

Thinking Irregular Warfare

The New York Times
April 23, 1982
F. Andy Messing Jr.

In Washington, hundreds of defense experts have been spending countless hours debating how to use defense dollars to rejuvenate our conventional and nuclear forces. While this thinking is necessary to develop a proper mixture of deterrent powers, a crucial element is missing from our formula but not from Soviet strategy - the ability to conduct efficient irregular warfare. By irregular warfare, I mean unconventional warfare, limited conventional military actions and reactions, and anti-terrorism.

Moscow understands the effectiveness and economy of irregular warfare. It realizes that it is possible to project power worldwide while tiptoeing around the nuclear tripwire. Thus, it has placed more than 200,000 military personnel, called Spetsnaz - an acronym for Special Purpose forces - under the K.G.B.

These highly trained, politically oriented personnel have been sent to many countries, among them Afghanistan, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Angola. In fact, South Africans killed numerous members of Spetsnaz and their K.G.B. controllers in recent battles in Angola. This, and other sizeable evidence, shows increasing use of Spetsnaz for a wide range of missions - not even taking into account similar units in the Warsaw Pact performing tangential operations for Moscow.

Conversely, for irregular warfare, the United States has only approximately 5,000 active-duty Army personnel in various stages of readiness. Furthermore, the Special Forces ("Green Berets"), the main component of the Army's irregular-warfare troops, is faced with a continual drain of combat-experienced soldiers; 70 percent of those joining are first-term volunteers. The Navy has a few hundred Seals, viewed as the best managed and organized of all people trained in irregular warfare. The Air Force has a small, eclectic group of aircraft that cannot meet irregular-warfare requirements worldwide. Of a total of 4,500 mainly Army reservists, except for a few soldiers and units there is virtually no such combat-readiness.

All this does not come close to America's total requirements. More distressing, because of a lack of coherent national strategy, we hardly use our irregular-warfare forces to counter actual or potential Soviet actions. This problem is further complicated by a multilayered chain of command that diminishes the value of these units.

Some Pentagon bureaucrats say that an upgrading of our irregular forces is just around the bend. However, most equipment and training funds to bring about this change are being built into future armed forces budget requests, and this puts them in direct competition with the rest of the military for finite resources. Not since John F. Kennedy's revitalization of the "Green Berets" has an Administration considered filling this void - until now.

Some key Reagan Administration officials see that even if we have 16 combat-ready divisions as well as a Rapid Deployment Force, their only use is psychological deterrence or limited high-stakes missions that could quickly lead to nuclear war. Accordingly, in looking for a low-cost way to protect and project our strategic interests, the officials are settling on rebuilding and consolidating our irregularwarfare forces to create a version of Spetsnaz. This organization, which would be useful across the entire spectrum of warfare, would consist of units like the Special Forces, Rangers, Army psychological operations units, Navy Seals, and special Air Force units, among others.

Encouraged by Maj. Gen. John Singlaub (Ret.), a participant in three wars and an irregular-warfare specialist, the key officials are making progress in their thinking. General Singlaub has encouraged them not to regard our projected Special Purpose Forces as a minor element of our conventional forces to be used piecemeal. He feels that this entity should be a strategic-action element for the Commander in Chief. While receptive, these officials are caught up in the Vietnam backwash and today's focus on nuclear strategy, and an oafish bureaucracy that guards expensive pet projects. One official who works in this area concludes: "Only a specific order by the President will get the organization, and, most importantly, the immediate funding required to counter the escalating level of violence promulgated by the Soviets."

America is being blind-sided militarily. El Salvador is only an example of how, because of a lack of organization and coherent policy, we are losing this undeclared world war. President Reagan must heed what the Chinese military expert Sun Tzu said in 350 B.C.: "One who has a few must prepare against the enemy; one who has many makes the enemy prepare against him." The Pentagon must prepare to respond to the Soviet Union's continuing engagement in irregular warfare in order to keep America free and away from nuclear conflict.

F. Andy Messing Jr. is executive director of The Conservative Caucus, "a nonpartisan grassroots lobby," and a major in the Special Forces Reserve.