided if possible, Conservatives argue, but conventionally trained forces can, with additional training, handle the limited counterinsurgency missions they may face.

Nearly every member of each camp possesses ground-level combat experience and impeccable academic credentials, which has led to a well-informed debate based on both tangible experience and a thorough understanding of military history and theory. However, the impressive credentials within each faction have often transformed the debate from a critical analysis of each side's logic into a discussion about whose résumés lend the most credibility (see, for example, Dreazen 2008). This sometimes distracts observers from a sober analysis of how the Army should be structured in

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the near future. Nevertheless, the professional backgrounds within each camp are an important part of the discussion, as they have considerably influenced the debate.

Although the media often present Crusaders as a small band of dissidents standing in defiance of the entrenched establishment, in actuality many of them have come to *represent* the establishment. Secretary Gates has long been a proponent of a balanced military (Gates 2009), and his appointment of General David Petraeus, another member of the Crusader faction, to Central Command was seen by many as a signal of the direction he wants the military to follow (National Public Radio 2008). However, it is a cadre termed by some as Petraeus's "brain trust" that has provided most of the Crusader movement's intellectual firepower. Perhaps the most vocal member of this cadre is Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, who retired from the Army recently after deploying to Iraq in 2004 as a battalion operations officer. While still on active duty, Nagl wrote the counterinsurgency classic, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, and more recently was a major contributor to the Army's new *Counterinsurgency Manual*, officially known as *Field Manual 3-24*. Others associated with the Crusaders include Brigadier General H.R. McMaster, who was widely praised for successfully waging counterinsurgency in Iraq; Colonel Pete Mansoor, who is General Petraeus's former executive officer; and David Kilcullen, a former Australian Army officer who served on General Petraeus's staff and is a co-author of the *Counterinsurgency Manual* (National Public Radio 2008).

While it is ironic that the Crusader movement is being led by the establishment,<sup>3</sup> the background of the most outspoken Conservative is even more surprising. Lieutenant Colonel Gian Gentile served as a battalion commander in Iraq prior to the surge and currently chairs the military history division at West Point. With an undergraduate degree from Berkeley and a doctorate in History from Stanford, Gentile seems accustomed to being a contrarian within the Army. Having served in Iraq prior to the surge, he has not shied away from writing controversial articles taking umbrage at the notion that the Army was using a misguided strategy prior to the surge. Other leading Conservative voices include Michael Mazarr, a professor of National Security Strategy at the National War College, and Colonel Andrew Bacevich, a West Point graduate and professor of International Relations at Boston University. Perhaps the most unlikely Conservative is Colonel Sean MacFarland. Widely hailed as one of the first officers to successfully wage counterinsurgency in Iraq (National Public Radio 2008; Michaels 2007), MacFarland recently made waves when he co-authored an

essay warning that the Army's deteriorating artillery capabilities represent a serious danger to national security (see MacFarland, Shields, and Snow 2008).

Crusaders believe that the military has learned to effectively fight counterinsurgency and must continue focusing on this type of warfare in the future. Conservatives counter that the recent focus on irregular warfare has degraded the military's ability to fight conventional wars, and argue that it must instead focus on rebuilding these capabilities. It is important to note that apart from advances that could improve both irregular and conventional capabilities, restructuring the military to improve its ability to fight counterinsurgency would come at an opportunity cost to its conventional competence. While there are certainly systems and equipment that could improve the military's capabilities in both types of warfare, diverting ground forces' resources, such as funding, personnel, or training time, to prepare for irregular warfare would, in general, detract from conventional proficiency. Even if the United States were to establish a counterinsurgency force without diverting resources from conventional assets (by increasing spending and expanding the size of the military), the benefits of such a policy would need to be weighed against the opportunity costs. In other words, the U.S. military should only augment irregular forces' resources if it will benefit national security posture more than a similar expansion of conventional forces. By definition, balancing the military would involve a tradeoff between irregular and conventional warfare capabilities. Therefore, Crusaders' support for a balanced military implies that the benefits would outweigh the costs, a notion that is open to debate. In essence, then, Crusaders and Conservatives are debating whether the benefits of a balanced military would outweigh the costs.

Although the current conflicts in the Middle East have given rise to the current debate, the debate has significant historical precedent. As far back as 1960, *Pragmatists* such as Morris Janowitz were arguing that in the atomic age, conventional warfare had become obsolete, and the military should shift its focus toward what he termed *limited warfare* (see Janowitz 1960). This half-century-old statement is strikingly similar to current arguments made by Crusaders. The Crusaders' push for *balance* is simply the logical continuation of the Pragmatists' vision of the military. In essence, then, the debate between Crusaders and Conservatives is simply the latest manifestation of a decades-old discussion about how the military should be used to further U.S. foreign policy goals. The underlying question, as Eliot Cohen has observed, is whether the United States should have an *imperial army*, which "accepts ambiguous objectives, interminable com-

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mitments and chronic skirmishes as a fact of life,” or a *mass army*, which “wants a definable mission, a plan for victory and decisive battles” (Cohen 2000).

Previous manifestations of this debate have been studied through the lens of civilian control of the military. The narratives of Cohen and Janowitz described a struggle between recalcitrant military officers who wanted to focus exclusively on conventional warfare, and Pragmatist civilian leaders who wanted the military to develop irregular warfare capabilities (see Janowitz 1960; Cohen 2002). Traditionally, Pragmatists lacked combat experience, which left them open to attacks on their credibility regardless of the relative strength of their arguments. The Crusaders’ military experience effectively shores up a superficial yet significant weakness in the Pragmatists’ case for an imperial army, and that credibility has allowed Crusaders to advance their ideas much more successfully than their forebears. Instead of veteran officers boldly restraining hubristic civilian leaders from sending soldiers into unwinnable conflicts, the debate can now be framed as the story of a few forward-thinking officers working to ensure that the bureaucratic defense establishment never again fails to prepare for modern warfare.

On a practical level, however, the Crusaders’ push for a balanced military rests on three assumptions highlighted previously. First, Crusaders believe that the military will continue to face scenarios comparable to Iraq and Afghanistan, requiring the utilization of irregular warfare tactics. Second, they believe that the military has developed an effective counterinsurgency doctrine that can lead to success in future conflicts. Third, they believe that increasing the military’s focus on irregular warfare will result in a net benefit for U.S. national security.

### III. WHAT WILL THE FUTURE OF WARFARE LOOK LIKE?

Whether or not the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan were misguided, the decision has been made to fight irregular warfare contingencies in those countries. Both camps agree that as long as these conflicts are being fought, they should be the focus of short-term decisions about the strategic direction of the military. However, fundamentally restructuring the military to improve its irregular capabilities is prudent only if the United States expects to continue involving itself in such conflicts over the long term.

At a fundamental level, Crusaders and Conservatives represent two diametrically opposing philosophies of what the future of warfare should and will look like. Conservatives continue to adhere to the *Powell Doctrine*,

which posits that the United States should not take military action unless national security is threatened, objectives are clearly defined, and all non-military alternatives have been unsuccessful (Bacevich 2008). Crusaders, on the other hand, view the Powell Doctrine as a desirable ideal, but feel that the military should prepare itself for future involvement in irregular warfare. They adhere to what has been termed the *Petraeus Doctrine*, which admonishes the military to prepare itself for a long series of irregular warfare contingencies without a clearly defined enemy, a timeline, or an unambiguous idea of what victory might look like (Bacevich 2008).

A key distinction between these two philosophies is that while the Powell Doctrine holds that irregular conflicts should be avoided, the Petraeus Doctrine makes no judgment as to the wisdom of such contingencies, but simply presumes future U.S. involvement. Since Conservatives believe that U.S. involvement in irregular conflicts benefits national security only marginally, if at all, they contend that the U.S. military should not be called upon to support such missions (MacGregor 2009). While Crusaders do not necessarily agree that the United States should be fighting irregular warfare, they believe that Conservatives' objections are obsolete in that they reflect "an ahistorical theory of war that experience disproves every day" (McMaster 2008, 26). For Crusaders, since civilian leaders have already made the decision to involve the military in future irregular conflicts, the military should do whatever is necessary to prepare for such contingencies (Bacevich 2008).

However, the question of who gets to decide is ultimately irrelevant; the fact that policy *decisions* are made by civilian leaders does not hinder military officials from offering policy *recommendations*. The opinions of military leaders are just as relevant to decisions about whether to go to war as they are to decisions about the structure and focus of the military. Ultimately, decisions about both force structure and strategy should be made by civilian leaders with the input of military advisers. While it would be improper for military leaders to limit the President's and Secretary of Defense's options, they would also be derelict if they did not provide their advice on how to best allocate resources.

Furthermore, it would not be unprecedented for civilian leaders to change the military's force structure so as to prevent future leaders from employing the military imprudently. For example, in the wake of the Vietnam War, the Army implemented the "Total Force" concept, which combined reserve and active duty units in an effort to prevent future civilian leaders from deploying the Army without calling up the reserves. This was meant to ensure that the entire country, rather than just the military, would feel



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the effects of future engagements, thereby encouraging political leaders to employ the military only when absolutely necessary (Cohen 2002). While it certainly would be inappropriate for military leaders to have done this surreptitiously, the decision was ultimately made by the president, and military leaders would have been negligent if they had *not* counseled their civilian superiors on the matter.<sup>4</sup> As Gentile has noted, “in the American Army many folks assume the decision [about military force structure] has already been made. And they do not fully appreciate the Army’s role and influence in this contentious policy matter” (Gentile 2008a).

The debate over whether the United States should have intervened in Iraq and Afghanistan is now moot, but it is still crucial to discuss whether to involve the U.S. military in similar conflicts in the future. Furthermore, the conception of these conflicts as campaigns within a larger war reinforces the argument that military leaders should play a significant role in the debate over whether to engage in similar contingencies in the future. Although some argue that the military should not be involved in deciding *whether* to go to war, few would argue that the military should not advise leaders on whether to engage the enemy on a certain battlefield, or whether to prepare to fight using a method they deem to be counterproductive.

Crusaders and Conservatives agree that the United States should only shift focus toward irregular warfare if it can maintain sufficient capabilities to effectively address conventional threats. According to Secretary Gates, the military’s conventional abilities are “sustainable for the medium term given current trends. The United States would be hard-pressed to fight a major conventional ground war elsewhere on short notice, but as I have asked before, where on earth would we do that?” (Gates 2009, 32). In other words, Gates’s belief that the military’s conventional capabilities are adequate rests on the assumption that no conventional war will unexpectedly break out. But considering that America has little success at predicting future wars, such thinking could lead the military into the same trap Crusaders believe it fell into after Vietnam: failing to prepare for a contingency that leaders believed was unlikely. As Bacevich has written, “Historically, expectations that the next war will resemble the last one have seldom served the military well” (Bacevich 2008, 20). But as Gentile points out, neither an Iranian clash with Iraq-based U.S. forces nor a North Korean attack on Seoul is out of the realm of possibility (Gentile 2009a, 31). Such threats are best mitigated through the deterrent effects of robust conventional forces.

Crusaders point out that while the military’s ability to wage conventional warfare far exceeds its capacity to wage counterinsurgency, the latter is more likely to occur. The apparent incongruity of maintaining a military that

is not proficient at fulfilling its most likely mission is shown in Table 1. Consequently, it would seem to follow that conventional resources should be redirected to meet irregular warfare needs. But balancing the military, in and of itself, could increase the likelihood of U.S. involvement in future conflicts. This could happen due to the diminished deterrent effect of a balanced military and because future leaders would be more likely to involve the U.S. in irregular conflicts if they believed the military to be capable of effectively waging counterinsurgency.

**Table 1. Crusaders' Conception of Current U.S. National Security Posture**

	Type of Conflict	
	Irregular Warfare	Conventional Warfare
<b>Ability to wage each conflict type</b>	Inadequate	Superior
<b>Likelihood of each conflict type</b>	Moderate	Low

As noted previously, focusing the military's resources on irregular warfare would come at an opportunity cost to conventional capabilities. Deterioration in conventional capabilities would likely decrease the military's ability to deter other actors from challenging the United States. Throughout history, formidable conventional militaries have prevented war by deterring potential enemies,<sup>5</sup> yet there is no evidence that a stronger counterinsurgency force would deter potential insurgents. While there has been scant literature on deterring insurgency (perhaps because its unfeasibility seems self-evident), there has been significant research on the related issue of deterring terrorism. Trager and Zagorcheva suggest that terrorism can be prevented by "deterrence by punishment," meaning "the threat of harming something the adversary values if it takes an undesired action," and "deterrence by denial," which is defined as protecting targets to such an extent that the cost of attacking them outweighs the benefit (Trager and Zagorcheva 2005/06, 89-91). Even if such methods can deter terrorists, however, they are not effective methods of deterring insurgency. Deterrence by punishment is generally unavailable to a counterinsurgency force, since insurgents are rarely distinguishable from the civilian population. Therefore, it is nearly impossible for an occupying force to punish insurgents without also harming the civilian population whose hearts and minds they are fighting for. The inability of counterinsurgents to distinguish

insurgents from civilians also makes deterrence by denial impracticable because impenetrable protection against attack would preclude crucial interaction with the local populace.

Thus, it is highly unlikely that a robust irregular force could deter potential insurgents. Redirecting resources from conventional to irregular forces would decrease the military's ability to deter conventional threats without a counterbalancing increase in its ability to deter potential insurgents. In fact, such a shift could actually diminish the U.S. military's ability to prevent insurgencies. For instance, the threat of invasion by U.S. ground forces compelled Slobodan Milosevic to surrender in 1999 (Boot 2003), preventing what might have become a major insurgency had the United States actually invaded. If conventional deterrence is significantly degraded, similar bloodless victories will not be possible in the future.

Moreover, the very existence of a force perceived as capable of waging irregular warfare could increase the likelihood of the United States involving itself in an irregular contingency. Several Conservatives have pointed out that a future defense establishment's overconfidence in the military's ability to effectively wage counterinsurgency could lead to a higher likelihood of U.S. intervention in irregular conflicts. Colonel Douglas MacGregor, for example, has argued that a greater focus on irregular capabilities "would be downright dangerous because it suggests that we can repeat the folly of Iraq...without understanding that...if the population doesn't want you in the country...your intervention is doomed to inevitable failure (National Public Radio 2008).

There is no indication that the U.S. military has seen the last of conventional warfare. However, a balanced military could potentially lead to a higher likelihood of both conventional and irregular warfare, as shown in Table 2. Therefore, the benefits of a balanced military must be weighed against the costs associated with a higher probability of conflict.

**Table 2. Effect of a Balanced Military on the Likelihood of Conflict**

	<b>Type of Conflict</b>	
	Irregular Warfare	Conventional Warfare
<b>Conventional Military</b>	Moderate	Low
<b>Balanced Military</b>	Possibly Higher	Possibly Higher

#### IV. HOW EFFECTIVE IS COUNTERINSURGENCY DOCTRINE?

The debate between Crusaders and Conservatives over tactics has largely centered on what a counterinsurgent's primary focus should be. Crusaders have tended to support the population-centric method, which focuses on protecting and winning over the occupied population. French military strategists devised the population-centric method in the 1960s in response to insurgencies they had faced in Algeria, Vietnam, China, and elsewhere. The most prominent of these strategists is David Galula, whose classic *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* was one of the primary sources for the *Counterinsurgency Manual* (Gentile 2009b). Population-centric counterinsurgency received a popular boost recently, when its implementation in Iraq was followed by a significant decrease in levels of violence (Dreazen 2008). However, some Conservatives have spoken in favor of the enemy-centric method, which emphasizes seeking out and neutralizing insurgents rather than focusing on the civilian population. They have argued that population-centric counterinsurgency relies too heavily on winning hearts and minds at the expense of hunting down and killing insurgents (Gentile 2009b).

According to the Crusaders' narrative, prior to 2006 only a handful of units were utilizing effective, population-centric counterinsurgency methods. The subsequent decline in violence in Iraq, they argue, was due primarily to the implementation of population-centric counterinsurgency tactics (Dreazen 2008). Conservatives take a more skeptical view, claiming several other contemporaneous events were much larger factors. These included the significant increase in troop levels, radical Shi'a cleric Moqtada al Sadr's decision to stand down his Mahdi Army, and U.S. monetary transfers to former Sunni insurgents (Gentile 2008b).

Whether or not population-centric counterinsurgency doctrine deserves the lion's share of credit for the turnaround in Iraq, the evidence seems to indicate that it was more effective than enemy-centric strategy. Nevertheless, restructuring the military to better implement such a strategy can only be justified if the results from Iraq can be replicated elsewhere, as Crusaders such as Nagl have claimed (Nagl 2009b). However, Conservative critics counter that it would be folly to believe that the military now has a formula to defeat insurgencies (Bacevich 2009), and argue that Crusaders have become overconfident in the military's irregular warfare capabilities (National Public Radio 2008). According to Gentile, the *Counterinsurgency Manual* is "so persuasively written...that it makes the impossible seem possible" (Gentile 2008b).

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Whether the military's counterinsurgency tactics are as effective as Crusaders claim, the fact remains that the United States has been unable to defeat the Afghan insurgency. Crusaders have argued that this has been due to the inability of the United States to implement effective counterinsurgency methods in Afghanistan, rather than a failure of the methods themselves, but this is beside the point. The United States has been unable to effectively wage counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, even though the Secretary of Defense and the Commander of Central Command are both adherents to population-centric counterinsurgency theory. This suggests that even if population-centric counterinsurgency theory is sound, the United States still may not be able to successfully implement it in the future.

### **V. WILL BALANCE BRING A NET BENEFIT TO U.S. SECURITY?**

According to Crusaders such as John Nagl, the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks “conclusively demonstrated that instability anywhere can be a real threat to the American people here at home” (Bacevich 2008). Nagl's implication is that counterinsurgency methods can stabilize countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, thereby preventing acts of terror within the United States. However, despite political rhetoric to the contrary, there is no conclusive evidence that the counterinsurgency tactics being used in Afghanistan and Iraq have made the United States safer, either by reducing the terrorist threat to the United States, or otherwise. Even if such tactics *have* reduced the threat, Mazarr has pointed out that there is a much more effective way for the United States to defend itself against international terrorism: use the military to “find out where the terrorists are and strike them without trying to repair every unstable context that offers a temporary safe haven. Meanwhile, use nonmilitary tools to improve governance, institutionalization, and economic performance in states of concern” (Mazarr 2008, 45).

While it is not clear that balancing the military would improve its ability to fight counterinsurgency, as mentioned previously it would certainly decrease the military's conventional capabilities. While Conservatives tend to emphasize the relative importance of conventional forces more than Crusaders, both camps generally agree that American conventional capabilities have deteriorated as a result of the military's focus on irregular warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan (Gates 2009; MacFarland, Shields, and Snow 2008).

The United States has enjoyed military supremacy for so long that it is easy to take its continued dominance for granted. However, recent

events have indicated that its conventional capabilities have degraded significantly. One of the most striking indications of this deterioration is a 2008 report on the state of field artillery units. Submitted by three Army colonels, including Sean MacFarland, a Conservative, the report detailed a significant atrophy of the skills necessary to effectively integrate indirect fire into combined arms operations. Combined arms, which refers to simultaneously assaulting an objective with both direct-fire (e.g. rifles and machine guns) and indirect fire (e.g. artillery and mortars), is a major factor in the U.S. military's dominance in ground warfare. The report noted that ninety percent of artillerymen were serving outside their specialty. Preventable safety incidents occurred in nearly every exercise, and second lieutenants—the least experienced of all artillery officers—were nevertheless the most competent fire direction officers (MacFarland, Shields, and Snow 2008). It is by no means certain that the counterinsurgency skills these officers may have learned are worth the deterioration in their artillery skills. As shown in Table 3, moving toward balance would likely involve a tradeoff between potentially improving the military's ability to conduct counterinsurgency operations and degrading its ability to wage conventional wars. In evaluating this tradeoff, it should be remembered that conventional warfare, while less likely than irregular warfare, is a greater threat to national security.

**Table 3. Ability to Wage Conflict Types**

	<b>Type of Conflict</b>	
	Irregular Warfare (Population-Centric Theory)	Conventional Warfare
<b>Conventional Military</b>	Inadequate	Superior
<b>Balanced Military</b>	Possibly Improved	Degraded
<b>Threat to national security</b>	Low	High

Crusaders have asserted that balance would save the military from having to relearn counterinsurgency in future irregular conflicts (Nagl 2009b). While this may be true, balance might also require ground forces to relearn conventional concepts during future wars. The question is, which of these scenarios would be best for national security interests? Crusaders have

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called counterinsurgency “the graduate level of war” (*U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* 2007, 1), implying that it is harder to learn than conventional combat. But this statement underestimates the complexity of modern conventional warfare and the precision and training required to effectively use combined arms to assault an objective. Furthermore, as Max Boot has noted, most soldiers and Marines say that it is easier for military forces trained for high-intensity combat to wage irregular warfare than it is for those trained in irregular warfare to engage in high-intensity combat (Boot 2005).

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) incursion in Lebanon in 2006 provides a recent example of the costs of atrophied conventional capabilities. Crusaders and Conservatives who have written about the incursion agree that it was an unmitigated disaster for the IDF, which had widely been perceived as the stronger side but left the battlefield with Hezbollah undefeated. They also agree that the United States should prepare to face similar *hybrid wars* in the future. However, the factions have vastly different interpretations of what the situation implies about how the U.S. military should prepare for the future, and both Crusaders and Conservatives claim that the incident substantiates their beliefs.

Crusader John Nagl asserts that Hezbollah fought “like insurgents, ensuring that the Israeli attacks would harm civilians in a visible, politically counterproductive way.” In his opinion, this demonstrates that “doing more of what the U.S. military ‘does best’ [by preparing for conventional warfare] is not the answer to all of the challenges that will be forced upon us” (Nagl and Burton 2009, 97).

However, although the strategy of maximizing civilian collateral damage is traditionally associated with insurgencies, most of Hezbollah’s tactics were actually conventional and required the IDF to fight conventionally as well. Conservatives like Gentile agree with Nagl that the U.S. military must adapt itself to meet threats similar to those faced by the IDF, but they see Israel’s failure as a consequence of atrophied conventional capabilities due to years spent concentrating on counterinsurgency in the West Bank and Gaza (Gentile 2008c). Observers outside the debate tend to agree with Gentile’s assessment.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, MacFarland’s report on the state of U.S. Army artillery units also mentions Israel’s incursion into Lebanon. The report asserts that one of the IDF’s most glaring problems was that its ability to effectively integrate artillery had deteriorated while it focused on counterinsurgency (MacFarland, Shields, and Snow 2008). It follows that continued focus on counterinsurgency could similarly deteriorate U.S. conventional capabilities and create a significant risk to national security

should a legitimate conventional threat arise.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Several conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of Crusaders' assumptions. First, there is inadequate evidence that balancing the U.S. military would significantly improve its ability to effectively wage counterinsurgency. Second, it is uncertain how large a role irregular warfare will play in the U.S. military's future. Third, conventional threats represent a far greater danger to U.S. national security than do irregular threats. Fourth, U.S. conventional capabilities have deteriorated significantly, making these threats even more severe. Fifth, a balanced military could increase the probability of both conventional and irregular conflict. Sixth, while balancing the military would significantly decrease its ability to wage conventional warfare, the level to which it would improve the military's irregular warfare capabilities is uncertain. Table 4 summarizes these conclusions and their potential implications for U.S. national security.

**Table 4. Potential Effects of "Balancing" on U.S. National Security Posture**

		Type of Conflict	
		Irregular Warfare (Population-Centric Theory)	Conventional Warfare
<b>Conventional Military</b>	<b>Ability to wage each conflict type</b>	Inadequate	Superior
	<b>Likelihood of each conflict type</b>	Moderate	Low
<b>Balanced Military</b>	<b>Ability to wage each conflict type</b>	Possibly Improved	Degraded
	<b>Likelihood of each conflict type</b>	Possibly Higher	Possibly Higher
<b>Gravity of each conflict type to national security</b>		Low	High

Since it is by no means assured that the U.S. military will be successful in future irregular engagements, such conflicts should be avoided unless they represent a clear threat to U.S. national interest. Nevertheless,



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there is still a significant possibility that the United States will continue to face contingencies comparable to those in Iraq and Afghanistan, and such threats cannot be ignored. Balancing the military might enable the military to confront these threats more effectively, but it could also lead to a higher probability of facing both conventional and irregular contingencies, and would, furthermore, represent an opportunity cost in terms of conventional capabilities. In determining the optimal military force structure, these costs should be evaluated against the benefit of a better-trained counterinsurgency force.

As discussed, advocates of a balanced military generally favor either creating a significant number of specialized irregular warfare units or adding counterinsurgency to all ground combat units' core competencies. Both of these methods would damage the military's ability to regenerate its conventional capabilities in the short term and weaken such capabilities in the long run. They would also increase the likelihood of U.S. involvement in future conflicts, which would be to the detriment of national security.

There are, however, several ways that the military can ensure that it retains adequate counterinsurgency competency without significantly increasing the likelihood of conflict or detracting from conventional capabilities. Military officers have gained significant counterinsurgency experience in Iraq and Afghanistan. The lessons they have learned should be collected, discussed, and passed on to junior officers. By maintaining a formal counterinsurgency school akin to the Army's Advanced Armor School or the Marine Corps' Expeditionary Warfare School, the military can ensure that irregular warfare concepts do not need to be relearned during future contingencies.

Another way to preserve such skill sets would be to maintain an irregular warfare training command dedicated to training indigenous forces to conduct counterinsurgency missions. This method would allow the U.S. military to focus on conventional threats by ensuring that future irregular warfare missions could be handled by indigenous armies. Such a training command could prepare allied militaries to wage counterinsurgency as well, further relieving the U.S. military's burden. History has shown that such techniques have been effective in the past. Max Boot points out that the British Empire's success was due in part to its ability to train indigenous forces that could in turn control their countries' populations. This allowed Britain to effectively control India, with its population of 340 million, using just 60,000 policemen and soldiers (Boot 2005). Although it is unlikely that most Americans would want to emulate Britain's imperial designs, the United States can learn much from its methods. Robert Kaplan provides

what is perhaps the most succinct endorsement of this counterinsurgency strategy in *Imperial Grunts*, noting that “55 Special Forces trainers in El Salvador accomplished arguably more than 550,000 troops in Vietnam” (Kaplan 2005).

In contrast to proposals offered by Crusaders, the number of personnel assigned to a counterinsurgency school or training command should be kept small enough to avoid both detracting from the military’s conventional capabilities and overinflating the conception the United States has of its own irregular warfare competency. These methods would allow the military to preserve its counterinsurgency proficiency and regenerate its deteriorated conventional forces without increasing the likelihood of conflict in the future.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A good primer on this debate is Bacevich 2008. Also, two sets of “point/counter-point” articles allow both sides to showcase their arguments; the first set is Gentile 2009a and Nagl 2009a, and the second set is Bacevich 2009 and Nagl 2009b.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Nagl and Burton 2009 and Mazarr 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Although a Conservative, General George W. Casey, currently serves as the Army’s Chief of Staff, observers have contended that by promoting him to this prestigious yet non-operational post while having General Petraeus succeed him as the top commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, Secretary Gates was signaling a new direction for the military establishment.

<sup>4</sup> For a differing opinion on the propriety of military leaders’ actions in implementing the Total Force, see Cohen 2002, pages 184-188.

<sup>5</sup> Thucydides mentions one of the earliest recorded instances of deterrence in *The Peloponnesian War, Book V*, when he relates an instance where the Athenians deter the Melians through a demonstration of their military superiority (Thucydides 431 B.C.).

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Matthews 2008.

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