

Books February 2013

# Guerrillas in the mist

*by Victor Davis Hanson*

*On guerrilla warfare.*

After America's bitter experience in Vietnam and Europe's colonial debacles in Asia, Africa, and the Arab world, most Westerners were sick and tired of hearing about asymmetrical warfare abroad. The global spread of cheap and technologically sophisticated weapons—and near-instant television and radio communications from the front—empowered the poor of the Third World to level the playing field.

The result of these advances was an increasingly affluent and leisured West, soured on fighting for empire or alongside dubious anti-communist allies. Such thankless struggles were not worth leaving thousands of suburban Americans and upscale Frenchmen rotting in places like the jungles of Vietnam. The horror of the two world wars, the postwar nuclear sword of Damocles, and a new therapeutic view about conflict and its resolution also conspired to turn public interest away from guerrilla wars.

September 11 changed all that. Westerners learned that while we may be tired of dealing with terrorists and guerrillas, the latter were hardly tired of dealing with us. In the conflict-filled, post-9/11 world, insurgents, terrorists, and guerrillas have all once again entered our living rooms. As a consequence, we need to be reminded that terrorism and asymmetrical warfare are not new, unfailingly effective, or exclusively the domain of the non-Western other.

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Max Boot is an ideal guide to offer such a timely and, in some ways, reassuring history of guerrilla warfare. An acclaimed journalist, opinion writer, policy analyst, and historian, the Renaissance man Boot is also a frequent visitor to combat theaters in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a close acquaintance of many of America's top generals in the field—as well as a student of the contemporary Middle East, where so much of our current interest in terrorism originates. His book is rightly subtitled an “epic,” given that the study is 729 pages long and systematically seeks to explain guerrilla wars from antiquity to the present.

As thousands have asked after September 11, what exactly is guerrilla (“little war”) conflict? Boot understands that dilemma of defining the nearly indefinable, and so right off the bat offers us a seemingly concise definition: the guerrilla warfare of his book's subtitle “will be used to describe the use of hit-and-run tactics by an armed group directed primarily against a government and security forces for political or religious reasons.”

That description might seem simple enough—yet it proves not to be so, and for the next two pages of his prologue Boot offers all sorts of exceptions and conditions that deal with terrorists and bandits. No surprise, then, that Boot has earlier warned us that, despite the book's subtitle, *Invisible Armies* covers both terrorists and guerrillas.” And in addition, “whatever you call them, fighters resort to terrorist or guerrilla tactics for one reason only: they are too weak to employ conventional methods.”

Apart from late Republican and Imperial Rome, we have little detailed literary or epigraphic information about hit-and-run armed groups until the modern era. That understandably explains that, while the book has an announced chronological sweep that begins with pre-classical antiquity in the Near East,

only about sixty pages deal with guerrilla conflict before 1650. There is little in-depth investigation about the phenomenon in Ancient Greece, the Dark Ages, or the Medieval Period, although Rome's rogue gallery of Ariovistus, Boudica, Jugurtha, Mithridates, or Vercingetorix, for example, might offer a richer vein than was tapped.

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Boot adopts an idiosyncratic approach to such a difficult and vast topic: He offers sixty-four chapters that prove to be abbreviated case studies, often less than ten pages each. They are grouped together in eight larger books, in both chronological and thematic fashion (e.g., "The Bomb Throwers: The First Age of International Terrorism" or "The Side Shows: Guerrillas and Commandos in the World Wars"). The narrative of each chapter begins in medias res and offers a lively snippet of a terrorist, insurgent, or guerrilla leader, such as a Francis Marion, Toussaint Louverture, Lawrence of Arabia, or Che Guevara.

Sometimes the emphasis is reversed. Our focus falls instead upon the other side of government counter-insurgency as waged by a brilliant Edward Lansdale or David Petraeus, two of the unspoken geniuses of the book. At first glance, the chapters' constant shifting between insurgent and counter-insurgent seems without plan or rationale, but eventually the reader appreciates Boot's wide angles of vision, and his repeated promises not to prejudge guerrillas as bad or good, but simply as opting for a style of conflict that often is forced upon them by both material circumstances and politics. Consequently, sometimes we identify with underdogs like the Mujahedeen fighting the Red Army in Afghanistan, while at other times the Ku Klux Klan, Yasser Arafat, and the Red Brigade utterly repulse us.

While each of these brief chapters makes good reading, they are too short in themselves to offer any real analysis. Instead, Boot offers these interesting stories to whet our appetite for the end of the book, where he devotes nearly 200 pages to explaining what all these fascinating terrorists and insurgents had in common. Consequently, an epilogue, twelve formal lessons about guerrilla war from the ages, an extremely valuable database of over 250 insurgencies since 1775, replete with statistical analyses, and over 100 pages of bibliography and notes follow. That alone is a considerable achievement that will ensure *Invisible Armies* remains a valuable scholarly research tool as well as popular history.

Again, Boot is concerned with neither a morality tale nor politics, but in conducting a disinterested examination of a method of war that is still poorly understood, yet increasingly relevant to our own security. Boot's formal findings may startle. Most guerrilla insurgencies fail (only 22 percent of insurgencies since 1775 have resulted in clear-cut victories). Even so, neither a scorched earth nor touchy-feely hearts-and-minds approach necessarily prevails over guerrillas. It is rather the precise mixture of the carrot and the stick—both winning over civilians while killing lots of the bad guys—that works. But too often the proper formula is found only after years of careful trial and error. Nevertheless, the common theme of both the chapter case studies and the database is that even the most ruthless guerrillas and insurgents usually lose, unless the government either over- or underreacts—or fails to stop critical foreign moral and material support.

In such a lengthy and wide-ranging study, it would be easy to disagree with some of Boot's more general assertions. It is true enough that the statement "Guerrilla warfare is not an Eastern Way of War; it is the universal war of the weak" applies to all eras and locales, as Americans know well from our own history of the Swamp Fox and Quantrill's Raiders. Yet in those identifiable wars of east against west, there is evidence of Western military dynamism—at least as manifested by superior technology and more successful approaches to discipline, logistics, and organization—that explain why the Vietnamese, Arabs, or Burmese prove weaker and thus are insurgents more often than the British or Americans.

Avoiding being “weak” often means using sophisticated weapons imported from the West or adapted from Western designs, while using Western notions of propaganda and sophisticated communications to appeal to global audiences. Except for a few colonial examples of outnumbered Westerners fighting as guerrillas against huge indigenous forces, or intra-Western civil wars, in most cases the insurgents, whether the Numidians under Jugurtha or the Iraqi jihadists, simply did not have access to commensurate Western resources, whether defined as weaponry, capital, or organization. The future nightmarish device that could destroy a London or New York will probably not be a product of indigenous African culture or Koranic wisdom.

In this regard, the notion of a Western Way of War is not a simple Asian-Western antithesis, as Boot seems to suggest, or confined to the affinity in the West for heavy infantrymen to fight in pitched battle. Rather, it involves a more general tendency to marshal greater capital, more sophisticated technology, and more disciplined troops that have allowed the West to project military power in far more lethal and distant fashion than its rivals—from the Indus under Alexander, to Scotland under the Caesars, to the Middle East during the Crusades, to Tenochtitlán by Hernán Cortés, to almost anywhere by the British of the nineteenth century.

That singular ability does not mean that Xerxes will not fight in Salamis Bay, Abdul Rahman will not reach Poitiers, the Ottomans will not approach the Gates of Vienna, or that bin Laden cannot knock down the World Trade Center—only that such efforts are usually rare and facilitated in part by the adoption of Western technology and expertise or help from Westernized allies. This is not always a minor quibble because Boot’s impressive survey of insurgencies, both in his chapters and database, have a habit of being aimed at Romans, British, Americans, and Europeans in general, or at least Westernized Imperial Japanese and Chinese nationalists or postcolonial governments. It is not reductionist to suggest that when Mao Zedong was without the Western-provided capital and weaponry of Chiang Kai-shek that he was an insurgent; after his victory,

however, he put down insurgencies, in part through vast rearmament and money from the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites.

A greater Western propensity for freer exchanges of ideas, market capitalism, and consensual government are often behind value-neutral rubrics like “strong” and “weak”—as least when the West collides with the proverbial “other” outside of Europe and America. Cultural differences in the approach to war do not ensure through the centuries that there were not plenty of Cunaxas, Islawandas, and Little Big Horns, just that we know them so well because they are more often the exception than the rule.

It is also one of the paradoxes of the West that in the modern period the legacy of classical consensual government, the leisured lifestyle of market capitalism, and the fumes of Judeo-Christian pacifism have made it now nearly impossible for Westerners to implement the full retaliatory force against terrorists and insurgents that their sophisticated technology and ample wealth might otherwise allow. In this regard, carpet-bombing Afghanistan would be as horrific to Westerners as it might have been cost-effective in curtailing the Taliban’s propensity to aid al-Qaeda. The dilemma is not that a Carthaginian Peace sometimes does not solve the insurgent problem, but that such an extreme measure is seen by its practitioners as a medicine morally worse than the disease.

Boot ends his magisterial study with the ominous conclusion that things may be changing. Insurgents, who for most of history have been largely unsuccessful, are beginning to use the weapons and communications of the modern globalized world to even the score—especially in the age of easily transferrable biological, chemical, and nuclear expertise. For those who enjoy living under the aegis of powerful Western governments, that change may be scary indeed.

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 31 Number 6, on page 60

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