The Importance of Operational Innovation in Irregular Conflict

Modern guerilla war involves a weaker irregular force fighting an established professional force usually belonging to a government. Modern conflicts are equal parts political and military due to the irregular forces need to undermine the ruling authority. In these conflicts the opposing force is typically less technologically advanced and seeks to mitigate the stronger force through asymmetric means. For a superior force, operational innovation is more important because technological advantage is offset by enemy strategies. Operational innovation is the ability of one side to adapt to the enemy’s operating procedure and harness their fighting capabilities in new and often imaginative ways. Having an adaptable force is more important in irregular conflicts than traditional state on state conflicts where a technological edge plays a decisive role. The Marines Corps has been particularly effective at demonstrating this idea. The Marine Corps is a more adaptive force than the other branches because they give more leeway to their officers on the ground and don’t limit these officers with burdensome operational doctrine. The value of an adaptive force was shown by the Marines during their small wars in Latin America in the early 20th century and with the combined action platoon (CAP) program in Vietnam. Improvised explosive device (IED’s) can be seen as an operational innovation because the technology is not new it is just employed a novel and deadly way. An operational approach focusing on cheap disposable weapons can shift the calculus of engagement and make war much more expensive for the enemy who relies on high tech weaponry.

One of the key distinctions the Marine Corps makes from other branches of the military is the autonomy that is placed in its low level officers. Decentralized operations are a significant part of operations and promote a high level of adaptability in conflict. Other forces such as the
German military and special forces also promote a high level of autonomy but it is not typical in most military forces.¹ Within conventional conflict this is not an issue. The scale of units is so large that flag level officers decide the operations. There is no need for serious operational innovation at the lower levels. Guerrilla conflict is unique in that operational innovation has a much larger impact on the conflict than technological innovation. Jeffrey B White an analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) describes guerrilla conflict as such: “The acquisition and use of modern military technology is often seen as a solution to the problems of warfare in the late 20th century, with information warfare the latest example. Irregular warfare, however, remains confoundingly unaffected by changes in technology.”² The next big technological breakthrough may give a nation state an advantage over its peers but does not matter in irregular warfare. This is due to the nature of irregular warfare itself. The weaker sides aims to limit the technological edge of the other by fighting a protracted war on its terms. The Marines have seen relative success in such conflicts because of their focus on innovative tactics. This has allowed them to improve the security situation in places they operate and to tactically defeat the enemy.

Latin America in the early 20th century gave the Marines plenty of practice in fighting “small wars.” Infamous Marines such as Chesty Puller made their initial careers through their daring and innovative actions in these conflicts. One such conflict is Marine operation in Nicaragua against the rebel leader Augusto Sandino. The Marines were sent in 1926 to keep order in this fragile nations. Its proximity to the Panama Canal and American investment in the region made stable government a must. The two opposing forces were the liberals and

conservatives. The conflict was described by Max Boot in his book *The Savage Wars of Peace* (2014) “An ancient war of division based less on ideology than blood and soil, pitting two of the nation’s cities (Liberal Leon versus Conservative Granada) against each other.” The Marines were small in number and totaled around 2,000. Opposing them was Augusto Sandino a liberal force commander. A unit of forty one Marines and forty eight auxillary forces was planning a raid on Sandino but he discovered this through his intelligence network. In response he planned an attack on the force in the town of Otacal where he knew the Marines were staging. His force consisted of around sixty regular fighters and he hired hundreds of additional fighters. Some were infiltrated into the town but those forces were discovered when a panicked rebel opened fire prematurely. Throughout the night Sandino led multiple wave attacks on the village which were repelled. Finally unable to assault he laid siege to the town and wrote a letter demanding surrender from the Marine captain in charge. The captain refused, and Sandino prepared to set the town alight. Overhead two reconnaissance planes were watching the battle and reported back to their aerial command. A few hours later a formation of five biplanes led by Major Ross Rowell and begin to strafe and release bombs after diving from 1500ft. According to Boot this was the first time the world had seen a dive bomb attack. This shattered rebel morale and they retreated. A few months later, the Marines dropped supplies to surrounded forces via parachute, aerial logistics was born.

The actions of the Marines show the value of operational innovation in unconventional warfare. The Marines were a technologically and operationally superior force but the rebels sought to attack in circumstances where they were able to mitigate that. It is important to note that this is a purely operational innovation. Planes existed before this battle and had been in use

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4 Boot, Max. *The Savage Wars of Peace* p.238
for about ten years at this point. What was new was the way they were used. It was probably common sense to the Marine aviators to use the plane as the aiming device for a bomb but it had never been done before. Typically bombs were armed and then dropped inaccurately off the side of the aircraft. The adaptiveness gave Marines a definitive upper hand in the battle. Because guerilla conflicts are often smaller in nature, innovations at a low level have a greater impact. In a large war individual units may be successful in operational innovation but it may not impact the efforts of larger divisions who may not even be aware of the operational innovation. In guerilla warfare, the opponent rarely engages but when he does it will be where he perceives the stronger force is weakest. An adaptive force can change this weakness into a strength and blow a decisive defeat to a weaker enemy when they finally decide to engage. This is seen again with the use of planes for aerial logistics. These uses are common sense today but were truly imaginative and innovative at the time (1926). Sandino was captured and executed shortly after the mentioned operations.

Irregular conflict is about more than military action. At its heart it is a political struggle between an established force and an opposition force. Operational innovation also plays a key role in this domain. Presence among the people is key and traditional military efforts are not useful in this sense. The challenge with these types of operations is that every conflict is different and what worked in the past may not be relevant in a new conflict of the future. By definition, innovation is necessary in each and every irregular conflict in order to win the hearts and minds of different cultures. In the small wars of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century the Marines showed they were capable of military innovation, in Vietnam they would expand military innovation to include the political realm that is vital to winning an irregular conflict.
Marines in Vietnam drew upon their experience in Latin America when they were called to action in South Vietnam. “Marine General Lew Walt, finding a gap between the capabilities of Marine units assigned to Vietnam and the need to protect the Vietnamese populations from the predations of Viet Cong insurgents, applied the lessons of earlier counterinsurgency campaigns to create combined action platoons (CAPs). A CAP was a squad of Marines who embedded with South Vietnamese Regional and Popular Forces inside villages in I Corps.”  

This deployment had a similar effect to that of special forces and enlisted Marines often acted as officers of larger South Vietnamese forces. Only the best Marines were chosen for this duty. They were screened for good behavior and high combat performance. This was important because it avoided a downfall of American forces in other regions. Draftees with low morale often abused the South Vietnamese population they fought to protect. This essentially acted as a recruiting agent for the Vietcong and led many Vietnamese to take arms against the Americans. The CAP program allowed Marines to live with the indigenous culture and as a result they were able to protect them constantly from attack and subversive influence.

The program was effective and was one of the few bright spots in this conflict. It created a better security environment and reduced NVA influence in the area it was enacted in. This came at a cost of a lot of manpower and the danger of embedding Americans on the frontline with little or no support. Unfortunately it was opposed by the head American commander General Westmoreland who “pursued a strategy of attrition, preferring search and destroy operations to protecting the Vietnamese population with a historically grounded counterinsurgency

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The CAP Program was a far cry from traditional operations. Though stronger militarily, conventional forces were focused only on high intensity operations. There was no political effort among the regular forces. The innovations of CAP were laid to rest by General Westmoreland when he discontinued the program in favor of Marines conducting conventional large scale operations. This illustrates a key difference between forces and shows that Marines promote innovation. In the Marine Corps this innovation often occurs at low levels and may even be horizontal in nature. Horizontal innovation moves amongst units who are in contact with each other. It is much less formal then vertical innovation which comes from the top down. The key with the Marine Corps is that high level leadership is open to innovation and promotes the idea. Therefore the agents of change (low and mid-level officers) avoid the bureaucratic hurdles faced in other branches. The unity of these two elements allows successful innovation. Company level commanders are in the best position to test new theories of operation and acceptance by higher level commanders allows real organizational change to be implemented. The actions of the Marine Corps in Latin America and Vietnam illustrate that operational changes and not technical carried the day in these two irregular conflicts.

The final illustration of innovation in Irregular conflict comes from the use of Improvised Explosive Device (IED’s). As defined by the DOD terminology program an IED is “A weapon that is fabricated or emplaced in an unconventional manner incorporating destructive, lethal, noxious, pyrotechnic, or incendiary chemicals designed to kill, destroy, incapacitate, harass, deny mobility, or distract.”\(^7\) The rise of IED’s has shown the value of operational innovation because all the technologies required to make them are available. Unfortunately, IED’s are a key

\(^7\) NAGL, JOHN

innovation of the modern irregular battlefield. We can see the value of IED’s from both their employment and the response to them by professional forces.

IED’s have become an increasing threat in modern conflicts including Iraq and Afghanistan. Between 1981 and 2015, an estimated 5,000 such attacks occurred in more than 40 countries, killing about 50,000 people. Terrorist fighting for the Taliban and other non-state terrorist groups needed a way counter American superiority in direct combat. For many terrorist groups arms and weapons can be restricted by the opposing force. This led to a need to create weapons from non-traditional sources. “Trip wires and pressure plates represent a simple mechanical approach that remains very effective and hard to detect, using the victim to set off the bomb, while passive IR triggers and motion sensors adapted from burglar alarms or car alarms are a more high-tech variation on the theme of victim operation.” Common household electronics are one of the primary elements of an IED. They are then modified or hijacked to serve a nefarious purpose. A combination of IED triggers is used by ISIS and other terrorist groups simultaneously. The sheer number of possible bomb configurations makes it extremely difficult for coalition forces (and US troops) to develop an operational method that can counter all of them, especially when they are combined with a small arms ambush. The US response has been the introduction of bomb seeking robots like the Vanguard DEFENDER, and the mine resistant ambush protected (MRAP) vehicle introduced. While effective, these solutions highlighted the strength of the insurgent’s operational strategy using IED’s. An MRAP costs

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roughly $1 million each\textsuperscript{12} compared to a few hundred dollars for an IED. This cost imbalance makes it considerably more costly for the US and offsets their military superiority by making it costly for them to operate.

In an irregular conflict, operational innovation is more important than technological innovation. The Marine Corps has structured itself to be an operationally flexible force that is not as restricted by doctrine as other branches. This is a crucial factor in explaining why the Marine Corps has been more successful in irregular conflicts specifically the CAP program in Vietnam and excursions in Latin America in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Innovation is important to insurgents as well. The IED has proven a formidable weapon and the US attempts to protect its personnel from these weapons have proven costly and limited in their effectiveness. Because technological disparity is a defining element of an irregular conflict, the guerrilla force seeks to offset the role technology. By decreasing the importance of the technological advantages it makes the operational approach even more important. As seen with the CAP program, operational innovation is necessary to win the political struggle because of the uniqueness of each of these conflicts and the importance of local customs to win the political struggle and establish government.


