George Bell was concerned with – and fought in – regular war. Every time we feel sorry for ourselves as we struggle with irregular war and wish that enemies fought according to our rules and against our strengths, and were not so damn asymmetric, we should recall what it meant to fight against enemies as well-equipped for regular war as we were. We no longer expect to mobilize our whole societies – let alone great alliances of nations - to confront common challenges. If we had lost the great wars of the past we have a clear, grim sense of what the consequences for our societies, and the values on which they are based, would have been.

Our current wars are different. Those who fight are members of volunteer regular forces. If they are killed it is not on the routine, industrial scale of the great wars, although that can make their individual sacrifices more personal and poignant. We do not seek to mobilize our people but we have to mobilize those in the lands in which we fight. The conduct of these wars requires attention to culture and anthropology as much as technology and tactics. Their boundaries are blurred; there is no confined military space and time that we set apart from civilian space and time. If we win it will be hard to know when to dare to declare victory. If we lose it is unclear whether our way of life will suffer irretrievably or just that our power will have been diminished and our values will have been rebuffed.

These contemporary conflicts have three features:

1. Military operations, at least for western countries, have become more a matter of choice and debate, at least when compared with the great power wars of necessity of the past. Questions are constantly asked about why and how a war is being fought and the probability of success.

2. The need to gain international support and put together multilateral coalitions means that appeals have to be made to parties which may not share the same degree of interest and commitment as you (or your opponent).

3. To the extent that contemporary conflicts tend to be irregular, and are counter-guerrilla, counter-insurgency or counter-terrorist in nature, then strategy depends on separating the activists/militants from their constituencies, who can provide them with sanctuary, recruits, supplies, and basic political support.

I want to concentrate for a moment on the last of these points.

The distinguishing feature of a regular war is that it is potentially decided through battle. I say potentially because political leaders may well decide to give up before their worst fears are realised when they can hope to salvage something. What they are watching is the developing confrontations between two sets of armed forces. Both intra- and inter-state wars can be regular in this sense.

The irregular elements in any war derive from the interaction between regular forces and civilian society. It is not just fighting within civil society – say gang warfare or hooligans clashing with rival fans during an international tournament. Rather irregular warfare results either from regular forces directing their efforts against civilian structures in order to undermine the enemy state or else fighters who seek to emerge out of and withdraw into civil society to compensate for their regular weaknesses.

Regular warfare is perceived to be in decline. This is for a variety of reasons, but the main ones are the readiness to solve great power disputes by means other than war and the superiority of western states in the conduct of regular war. By and large the increased focus on irregular war now results from the second of these reasons – the apparent invincibility of US forces, with or without their allies, in conventional battle. This leads to talk of ‘asymmetric’ war, and concerns about direct attacks on civil society.

The decline of regular warfare should not lead us to exaggerate the novelty of ir-
regular warfare. The great age of irregular warfare was the colonial period, when both sides were playing for high stakes. The current context is different. The conflicts of this period have forced us to look at factors such as the relationship between military technique and political legitimacy, the radicalisation of populations, the role of international opinion and intervention forces, the consequences of inter-communal violence in a way that challenges traditional ways of looking at armed conflict.

Yet these are primitive strategies because they tend to fail in their avowed intent. They can succeed if the only intention is to cause hurt; if there is a wider political intention the effort is normally futile. They can exercise a coercive effect, for example in suggesting in the aftermath of the July 07, 2005 bombings in London that it is unwise for the UK to be in Iraq, but if this is an effective argument it is only because there is already a widespread view that this is unwise. Otherwise terrorists must aspire to becoming resisters or insurgents, forms of warfare in which political and military strategy is more effectively integrated.

Here the intent is less to attack civil society than to use civil society as a base from which to attack the regular forces of the enemy, inviting the state to reveal its oppressive nature. This type of irregular warfare can be divided into two – defensive, which might be called resistance, and offensive, which might be called insurgency. Like all these distinctions this is by no means clear cut – resistance and insurgency can be part of the same struggle. The distinction can be understood at a strategic and a tactical level. Strategic resistance refers to the methods used to prevent an occupying force establishing itself; a strategic insurgency refers to the methods used to expel a purported illegitimate force from a defined territory. Within one of these struggles at a strategic level, battles for particular localities can in turn reflect tactical resistance and insurgency.

At either level the key factor is the attitude of the local population. Resistance normally depends on a supportive population. This provides sanctuaries, supply lines, recruits and intelligence. A resistance which lacks these advantages risks defeat – constantly fearing informers and lacking supplies. The task for an insurgency is to create support where at the outset it is scarce. This will require that it find a point of political contact with the target community. Relations with the community may be forged on a hearts and mind basis, a shared patriotism or kinship, but it might also be based on intimidation and fear – the consequences of known collaboration with the enemy, the expectation that even when the insurgents disappear they will be back and ready for revenge if they feel betrayed.

An important feature of irregular forces is that they are often regular forces in development, with military-type command structures and designations. Indeed if they are successful they will become regular, in that they will be able to confront directly the regular forces of the state (or the occupation). This was the aspiration of Asian guerrilla theory, as reflected in Mao in China or Giap in Vietnam. Irregular warfare, in the form of guerrilla tactics, is not a preferred way of fighting. It is for want of something better. By itself it cannot produce victory because it does not allow power to be wrested directly from the state. At some point, even if only during the end-game, the irregulars will reach the strength to ensure a decisive victory over the state or, if the enemy has succumbed to demoralisation and disarray, to be able to line up and march to demonstrate their authority as the armed forces of a state in waiting. This was how Fidel Castro marked his victory over the regular forces of Batista in Cuba a half century ago.

The purpose of irregular warfare is not to gain a decisive victory because these tactics by themselves cannot directly defeat a regular army. Instead the aim is to try the patience and resilience of the enemy, to undermine the authority and confidence of the ruling elite and create an audience for a rival political creed. As the insurgents gain recruits and support and the enemy suffers from desertion and popular disaffection then the balance of power will shift and the irregulars will be able to act in a more regular fashion.

If they are unable to reach that point, however successful they are in mounting individual attacks and embarrassing the state, they will fail. Irregular warfare that is in practice a set of uncoordinated and fragmented attacks by cells that are barely in touch with one another, and are unable to create a sense of irresistibility, will fail. In this sense the objective of terrorism is to create the conditions for resistance or insurgency and, following on, the objective of resistance or insurgency is to create the conditions for regular war.

Of course all this takes time and the political context will change. If the enemy has no deep stake in the territory it is occupying or attempting to occupy then it will have a lower tolerance of losses than one whose commitment is existential and dare not lose. Equally if the irregulars have trouble agreeing on a strategy and a political line and are unable to coordinate their activities then they will fail. This points to a critical feature of this sort of warfare: operations may have to be undertaken to strengthen the group as much as to hurt the enemy. At times of course this may result in internecine warfare as different radical groups vie with each other for leadership of a struggle to which they are all notionally committed.
The most natural form of irregular warfare is resistance, which is defensive, normally against some foreign, occupying force and so able to benefit from nationalist sentiment and local knowledge of culture and terrain. Defeating resistance can require a whole population to be pacified in some way to isolate and subdue the armed elements within it. Heavy handed tactics confirms the resistance propaganda and gain them recruits. A light touch allows them to establish unencumbered their political authority – as in no go areas where the authorities dare not come and where a parallel government may be established. By contrast it ought to be easier to deal with an insurgency, for here the militants are venturing into territory where they may be less familiar with the terrain and, more to the point, less sure about the degree of popular support. The state authorities should be better placed to acquire critical intelligence and so identify and isolate the militants. So those fighting a resistance aim to turn it into an insurgency, by ensuring that the front line forces are recognisably local and can play the patriotic card as effectively as the enemy. The more the enemy turns from an insurgency into terrorism, the more successful the campaign, for this is a backward step.

If we take the Middle East, the Palestinians have had the basis of a formidable resistance movement. The Israeli occupation became progressively unpopular to the point where there was no shortage of recruits, including potential martyrs. As the first intifada demonstrated, Israel could be embarrassed by unarmed youngsters to the point where it realised that it could not really treat the territories as if they were part of a greater Israel. This was the success of the first intifada of 1988-1991. This also explains the failure of the second intifada from 2000 to 2004. This saw attacks on the main Israeli cities so it then became an insurgency, but one with particular difficulties. It lacked local popular support within Israel proper and so its militants had limited opportunities to mount operations of true strategic effect. They therefore adopted tactics of extreme desperation, which took their toll, but also hardened Israeli attitudes and required the militants to expose themselves to counter-insurgency operations.

Western countries, in general, now follow certain precepts when dealing with irregular war. Compared with colonial times, coercion of civilians is now out of bounds. Whenever attacks on military-related targets result in damage to civilian infrastructure or civilian casualties it is explained as unintended and regretted ‘collateral damage’ and not justified as a means of persuading the enemy to give up. It is hard, however, when an enemy is engaged in irregular warfare to stick to the principles of regular warfare, for example by not chasing enemy fighters into their towns and villages, or blocking the enemy supply lines, even though this can create a sense of civilian siege. When the fight becomes more existential, as with Israel, and when the battle for hearts and minds is considered lost, then restraint may lapse. It is evident that once this happens this struggle will become more prolonged and painful because it tends to push the militants and their supporting population closer together, when the main aim should be to impose wedges, to drive them apart.

Nonetheless, the inability to engage in extreme violence against hostile populations renders western forces properly unable to use the methods with which armed uprisings were put down in the past. So during the Second Lebanon War Israel could argue that when it killed ordinary Lebanese this was because of the way that Hizbollah – its main targets – had concealed itself among civil society. Meanwhile Hizbollah’s own missile attacks were clearly designed to hurt civilians. The fact that far more Lebanese were killed than Israelis reflected the inaccuracy of the Hizbollah missiles and the protective measures taken by Israelis. It had nothing to do with intent. Yet in the international evaluation outputs counted more than intent.

This is why the need to win over hearts and minds is a frequent theme in discussions of strategies for irregular wars, referred to whenever questioning harsh methods used by one’s own side and whenever there is a need to persuade people, through good works and sensitivity to their concerns that the government and the security forces are really on their side. It sums up the idea of wars being won in the cognitive rather than the physical domain. It supports an essential counter-insurgency, and counter-terrorism, strategy by suggesting a way of winning over a population that might otherwise be hostile (and which subjected to brute force almost certainly will be), thereby depriving militant opponents of their potential sources of backing.

The term requires some unpacking. In other contexts, heart and mind are often pitted against each other – strong emotions versus cool calculation, appeals to values and symbols versus appeals to the intellect. In strategic discourse, much hearts and minds theory seems very hearts oriented, as if by showing a human face with a ready smile, with desperately needed goods and services being brought by Sergeant Bountiful backed up by Major Reassurance, a thankful but hitherto sullen populace can be won over. Such activities can undoubtedly have substantial payoffs, but only in favourable conditions.

It is easier to work out what can lose popular support than what can win it. Heightened cultural awareness is not essential to realise that arbitrary arrests, displays of brute force, rudeness and disrespectful behaviour are likely to generate alienation and hostility. Reactions to being treated harshly and disdainfully for no good reason, especially by uninvited foreign troops, are not likely to vary greatly among otherwise diverse cultures. In the aftermath of such behaviour, repairing the damage and putting a positive ‘spin’ on events requires more than a keen and well-resourced public affairs outfit but rather evidence that policies have been changed and more appropriate behaviour is now in place.

What can win support? First, some means must be found of addressing the real concerns and grievances of the local people. The failure of the hearts and minds approach in Vietnam was because its purposes were subverted to serve the needs of the South Vietnamese regime rather than the people. That is, to succeed it has to be passingly democratic and this may well upset local power structures. In part it may be a matter of civic action, repairing roads and building schools, or securing power and sanitation infrastructures, but at some point issues of official repression, land reform or ethnic mix may become germane. We can see this clearly in Afghanistan at the moment.
A military and political strategy must go hand in hand and a political strategy requires internal reform as much as external gestures.

“There is a chicken-and-egg problem. These strategies can be too dangerous to follow without local security; but until local security is established they cannot be followed. Without security, foreign troops and local people will be unable to interact closely and to develop mutual trust. Security is not just a matter of immediate safety: it also requires a look forward, assessing the likely future power structure that will emerge as the conflict develops and will probably be in place when the foreign troops leave. In this respect, a more minds-oriented approach must establish trust by addressing questions about who is likely to prevail in the continuing political and military struggle and the nature of the long-term political agendas of all involved. The insurgent can sow doubts as to the trustworthiness of the local population, about what is real and what is fake, as to who is truly on one’s side and who is pretending. As the insurgents and counter-insurgents play mind games to gain local support, they may be as anxious to create impressions of strength as of kindness, to demonstrate a likely victory, as well as largesse.

Part of the challenge for counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations is to seek to unbind the enemy force by undermining their strategic narratives. This requires playing on the natural fault lines within the political movements that spawn terrorist groups in order to aggravate their differences. Such an approach is helped by the familiar tendency of radical movements to fragment into competing factions. These movements are not inherently pragmatic. They deal in ultimate ends and so small divisions over political programmes or current tactics can quickly be magnified into fundamental differences of principle. Those of a certain political generation will recall endless, pointless debates among competing socialist factions, often quite tiny, about obscure questions of Marxist–Leninist theory. Such an approach can consider itself successful so long as the insurgents or terrorists are prevented from moving beyond their networked, cellular form. If the enemy is not making progress it is apt to get frustrated with intense, internal strategic debates, with some arguing for more dramatic military actions to attract more attention and recruits, while others will argue the need for patience, political work to develop a constituency. These disagreements may be personalized and factionalized and it could happen that these schisms reach such an intensity that the factions begin to fight. If there is any optimism about the prospects for al Qaeda it comes for precisely these reasons. A debate has developed from within its own core Islamist community questioning the wisdom of exaggerated political ambition. Suicide bombings, and all tactics that seem to claim Muslims as much as non-believers as victims, and the lack of evident gain from a decade of Jihadist action.

This is why terrorist campaigns often either peter out or are marginalized by political developments, with the militants neither seizing power nor surrendering. Unlike regular warfare, irregular conflicts are unlikely to turn on having the most advanced technology or the imposition of overwhelming force. The military role may be quite limited, with key tasks in the hands of intelligence agencies and the police, and with even political leaders and intellectuals who frame and describe the core issues at the heart of the struggle. Whoever takes the lead, success will depend on how a particular irregular war’s purpose, course, and conduct is viewed by public opinion at home as well as within the theatre of operations.

Although such a war requires a shift in focus, the issues raised are hardly novel. Those who served in the anti-colonial wars of the twentieth century would recognize many of the dilemmas faced by their contemporary counter-parts as they try to think of ways to win over sullen populations by offering current security and hope for the future, acquiring reliable intelligence, setting traps while avoiding obvious ambushes, flushing out militants and turning some into informers, building up credible local leadership while catching or discrediting those of the enemy, and dividing and ruling through judicious use of amnesties and political initiatives. They might be shocked by the media gaze that ensures that these efforts are watched and evaluated constantly and globally, so that every mistake and false move is broadcast immediately, and constant difficulty is experienced in distinguishing minor tactical success from major strategic advances. But they might also conclude that this reinforces the lessons of past conflicts, that acquiring or retaining the trust and confidence of populations requires sensitivity to their concerns and treating them with respect.

Although irregular warfare has caused the west considerable problems in recent years it is important not to be too despondent about our capacity to deal with it as a military problem. The key point however is that the military strategy must be integrated with a political strategy. If the side we are supporting is weak it is probably because it lacks a strong political base and is prone to division. If the enemy is weak it will be for similar reasons. The side with the strongest political foundations should prevail militarily, following Mao’s dictum: “respect the enemy tactically but despise him strategically”.

Note

This address followed the presentation to Professor Freedman of the first Brigadier-General George G. Bell Shield in recognition of the qualities of outstanding intellectual leadership, inspiration in strategic studies and promoting public awareness of international security interests as exemplified by Brigadier-General George G. Bell, OC, MBE, CD, PhD, Soldier, Scholar, and Founding President of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, at the first Tribute Dinner on 19 June, 2008.