

JOHN RALSTON SAUL

The New Era of Irregular Warfare



ODAY, the reality of warfare is irregular warfare. The dominant applied strategy in the world for a long time now has had little to do with mobile tank warfare or precision bombing or weapons of mass destruction. In conflict zones around the globe, we see small, highly mobile forces that strike, melt away when necessary, but do not cede or dissolve. Warfare for half a century now has meant irregular warfare. And Canadian military personnel are extremely well placed to deal with situations involving this type of conflict. Why? Because the experience of the Canadian Armed Forces since the Second World War has been slowly adapted and designed and built upon increasing expertise in dealing with irregular warfare.

A half-century ago, we invented something called peacekeeping. It gradually evolved into something called "peacemaking," which in turn evolved into dealing with irregular warfare. So we have a certain expertise here.

This expertise is more than a specialty; it is the outcome of a great deal of experience. It has evolved on the spot. Our military personnel have seen problems and have dealt with them at a tactical level. Somehow those tactics have gradually added up to what now amounts to a strategy. Given the almost subterranean nature of this evolution it is a miracle that we have done so well, and have ended up with something coherent enough to be identifiable as a strategy.

His Excellency JOHN RALSTON SAUL has spent time with Canadian Forces in Bosnia, Kosovo, Kabul, and in the Arabian Gulf. During the 1980s, he travelled with irregular armies in North Africa and South East Asia. His PhD dealt in part with post-WWII European military strategy, and he has written at length about military strategy in his book *Voltaire's Bastards*.

This strategy and this activity present us with an extremely interesting and positive choice for a small armed force. It allows Canada to be a leader in international military situations, as opposed to becoming merely an adjunct to someone else's leadership – nations with much larger military forces and talents of other sorts.

Some of the most interesting theorists of warfare over the last half century have tried to work with chaos theory as a postmodern way of addressing mobile warfare. But the slippage towards irregular warfare as the strategic norm of the late twentieth and now the twenty-first century is giving chaos theory its real military sense. That sense gives complexity a far more complete meaning.

The real military debate for the next couple of decades is going to be, *how are we going to deal with this increasing complexity?* This is not so much a question of the complexity of weaponry, but of the complexity of forces and methods, and the complexity of communities. And these are going to require an increasingly sophisticated, nuanced, and varied approach towards irregular warfare. That is the real debate.

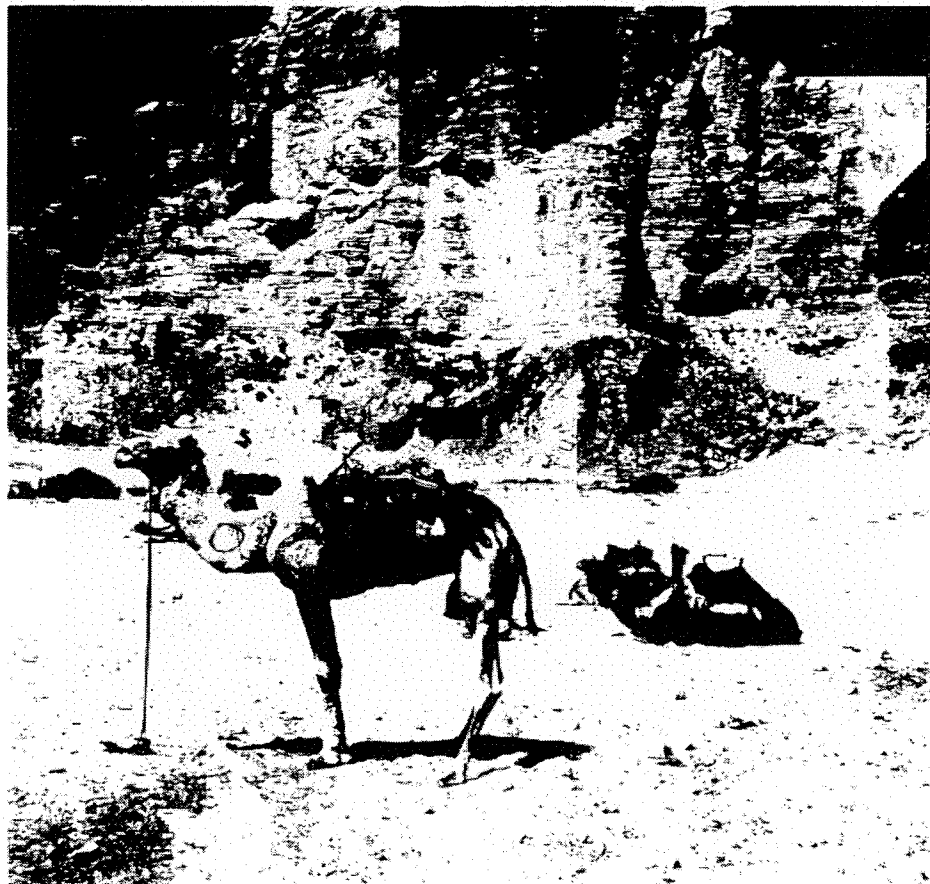
Irregular warfare is a specific strategy in and of itself. But it is also a term that has come to encapsulate a whole range of military approaches – guerrilla warfare, asymmetric warfare, insurgency, counter-insurgency, terrorism, resistance forces, wars of liberation, jungle warfare, underground forces, the use of special forces. Even espionage, which has become such an obsession in our modern world, belongs on the list. All of these terms – different though they are – fall into the category of irregular warfare.

It is very important that we realize that we cannot remove any one of these categories and say, "right now we only want to talk about guerrilla warfare," or "at present, let us just discuss asymmetric or irregular warfare ... or terrorism ... or how to undertake a war on terrorism." We cannot make the mistake of believing that each one of these subjects can be discussed in isolation from all the rest. They are all part of a big, interwoven historical and military package.

Another very important thing for us to remember is that, as with the other classic twentieth-century strategies, some of the elements of irregular warfare will be used by evil people, and some will be used by heroic people struggling for ethical values. It is very difficult to attach a strategy to an ethical position. War doesn't work that way. And it will not change reality to say that those who refuse to use classic methods and strategy are somehow acting in a dishonourable way. They may well be. Or they may simply be adopting a strategy that will

work for them. How do you tell who is profoundly evil and who isn't? We will not discern this from their methods as much as by who they actually are, and what their aims are.

A new emphasis on the teaching of strategies and tactics relating to irregular warfare would involve a reorientation of the present mandate of RMC – and for that matter the military staff colleges – to some extent away from the more classic university studies and towards the sort of military studies given greater emphasis in military colleges in many other countries – in other words, a balance between the two. Some might worry that such a reorientation might discourage applicants. I do not believe that is so. I believe that a clearer intellectual preparation for the reality of the officer's life which lies ahead would excite applicants and help them orient themselves both professionally and emotionally.





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