

May 27, 2012

# West Point Is Divided on a War Doctrine's Fate

By ELISABETH BUMILLER

WEST POINT, N.Y. — For two centuries, the United States Military Academy has produced generals for America's wars, among them Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, George S. Patton and David H. Petraeus. It is where President George W. Bush delivered what became known as his pre-emption speech, which sought to justify the invasion of [Iraq](#), and where President Obama told the nation he was sending an additional 30,000 American troops to [Afghanistan](#).

Now at another critical moment in American military history, the faculty here on the commanding bend in the Hudson River is deep in its own existential debate. Narrowly, the argument is whether the counterinsurgency strategy used in Iraq and Afghanistan — the troop-heavy, time-intensive, expensive doctrine of trying to win over the locals by building roads, schools and government — is dead.

Broadly, the question is what the United States gained after a decade in two wars.

“Not much,” Col. Gian P. Gentile, the director of West Point's military history program and the commander of a combat battalion in Baghdad in 2006, said flatly in an interview last week. “Certainly not worth the effort. In my view.”

Colonel Gentile, long a critic of counterinsurgency, represents one side of the divide at West Point. On the other is Col. Michael J. Meese, the head of the academy's influential social sciences department and a top adviser to General Petraeus in Baghdad and Kabul when General Petraeus commanded the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Nobody should ever underestimate the costs and the risks involved with counterinsurgency, but neither should you take that off the table,” Colonel Meese said, also in an interview last week. Counterinsurgency, he said, “was broadly successful in being able to have the Iraqis govern themselves.”

The debate at West Point mirrors one under way in the armed forces as a whole as the United States withdraws without clear victory from Afghanistan and as the results in Iraq remain

ambiguous at best. (On the ABC News program “This Week” on Sunday, the defense secretary, Leon E. Panetta, called the Taliban “resilient” after 10 and a half years of war.)

But at West Point the debate is personal, and a decade of statistics — more than 6,000 American service members dead in Iraq and Afghanistan and more than \$1 trillion spent — hit home. On Saturday, 972 cadets graduated as second lieutenants, sent off in a commencement speech by Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. with the promise that they are “the key to whatever challenges the world has in store.”

Many of them are apprehensive about what they will find in Afghanistan — the news coming back from friends is often not good — but still hope to make it there before the war is largely over. “We’ve spent the past four years of our lives getting ready for this,” said Lt. Daniel Prial, who graduated Saturday and said he was drawn to West Point after his father survived as a firefighter in New York City on Sept. 11, 2001. “Ultimately you want to see that come to fruition.”

At West Point the arguments are more public than those in the upper reaches of the Pentagon, in large part because the military officers on the West Point faculty pride themselves on academic freedom and challenging orthodoxy. Colonel Gentile, who is working on a book titled “Wrong Turn: America’s Deadly Embrace With Counterinsurgency,” is chief among them.

Colonel Gentile’s argument is that the United States pursued a narrow policy goal in Afghanistan — defeating Al Qaeda there and keeping it from using the country as a base — with what he called “a maximalist operational” approach. “Strategy should employ resources of a state to achieve policy aims with the least amount of blood and treasure spent,” he said.

Counterinsurgency could ultimately work in Afghanistan, he said, if the United States were willing to stay there for generations. “I’m talking 70, 80, 90 years,” he said.

Colonel Gentile, who has photographs in his office of five young soldiers in his battalion killed in the 2006 bloodshed in Baghdad, acknowledged that it was difficult to question the wars in the face of the losses.

“But war ultimately is a political act, and I take comfort and pride that we as a military organization, myself as a commander of those soldiers who died, the others who were wounded and I think the American Army writ large, that we did our duty,” he said. “And there is honor in itself of doing your duty. I mean you could probably push back on me and say you’re still saying the war’s not worth it. But I’m a soldier, and I go where I’m told to go, and I do my duty as best I can.”

Colonel Meese's opposing argument is that warfare cannot be divorced from its political, economic and psychological dimensions — the view advanced in the bible of counterinsurgents, the U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual that was revised under General Petraeus in 2006. Hailed as a new way of warfare (although drawing on counterinsurgencies fought by the United States in Vietnam in the 1960s and the Philippines from 1899 to 1902, among others), the manual promoted the protection of civilian populations, reconstruction and development aid.

“Warfare in a dangerous environment is ultimately a human endeavor, and engaging with the population is something that has to be done in order to try to influence their trajectory,” Colonel Meese said.

In Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal so aggressively pushed the doctrine when he was the top commander there that troops complained they had to hold their firepower. General Petraeus issued guidelines that clarified that troops had the right to self-defense when he took over, but by then counterinsurgency had attracted powerful critics, chief among them Mr. Biden and veteran military officers who denigrated it as armed nation building.

When Mr. Obama announced last June that he would withdraw by the end of this summer the 30,000 additional troops he sent to Afghanistan — earlier than the military wanted or expected — the doctrine seemed to be on life support. General Petraeus has since become director of the Central Intelligence Agency, where his mission is covertly killing the enemy, not winning the people.

Now, as American troops head home from Afghanistan, where the new strategy will be a narrow one of hunting insurgents, the arguments at West Point are playing out in war colleges, academic journals and books, and will be for decades. (The argument has barely begun over whether violence came down in Iraq in 2007 because of the American troop increase or the Anbar Awakening, when Sunni tribes turned against the insurgency.) To Col. Gregory A. Daddis, a West Point history professor, the debate is also about the role of the military as the war winds down. “We’re not really sure right now what the Army is for,” he said.

To officers like Brig. Gen. H.R. McMaster, much of the debate presents a false either-or dilemma. General McMaster, who used counterinsurgency to secure the Iraqi city of Tal Afar in 2005 and returned recently from Kabul as head of a task force fighting corruption, said that without counterinsurgency, “There’s a tendency to use the application of military force as an end in itself.”

To John Nagl, a retired Army lieutenant colonel who fought in Iraq, wrote a book about

counterinsurgency and now teaches at the United States Naval Academy, American foreign policy should “ensure that we never have to do this again.”

Does counterinsurgency work? “Yes,” he said. “Is it worth what you paid for it? That’s an entirely different question.”

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

***Correction: May 30, 2012***

An article on Monday about a debate at the United States Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., over the military doctrine of counterinsurgency misstated the number of cadets who graduated from the academy on Saturday. There were 972 graduates, not 1,032. (Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. used the 1,032 number in his commencement address to the cadets.)