



Attritional War: The Neglected Phase of Modern Warfare

By Thomas Neely

The United States has fought three modern wars: Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. They differ from most of our prior wars. Modern wars have two phases: conventional military activity followed by the slow but deadly erosion of our troops' ability and will to carry out their mission, called in this paper attritional war. The attritional war phase of our three modern wars is what distinguishes them from past conflicts.

The first part of the conventional military activity phase is troops versus troops engaged in activities for which they have been trained. It is referred to in this paper as traditional war, and is what we generally think of as "war," whether on a large scale D-Day canvas, or in other tactical contexts taught at Fort Benning, Quantico, and elsewhere. Counterinsurgency (COIN), the second phase of conventional war, consists of retaliatory attacks on insurgents, creating relationships with local leaders, building infrastructure, "winning the hearts and minds," and may include efforts to create democratic nations. It often begins as the traditional war is winding down but may happen simultaneously.

In Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, we defeated our enemies in traditional warfare. The results of our counterinsurgency efforts are less clear. But in all three conflicts, we lost—at considerable cost—the attritional wars. This paper describes the characteristics of attritional war, distinguishes it from conventional war, gives examples of attritional war from literature, and considers why it matters as we prepare ourselves for future conflicts.

Attritional War

Attritional war is waged against American and other allied units by snipers, suicide bombers, and those who plant what were called booby traps in Vietnam and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is often experienced at small unit levels, company, platoon, and squad.

The central feature of attritional war is the gradual wasting, physical and psychological, of United States forces without inflicting similar loss on our foes. Enemy armies are largely gone from the field after being defeated by our armies, our forces patrol, insurgents kill our soldiers with small arms fire, IEDs, and suicide bombs, and then melt into the crowd. This went on for years in our three modern wars.

But "attrition" falls heavily on our ear, because it conjures up pitched conflict between large armies bleeding each other over long stretches of time. In our collective memory attrition is Verdun, the series of battles and countless artillery barrages that began near that city on the western front in France on February 21, 1916 and lasted, depending on one's perspective, until December when the French regained lost ground or well into 1917 as fighting continued in the area on a reduced scale. Casualties on both sides—killed, wounded, and missing in action—are estimated to be in the 750,000 range.¹ Attrition in modern wars is a rounding error by comparison. Approximately 8,000 U.S. troops have been killed in Afghanistan and Iraq, about the number that died in two weeks at Verdun. Regardless of the particularities of the war, attrition connotes loss without recompense, which eventually is intolerable.

Modern attritional wars share seven characteristics:

1. There is no apparent military reason why one unit is hit and others are not;
2. Violence may come from anywhere at any time;
3. Violence is largely anonymous—those responsible for it are usually long gone when the damage is done, and our troops find no enemy to fight;



4. There are fewer casualties than in conventional warfare;
5. There is an “invisibility” in the public and military consciousness due to the smaller number of casualties. There are no battles for the media to cover and report, and from a military perspective, not much seems to happen;
6. There is the potential for attritional wars to continue as long as our troops are in-country; and
7. Unlike conventional wars, they cannot be won.

Soldiers and marines are not trained in the tactics of attritional war, because there are no tactics. Our troops are attacked, the attackers are nowhere to be found, medics and corpsmen tend to our wounded and dead.

Attritional war corrodes morale, induces tension, fear, confusion, frustration, and can lead to atrocities committed against civilians. There is at hand no confirmed enemy to attack in retaliation. But there is often at hand a large number of people who look like the enemy, speak the language of the enemy, and who in fact may be the enemy in civilian clothing. So for the soldier or marine in attritional war, attrition by physical wounds is often replaced by psychic wounds that present as profound depression, PTSD, and other less visible casualties, many of which do not merit the award of a Purple Heart.

Attritional war often proceeds side by side with the counterinsurgency part of conventional war. Although its impact and consequences are significant, it remains unrecognized, is not the subject of rigorous analysis, and was not considered when decisions were made to commit troops to our three modern wars, or acknowledged as those wars were carried out.

Conventional Warfare; Tet and My Lai; Attritional War in Literature

Until Vietnam, our wars for the most part were fought in the field and in cities by trained troops against the trained troops of others, without much in the way of counterinsurgency.² At the conclusion of the traditional part of these wars, we could rightly say “Mission Accomplished.” In our three modern wars, however, counterinsurgency continued and attritional war began. While attritional war has not been extensively analyzed, it has been eloquently described in literature. In the absence of a systematic military analysis, this is the best record we have. A few examples of attritional war in literature follow a brief analysis of the differences between conventional and attritional war that occurred in the Tet Offensive and My Lai 4.

The Tet Offensive in Vietnam, which began in January 1968, and the few months thereafter that led up to the events My Lai 4 on March 16, 1968, illustrate the difference between conventional war and attritional war. Tet was fought as conventional warfare, what followed was not. It was attritional, and profoundly so.

“Tet” quickly became ingrained in national memory. It commenced with country-wide attacks in South Vietnam by 80,000 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese army regulars on cities, provincial capitals, and military and diplomatic installations, including the United States embassy in Saigon. Although the Americans and South Vietnamese were taken by surprise, they conducted a series of coordinated and effective counterattacks and within weeks re-secured their original positions and inflicted thousands of enemy casualties. By any traditional measure, it was a major victory for the combined forces of the United States and the Republic of Vietnam. The Tet Offensive, like the battles of Falluja in 2004, the Anbar Awakening in 2006, and the surge in Afghanistan, was an organized military response to insurgency, which resulted in victory. Tet and the battles noted in Iraq and Afghanistan are examples of traditional war; they were recognized as “war” by our military and civilian leaders and made news in a way that attritional wars do not.

On March 16, 1968, a few months after Tet, Company C (“Charlie”), 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 23rd Infantry Division (Americal), killed many Vietnamese in the villages of Truong Dinh, Tu Cung, My



Lai, and Co Luy, collectively called My Lai 4, which soon became known as “My Lai.” It was estimated that between 175 and 400 Vietnamese died that day. Other than a few self-inflicted wounds, American casualties were negligible.³

After its arrival in Vietnam in December 1967, Charlie Company had begun daily patrols in search of the enemy, particularly the Viet Cong’s 48th Local Force Battalion, estimated to be several hundred strong. Neither that battalion nor any other enemy was found in force, but the company took casualties from snipers and mines. On the eve of My Lai, Charlie Company had suffered five deaths and twenty-three wounded. “All the casualties had come from mines and booby traps and snipers. They had never seen or encountered the enemy in any strength. There had been no heavy contact. They were battle-scarred without being battle-tested.”⁴ They had trained to fight one war, a traditional one, and found themselves in another—attritional war—that offered no way to retaliate against those who were killing, maiming, and terrifying them.

Those in My Lai looked like the enemy, and many of them may have given aid to the Viet Cong. There is no way to know. And with the tacit—and perhaps overt—approval of superior officers (testimony varied), the soldiers of Charlie Company killed. They were told that they would be engaging the Viet Cong’s 48th and that everyone in the villages should be considered the enemy. They expected to fight a battle for which they had been trained, and after being randomly attacked in the jungles by an unseen enemy for several weeks, they were ready to kill. But instead of the Viet Cong battalion, they found several hundred old men, women of all ages, and children.

From a military perspective, nothing that happened to Charlie Company since its arrival in-country and in those few hours at My Lai 4 on March 16, 1968 had any impact whatsoever on the Vietnam War.⁵

In *The Things They Carried*, a novel by Tim O’Brien, the narrative tracks a depleted platoon in Vietnam of only 17 young soldiers, about half the size of a normal platoon.⁶ The book is about many things—the persistence of memory and imagination, young love, Norman Bowker’s suicide ten years after his tour, Rat Kiley’s disintegration and self-inflicted wound, the fate of a baby water buffalo, the power of stories—and most importantly, it is a quintessential description of attritional war and its lingering aftermath.

Nothing much happens in *The Things They Carried*. The soldiers patrol, usually without action. There is no mention of any fighting on any substantial scale until near the end of the book when the narrator says that “after a battle in the mountains,” he was assigned to “police up the enemy’s KIAs. There were twenty-seven bodies altogether, and parts of several others.”⁷ We are not told if his platoon participated in the battle.

Over the several months of the narrator’s tour, the deaths of three members of his platoon, Ted Lavender, Curt Lemon, and Kiowa, are described:

- Lee Strunk was relieved that he had just successfully completed his search of an enemy tunnel, a highly dangerous business. “[Strunk] made a funny ghost sound, a kind of moaning, yet very happy, and right then, when [he] made that high happy sound, when he went Ahhooooo, right then Ted Lavender was shot in the head on his way back from peeing.”⁸
- “. . . Curt Lemon stepped on a booby-trapped 105 round. He was playing catch with Rat Riley, laughing, and then he was dead.”⁹
- On a night of pouring rain when the platoon bivouacked in a place that flooded, Kiowa was hit by a mortar and sunk in the ooze. The next day after an extensive search his body was found in the water “wedged under a layer of mud.” It took five men several minutes tugging and pulling and digging with entrenching tools before Kiowa was recovered.¹⁰

The narrator describes the platoon’s journey: “By daylight they took sniper fire, at night they were mortared, but it was not battle, it was just the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost.”¹¹



Nothing happens in *The Things They Carried* that had any impact whatsoever on the Vietnam War. The lasting impact, rather, was on the members of O'Brien's platoon and those close to them.

The United States began military operations against Afghanistan on October 7, 2001 when the Taliban refused to deliver Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda terrorists after the 9/11 attacks. Combat operations in Iraq began on March 20, 2003 in the controversial belief that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, which he was prepared to use against America and our allies. In both countries, as the United States and its allies were defeating their enemies in traditional war, the conflicts morphed into lengthy, seemingly never-ending, counterinsurgencies and attritional wars.

Phil Klay is an Iraq marine veteran who wrote a collection of stories titled *Redeployment*.¹² His description of attritional war in "After Action Report" could have been written about Charlie Company before My Lai or Tim O'Brien's platoon in *The Things They Carry*:

Somebody said combat is 99 percent sheer boredom and 1 percent pure terror. . . . On the roads I was scared all the time. Maybe not pure terror. That's for when the IED actually goes off. But a kind of low-grade terror that mixes with the boredom. So it's 50 percent terror and 49 percent normal terror, which is a general feeling that you might die at any second and that everybody in this country wants to kill you. Then, of course, there's the 1 percent terror, when your heart rate skyrockets and your vision closes in and your hands are white and your body is humming.¹³

Dexter Filkins, a journalist in Iraq and Afghanistan, wrote *The Forever War* about his experiences.¹⁴ In "A Hand in the Air," he describes the frustration of not knowing who the enemy is and how to distinguish friend from foe:

The insurgency was everywhere and it was nowhere. The Americans. . . would roll into Iraqi towns ready for a fight, and they would discover, invariably, that the enemy had disappeared. Often, the people they were looking for were standing a few feet away. . . . The insurgents were Iraqis; the Iraqis were insurgents. Sometimes they fought; the rest of the time they were standing around like everyone else. . . . It drove the Americans crazy. They would drive through a village and spot an Iraqi man standing on the roadside, marking the convoy's time and speed as it passed. Working for the insurgency, no doubt, but how do you shoot a guy for looking at his watch?¹⁵

Attritional war was not the war that soldiers and marines expected to fight. Klay's character in "Money As a Weapons System" says, "Success was a matter of perspective. In Iraq it had to be. There was no Omaha Beach, no Vicksburg Campaign, not even an Alamo to signal a clear defeat. The closest we'd come were those toppled Saddam statues, but that was years ago."¹⁶

In "Unless It's A Sucking Chest Wound," Klay's protagonist compares the experience of Sergeant Julien Deme, who was awarded the Navy Cross for bravery in action, to that of James Vockler, a fellow marine. Both were killed in action, Deme while trying to help wounded marines out of an ambush in Iraq. Deme saved Vockler in that ambush, but Vockler, who volunteered for Afghanistan after his tour in Iraq, died later

in an IED, like the majority of combat casualties in these wars, a death that doesn't offer a story younger Marines can read and get inspired by. IEDs don't let you be a hero. That's what makes Deme so important. The cold, hard courage that sends veterans like Vockler back to war is not what makes teenagers join the Corps in the first place. Without the rare stories like Deme's, who'd sign up?¹⁷

James Vockler died with as little fanfare or impact on his wars as Ted Lavender, Curt Lemon, and Kiowa did in an attritional war decades removed. The heroic story of Chris Kyle, whose participation in traditional battles in Iraq and his ensuing death, seen by millions in *American Sniper*, is inspirational; the attritional war deaths of Ted Lavender, Curt Lemon, Kiowa, and James Vockler are not. Attritional wars, because they are invisible to the military and civilian narratives of the war, end up with unforeseen and unanalyzed impacts. They wear away at our military



Why Attritional Wars Matter

We win our traditional wars and maybe our counterinsurgencies, too. But our attritional wars matter because they are costly, lengthy, deadly—and here's the sobering message: they cannot be won.

More than a dozen years after the commencement of our recent wars, we are faced again with the decision whether to continue substantial military assistance in the Middle East. Our choices are:

- (1) No;
- (2) Yes, but with limited and clearly defined and understood objectives, as in the Gulf War;
- (3) Yes, with aid and support (including training, air, drones, and cyber support), and other assistance—perhaps some form of counterinsurgency—but without traditional war combat readiness; or
- (4) Yes, with traditional war combat forces and implementation of our range of COIN capabilities.

Our ultimate choice depends on what we hope to achieve. If we decide to act, there are many long-term considerations that need to be weighed and debated:

- Will the goal be to help allies in the region defeat the current jihadist threat (either with or without committing our ground forces), after which much of our military support including ground forces will be withdrawn?
- Will we keep our troops in-country after the immediate objective of defeating enemy forces has been substantially met, to assist in counterinsurgency efforts and nation-building, as we did in Afghanistan and Iraq?
- Will we leave armies of deterrence in place for the foreseeable future to discourage enemies from re-forming conventional military units that will have to be defeated in the future?

If history presents lessons, any choice that involves leaving large numbers of U.S. ground forces in the region upon the winding down or end of traditional warfare, will likely (but not inevitably) involve our forces in attritional war. So, before we decide on objectives, our public debate should include an analysis of what we have learned from our three prior attritional wars, including:

- (1) How we determine when traditional war is winding down or ended;
- (2) The relationship of insurgency/counterinsurgency and attritional war;
- (3) The costs of attritional war; and
- (4) The proper role for our troops at the conclusion of traditional warfare.

And we should also consider Korea, a traditional war that appeared destined to move into attritional war, but did not.

1. Conclusion of Traditional Warfare

Unlike earlier wars, it was not easy in our modern wars to determine when battle between organized military units largely ended. There were no war-ending treaties, no dramatic surrenders on battleships; there was not an armistice of the kind that ended the fighting in Korea in 1953. George M. Cohan's "Over There," written in 1917 to encourage patriotism and enlistment in World War I, exhorts "We'll be over, we're coming over, and we won't come back till it's over, over there."¹⁸ It's an uplifting but now quaint notion that a time would eventually come when everyone, friend and foe alike, agreed that the war really was over, over there. Our modern wars do not give us that luxury. In fact, what we have seen is that at the conclusion or general winding down of traditional war, more elusive, more frustrating warfare is just beginning.

Probably the best way, maybe the only way, to judge the end of this first part of conventional war is the



disappearance of enemy forces. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the last major battles for our ground forces in Vietnam occurred as part of the Tet Offensive in 1968. Of course there were many fire fights and casualties to go before our final withdrawal five years later. But no operations, including the incursion into Cambodia in 1970, resulted in many battles of a traditional nature, and those that did were inconsequential (except, of course, to the casualties).

After Tet, the Viet Cong disappeared into the jungles and the North Vietnamese Army stayed out of contact. The same was true in Afghanistan and Iraq. For the most part, organized opposition by major forces simply ended. Over time, a very long time, our troops searched for the enemy. The result was little contact with large groups of enemy troops—and attrition of our forces from booby traps, IEDs, and snipers.

There are at least two reasons to track the end of this part of war: first, if we are to understand the costs of attritional war, we should try to exclude the costs of traditional war; and second, the winding down of traditional war should trigger warning lights that the cycle of insurgency/counterinsurgency will almost certainly begin or intensify, and attritional war is on the way.

2. Relationship of Insurgency/Counterinsurgency and Attritional War

I include counterinsurgency as a part of conventional war because of its revival during the last dozen years and because it is taught, much as traditional warfare has long been taught.¹⁹ As a doctrine, counterinsurgency was in deep disfavor for many years after Vietnam. Our early successes in Afghanistan and Iraq in traditional battles were followed by some years of erosion during the attritional wars that followed. By 2005-2006, COIN had made a strong comeback under the leadership of General Petraeus.²⁰ Some cite it as the principal reason for our success in the surges, while others are not so sure.²¹

Field Manual 3-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, is must-reading for all interested in modern warfare. Its purpose is described in the Preface:

[This Field Manual] provides doctrine for Army and Marine units that are countering an insurgency. It provides a doctrinal foundation for counterinsurgency. [It] is a guide for units fighting or training for counterinsurgency operations²²

The manual offers useful commentary on the need for a unified effort, ensuring the involvement of allies in the host country, the need to understand local culture, and on insurgency and counter insurgency strategies and tactics. But it would seem to have little value as a practical guide for soldiers and marines in the field. It is too long, too formalistic, too loaded with defined terms, and its style is often turgid, sometimes incomprehensible. (“A line of operation is a line that defines the interior or exterior orientation of the force in relation to the enemy or that connects actions on nodes and/or decisive points related to an objective(s).”²³ At the beginning of the seventh section of the manual, nine “counterinsurgency paradoxes” are listed and explained: e.g., “Sometimes, the more force is used, the less effective it is,”²⁴ and “If a tactic works this week, it might not work next week; if it works in this province, it might not work in the next.”²⁵ These paradoxes, together with the several case studies interspersed throughout FM 3-24, would have made a much leaner and more useful tool for addressing insurgencies than the manual in its current form.

The manual also has at least two serious omissions: (1) analytics to determine when attritional war is occurring alongside or in place of counterinsurgency; and (2) an analysis of who is best able to make that determination. Both points could be addressed in what is now Section 9 of the manual, which considers various direct methods for countering insurgencies.

So those charged with planning and carrying out COIN at the present are given a manual describing doctrine that has some formal elegance, but is too unwieldy to be of much practical use and, despite its length, has serious omissions. It suggests that if everyone understands and follows its directives, if each commander is wise in



applying the counterinsurgency paradoxes, all will be well. But application of the doctrine requires the exercise of good judgment by emotionally intelligent people, tact, and not just a little bit of luck. (Just how do we foretell whether a tactic that worked this week will, or will not, work next week?) And what often ensues is not surprising. War being war, the field is fluid and even the best laid plans can go awry. Aggressive, focused commanders planning and carrying out COIN that results in attritional war casualties will view these as temporary setbacks, and will go out the next day and the next and the next, as they are trained to do. But at some point they have crossed over to attritional war, the war we are destined to lose, and they do not know it. They do not know it because attritional war has not been recognized as part of modern warfare, as counterinsurgency has. Who could blame these dedicated and brave leaders? They are doing their jobs.

3. *Costs of Attritional War*

The monetary costs of all phases of war are astronomical, and the costs of each should be quantified and its impact assessed. But the fact is that when we have decided to go to war, Congress foots the bill and keeps paying until a political decision is made to stop.

There are other costs to be considered: desertion rates, suicide and PTSD rates, enlistment and re-enlistment rates, combat readiness, and unit morale to name some. Substantial study has been done on suicide and PTSD and its cousin, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and this is all to the good.²⁶ We need to know all we can about the causes of these afflictions, how suicide may be averted, and how PTSD and TBI can best be treated. But more must happen to assess the role attritional war plays in these events.

First, the military must acknowledge that attritional war was a reality in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, just as conventional warfare was, and that it lasted much longer than the conventional phase. Second, the military must determine when each of our three modern wars became attritional, that is, when the seven characteristics of attritional war noted at the beginning of this paper became predominant. This will not be easy because wars are fluid and parts occur simultaneously. Traditional warfare, counterinsurgency, and attritional war can and often do overlap. And as happened in Afghanistan and Iraq, attritional war was largely replaced by traditional war during the surges, then returned when the enemy backed away after goals of the surges were met. That the different phases of modern wars are not always separated with precision, however, should not obscure the distinctiveness of each.

Until there is general agreement on when our attritional wars occurred,²⁷ it will not be possible to correlate studies of suicides and those suffering PTSD and TBI with those wars. But once that happens, we could at least identify the afflicted who served during those periods. Further, knowing their military occupational specialties would suggest if their service would be more or less likely to put them in harm's way. For example, those designated 11B (infantry) and 68W (combat medic) are more likely to have borne the impact of attritional war than clerk-typists. Of course it would not necessarily follow that attritional war caused suicides, PTSD, and TBI, but the data may be illuminating.

An additional significant cost is the impact of attritional war on Congressional and public support. Harold Bruff, in *Untrodden Ground: How Presidents Interpret the Constitution*, explores the notion of "political ratification" of presidential assertions of power that go beyond theretofore understood limits.²⁸ In doing so, presidents legitimize their actions by seeking the consent of Congress and the public. Examples include Andrew Jackson's use of the veto power; Lincoln's decisive actions at the start of the Civil War before Congress was in session, including treating the rebellion as a war, a power the Constitution granted to Congress; and of course his issuance effective January 1, 1863 of the Emancipation Proclamation.

While the actions of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson in Vietnam, and George W. Bush and Barack Obama in Afghanistan and Iraq, may not have involved assertions of new presidential war-making power (as we shall see, Harry Truman addressed that in the Korean War), Johnson and Bush quickly gained support to pursue



very broad military objectives with the authority to reach them as they saw fit.²⁹

In 1964, Congress adopted the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which provided that “Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression. . . .”³⁰ This joint resolution passed unanimously in the House and 88 to 2 in the Senate. Three days after the 9/11 attacks, a joint resolution directed at Afghanistan was adopted (one dissent in the House, none in the Senate), which provided “That the President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force to defend against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons. . . .”³¹ In 2002, Congress adopted a further joint resolution, which provided that “The President is authorized to use the Armed Forces of the United States as he determines to be necessary and appropriate in order to defend the national security of the United States”³² against threats from Iraq. The vote was 297 to 143 in the House, 77 to 23 in the Senate.

Congressional and public support for the wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq remained generally strong as long as the wars stayed traditional. But it waned in each as traditional war morphed into a long siege of counterinsurgency and a war that increasingly became attritional. Public opinion for the Vietnam War eroded precipitously as the same pattern emerged in the late 60s, and Congress terminated the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1971. And despite the overwhelming and open-ended support given to President Bush for the invasion of Afghanistan and the very strong support for invading Iraq, no general consensus has emerged that those wars were won, and some in Congress, the public, and even the military, have been highly critical.³³

4. The Role of Soldiers and Marines after Traditional War

There are legitimate differences of opinion about what our proper role should now be in the Middle East. For some, there is profound war weariness—we have done more than enough, we get signals from host countries that our presence is unwelcome, our continued involvement just makes us more enemies, the costs are too high and it is time to move on. For others, however, not returning now when the outcome is in doubt, is an inexcusable default on promises made, a betrayal of those who fought and died in foreign lands, and a failure to keep America secure against those who wish us harm. Since 9/11, we have been in a global and unrelenting war in defense of our values and way of life, to which the only acceptable response is to engage on many fronts, including militarily.

Let us assume that after full and vigorous debate, including an analysis of the nature and costs of our three attritional wars, a decision is made to send combat troops back to the Middle East with no commitment to bring them home at the conclusion of traditional warfare. When we have won that first part of conventional war, what should these troops do if they are not brought home? There seem to be four options:

- (1) Patrol and search for the enemy, help train indigenous troops, offer air, infrastructure, technical and intelligence support, and implement a robust counterinsurgency—in short, do what we did in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq;
- (2) Some modified version of the first option, one that keeps our soldiers largely off the streets and out of the field in noncombatant roles, but offers assistance consistent with such status, which may include help with training and integration of troops and some COIN efforts;
- (3) Have forces in sufficient numbers to engage only in the traditional part of conventional warfare; and
- (4) Leave troops in sufficient strength to deter the rise of new enemy armies that will threaten Middle East stability and require defeat in yet another conventional war.

We might pick option one, even if it leads to attritional war. Our analysis might lead us to conclude that, dispiriting though it may be, even the costs of attritional wars were well worth it. The model works, the argument goes, even if we find ourselves in other attritional wars. Yes, they drag on and we suffer casualties, but people



volunteer for military service knowing it is a dangerous business. Maybe training is tweaked to better prepare troops for the special challenges of attritional war; maybe adjustments are made to operations, such as cutting back on daily patrols and refining our counterinsurgency efforts; maybe a relatively small number of troops, say 10,000, would be sufficient to give effective aid to indigenous forces. But our mission would remain the same, and we would step back from time to time to assess where matters stand and if it is appropriate to draw down, or increase, troop levels. Wars are messy, fraught with uncertainty. We cannot predict when our ground troops will no longer be needed.

The fourth option, sufficient forces in place with the primary goal of discouraging the rise of new enemy armies, raises many more questions. How many troops are “sufficient” for deterrence, what would this force have to do to discourage jihadis from creating new armies, would substantial changes in training be necessary, how firm would our resolve be if host countries decided they did not want us there any longer? Whose interests are we protecting, the host country’s or ours, and how are they the same, how do they differ?

5. *The Curious Case of Korea*

There is a further consideration, the existence of newly organized and well equipped jihadi forces in numbers sufficient to wage effective traditional war. This is happening now. Our allies are in jeopardy, the Middle East is being further destabilized, and our national interests may be adversely affected. What if these forces win significant and lasting victories? And even if they are defeated, what is the likelihood that other forces capable of waging effective traditional war will rise to take their place?

While we may not find answers from our experience during and after the Korean War, the history of that conflict should be part of the discussion. The war started in June 1950 when the North invaded the South. In that Cold War era with Communism seen as the overarching threat, President Truman and his advisors felt that a strong American response was necessary. After discussion with advisors, but without concurrence of Congress, Truman decided to supply air and sea power to protect Americans and their dependents in the South and to help South Korean troops halt the attack.³⁴ Fighting intensified with the South under siege, and upon the recommendation of General Douglas MacArthur, our troops were committed in substantial numbers. Fierce fighting ensued, and the Chinese joined North Korea in the battle against South Korean and U.S. troops. An armistice ending the fighting was signed June 27, 1953. It established a demilitarized zone between the North and South at the 38th parallel, roughly at the divide between the two countries when they were established at the end of World War II.

Three months later, on October 1, the U.S. and the South Korea signed a Mutual Defense Treaty “to strengthen their efforts for collective defense for the preservation of peace and security pending the development of a more comprehensive and effective system of regional security in the Pacific area. . . .”³⁵

The Korean War, characterized as a “police action” by Truman, was as much a war as any of our three modern wars. Traditional fighting was intense, costing approximately 35,000 U.S. dead and 100,000 wounded.³⁶ There was a key difference, however, from our modern wars: although U.S. and South Korean forces did not lose the traditional war, they did not win it. Fighting ended in a stalemate with opposing armies facing each other at the demilitarized zone. Unlike Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the enemy did not simply disappear. Instead, they squared off as equals. Thus we had no opportunity to try to ferret them out in the cities and the countryside, and no significant counterinsurgency or attritional war ensued as it did in our modern wars.³⁷

Pursuant to the Mutual Defense Treaty signed after the end of hostilities, the U.S. has had tens of thousands of troops in Korea ever since, including over 25,000 each year in the last decade.³⁸ Over the years, there have been tensions in Korea between the opposing forces and several sharp clashes, but there was nothing approaching attritional war. And Congress and the public have generally supported this peace-keeping effort.



Failure to recognize the presence of attritional war and that it cannot be won—U.S. forces do all the taking and little of the giving—has catastrophic consequences. It is the primary reason we lost the Vietnam War. After several years of attritional war seen every night on the news (that problem for the military has been eliminated by the tightly controlled media access in Afghanistan and Iraq), public and Congressional support melted away. No one called the attritional war in Vietnam by that name, but the public had a better intuitive sense of its reality than our civilian and military leaders. It is a wonder that we kept at it so long, which happened only because Lyndon Johnson insisted that we were there to win and Richard Nixon needed to reach a “peace with honor.”³⁹ And all the while we failed to understand that we were in a new kind of war, and that we were losing it.

I leave it to others to judge how we fared in Afghanistan and Iraq, whether despite losing the attritional wars, victories in the traditional wars and possibly counterinsurgency efforts, on balance, add up to successes. But unrest and conflict continue in both countries and jihadis throughout the Middle East are waging effective and ruthless insurgency and traditional war. This paper is not about what our next steps should be to combat terrorists in furtherance of our national interest; rather it is a call to understand that whatever action we take must minimize a long attritional war, the war we do not win. Putting troops in situations for an extended period that require them to endure casualties they can neither avoid nor reciprocate is a fool’s errand that we—and especially they—cannot afford.

Thomas Neely is a retired partner of Wilmer Hale, a law firm with twelve offices in the United States, Europe, and Asia. After graduation from Williams College and Harvard Law School, he served for two years in the United States Army, which included a tour in Vietnam in 1970 and 1971 that led to his general interest in military history and modern warfare in particular.

NOTES:

1. For an excellent analysis of the battles and a vivid description of their horrors, see Paul Jankowski, *Verdun: the Longest Battle of the Great War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). For a moving and enduring narrative, see Alistair Horne, *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1963).
2. There was insurgency/counterinsurgency during the Civil War; and of course conflict did not end with Lee’s surrender at Appomattox and General Sherman’s defeat of Confederate forces led by General Johnson. Reconstruction went on for a dozen years. With it came a large presence of Federal troops in the South to keep order and help implement change. Reconstruction was nation-building or rebuilding, of the highest order, perhaps counterinsurgency with a capital “C.” See Gregory P. Downs, *After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).
3. Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1992).
4. *Ibid.*, 93.
5. My Lai, however, had an enormous impact when the massacre became generally known to the public in 1970. It symbolized to many all that was wrong with Vietnam, the first of our modern wars. And My Lai happened shortly after the series of US and South Vietnamese victories in the Tet Offensive, victories, curiously enough, that were seen as losses and convinced many on the home front that the war was neither winnable nor worth the cost.
6. Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence, 1990).
7. *Ibid.*, 242.
8. *Ibid.*, 12.
9. *Ibid.*, 78.
10. *Ibid.*, 173-74.



11. Ibid., 15.
12. Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014).
13. Ibid., 42-43.
14. Dexter Filkins, *The Forever War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).
15. Ibid., 122.
16. Klay, *Redeployment*, 77.
17. Ibid., 268-69.
18. George M. Cohan, *Over There* (New York: William Jennings Publishing Corp., 1917).
19. Study of insurgency/counterinsurgency is nothing new. See in particular the works of French officer David Galula, including his own *Pacification in Algeria* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2006) and David Galula and John A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006 [1964]).
20. The current field manual, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, was adopted in 2014, replacing the 2006 manual *Counterinsurgencies*. Both embody the idea that soldiers and marines are expected to be nation-builders as well as warriors. For a critique of the counterinsurgency orthodox in the 2006 version of FM 3-24, see Mark Moyer, *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
21. See, e.g., by Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents* (Old Saybrook: Tantor Media, Inc., 2013), and "The End of the Age of Petraeus: The Rise and Fall of Counterinsurgency," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2013).
22. Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 13 May 2014), v.
23. Ibid., 7-7.
24. Ibid., 7-1, 7-2.
25. Ibid., 7-2, 7-3.
26. See, e.g., See Wayne Kinney, "Comparing PTSD Among Returning War Veterans," *Journal of Military and Veterans' Health* 20(3), (2015); Peter Nasveld, et al, "Effects of Deployment on Mental Health in Modern Military Forces," *Journal of Military and Veterans' Health* 20(3) (2015); Cyrus A. Raji, et al, "Functional Neuroimaging with Default Mode Network Regions Distinguishes PTSD from TBI in a Military Veteran Population," *Brain Imaging and Behavior* (2015); Cynthia LeardMann, et al, "Risk Factors Associated with Suicide in Current and Former US Military Personnel" *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association* (2013); and for a lay person's description of his experience with PTSD, see Sebastian Junger, "How PTSD Became a Problem Far Beyond the Battlefield," *Vanity Fair*, May 7, 2015; and *Tribe: Homecoming and Belonging* (New York: Twelve, Hachette Book Group, 2016).
27. As noted, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the various phases of war, but soldiers and marines pride themselves on doing the difficult.
28. Harold H. Bruff, *Untrodden Ground: How Presidents Interpret the Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
29. Kennedy eased into the Vietnam conflict without needing ratification and was assassinated before it grew into an American dominated war. And while Johnson got broad authority to conduct the war, his decisions as commander in chief went far beyond the military commitments he outlined for Congress and the American people. Those decisions did not serve him well.
30. *Tonkin Gulf Resolution*, Public Law 88-408, 88th Cong., 2d sess. (August 7, 1964).
31. *Authorization for Use of Military Force*, Public Law 107-40, 107th Congress, 2d sess. (September 18, 2001).



32. *Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002*, Public Law 107-243, 107th Cong., 2d sess. (October 16, 2002).
33. See, e.g., Daniel P. Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).
34. See Bruff, *Untrodden Ground*, 271-275, for a thorough analysis of Truman's unilateral escalation of our participation in the war and restatement of our war goals.
35. Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea; October 1, 1953, preamble.
36. Congressional Research Service, "American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics," February 26, 2010, gives 36,574 deaths and 103,284 wounded.
37. Of course no one knows if victory in the traditional war would have led to counterinsurgency and attritional war, as happened later in our modern wars. But during the fighting and before the intervention by China, Truman, once again without consulting Congress, expanded the objective of the war from expelling the North forces to reuniting the two Koreas as one country. Had the Chinese not intervened and had the South prevailed over the North, it is not a great stretch to imagine a protracted counterinsurgency and attritional war similar to Vietnam.
38. Congressional Research Service, "U.S.—South Korea Relations," April 26, 2016, 12.
39. Some argue that our counterinsurgency efforts, known as the Phoenix Program, put us in a position to fulfill our promises to South Vietnam when we left in 1973. Even if that is so, and it very well may be, the public knew nothing of "counterinsurgency," let alone something called a Phoenix Program. War was bombing and shooting, and while we had done a lot of both, the public and Congress saw no "light at the end the tunnel," as the saying went. The troops were coming home. Loss of the attritional war cost us the larger war as well.