



A Lesson from an Ancient

Facilitating Retreat and Desertion

Among Insurgencies

By Joseph N. Rudolphi

Even in our modern age we look to old ideas for wisdom, but *old* does not mean obsolete, and old voices can offer counsel. For instance, today Carl von Clausewitz is held in high regard, though in his own time he was merely a minor player in the Napole-

onic Wars. This article has two related objectives: first, to discuss what a specific ancient voice has to offer us, and second, to consider how such old ideas could be implemented today, thousands of years later, in modern warfare.

That ancient voice is Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus, more commonly referred to as Vegetius, a Roman general who wrote *De Re Militari* in the 5th century, hoping that his counsel would help return Rome to its glory days. One

of his main ideas is controversial: An enemy's flight should not be prevented but facilitated.¹ Because Vegetius was writing about conventional warfare, this idea would not seem relevant to the many commanders throughout history who would come to read these words—rarely has a plan to encircle and completely destroy an enemy been replaced with a plan to let them run scared. In World War II, for example, armies made great attempts to encircle enemy forces. It

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U.S. Navy Douglas A-4E Skyhawks from Attack Squadrons VA-163 Saints and VA-164 Ghost Riders attack Phuong Dinh railroad bypass bridge, 10 kilometers north of Thanh Hoe, North Vietnam, on September 10, 1967 (U.S. Navy/Jerry Breast)

was of great concern rather than a relief, especially early on for the Axis powers fighting the Soviet Union, that enemies could escape these encirclements.² And so, because of a historical lack of implementation, Vegetius's ideas largely faded into obscurity.

Vegetius, though, believed that an enemy, if trapped, with no hope for escape and no hope for mercy, might yet find hope in fighting to the death. He wrote, "Fear itself will arm an enemy, and despair inspires courage." He argued that, if left a chance to escape, an enemy would put all its effort into staying alive. To Vegetius, a perfect victory would look like this: An opposing force would be put into a situation where withdrawal would be seen as a benefit. Rather than cut this withdrawal off, Vegetius would

have the route of its withdrawal made for the opposing force. The opposing force, throwing all effort into a retreat, might succeed in saving some of its own but would be effortlessly cut down. Vegetius would win a battle without forcing a slaughter to the death—an effort that would have the potential to harm his own army. Vegetius's strategy is to tempt an enemy with the idea of saving its own forces. Indeed, this approach worked in conventional warfare recently, when Ukrainian forces, encircled by Russian and separatist armies in Ilovaik, were offered a corridor for retreat; they took it and fell into an ambush that had decisive results. A humiliating defeat led to a ceasefire.³

Equally important is Vegetius's idea that an adversary is more hurt

by desertion than by slaughter.

Extermination does not extinguish a cause; in some cases, it may further a cause in the long run. "Remember the Alamo" is a case in which the total extermination of an enemy eventually became a rallying cry. Brutal German atrocities in the Soviet Union during World War II turned enemies of the Communist regime into soldiers willing to fight—not for the protection of the state but for themselves and their families.⁴ Showing an adversary that their cause is worthless, though, and getting them to abandon it would be the better strategy.

Can a coalition force create a strategy to put insurgents in a hopeless situation and generate an existential crisis? Can they achieve a victory against an insurgency that Vegetius sees possible against

conventional forces? It is possible. To begin, however, we must recognize that the strategy of state-building is *not* the strategy to achieve peace in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. joint force should instead look to its respective Service mission statements. For example, the U.S. Army mission statement reads, “To deploy, fight and win our nation’s wars by providing ready, prompt and sustained land dominance by Army forces across the full spectrum of conflict as part of the joint force.” Rather than prop up a state to fight a war via state-building, the U.S. joint force in cooperation with coalition forces must look to win a dominating, and thus decisive, victory. The current strategy of state-building simply props up a state to fight a war, leaving coalition forces in a support role. A support role would be fine if the states could both win in the field and create in the nation an atmosphere less susceptible to enemy recruitment; however, this has not been the case, and this strategy has been in use for too long—and enemies have been emboldened by its failure.

Coalition forces must look to a plan that would match with Vegetius’s two ideas: facilitation of retreat and desertion. Insurgents do not fight war conventionally, and so these two ideas could be blended into one: Get the enemy to abandon the cause. Insurgents must be tempted with the idea of saving themselves. Two necessary preconditions must be in place for such a temptation to work: The insurgent must lack the means to effectively fight, and the insurgent must see life outside the insurgency as an improvement to his or her current state.

The first may be achieved by recognizing that insurgents, though they fight asymmetrically, have conventional needs. They need food, money, weapons, communications, supplies, and, most important, manpower. Combined, these elements create and sustain the insurgencies that for years have evaded defeat. Our current strategy seems to do the following: Prop up our state ally while fighting and defeating enemy manpower in search-and-destroy operations. The sole exception in recent years has been the so-called Islamic State (IS), whose

initial power surge allowed it to fight in the field as a conventional force; however, as its territory is diminished and its forces defeated in the field, it will begin to fight more like the Afghan and earlier Iraqi insurgents. Coalition combat operations in the tactical sense seem overly focused on defeating the product of a logistics system capable of making people willing to fight. Despite tactical victories, the strategic plan props up a state unable to achieve its own victories and unable to combat the network that produces insurgents.

To achieve Vegetius’s first precondition for power—the insurgent must lack the means to effectively fight—a new strategy must focus on coalition forces combating the logistics. Crippling the logistics of an insurgency is needed to back it into a corner, and then diplomacy will be the avenue out for the lower ranking manpower to take. As Vegetius suggests, desertion of a cause must be facilitated, not prevented. A campaign that successfully brings about high levels of desertion will harm the insurgency beyond repair. This is the overall strategy.

How are insurgents having their logistics needs met? Jonathan Owen, a former Marine officer and security and protection expert, noted that insurgencies, including those operating in Afghanistan, receive support from a neighboring state. This predicament was true in the Vietnam War, the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, and numerous other battles. IS is likewise reportedly receiving support from other countries in its region, and many foreigners are among its ranks. States that provide support are essential for insurgents; they allow sanctuary, giving insurgents a place to organize for future movements or rest and regroup after a tactical defeat. Osama bin Laden himself was killed not in Afghanistan but in Pakistan, close to its capital and near a military academy. The Barack Obama administration rightly pressed Pakistan for answers on how he could have operated unnoticed.⁵

Removing state support by way of strict border security is Owen’s solution to striking at enemy logistics.⁶ Owen believes that once insurgents are denied freedom of movement they

will become liabilities to those nations where they have found sanctuary. To restore capability, these insurgents would have to make more conventional moves that would have little chance of success against coalition forces with vastly superior conventional capability. Insurgents may attempt, for example, conventional assaults on border passes, hoping to reopen them.⁷ When these assaults fail, insurgents may try to force their needs on their sanctuary state—becoming a liability where it once was a tool.

Forcing a sanctuary state to reverse its policy is not without historical precedent. In the late 1960s, Jordan provided sanctuary to the Palestinian group Fatah, led by Yasser Arafat. Soon, however, the guerrilla group became a liability to Jordan. Fatah disregarded Jordanian law and tried to undermine the government. When Jordan’s government decided enough was enough, Jordanian forces struck back in September 1970. Historian James Gelvin put it simply: “As can be inferred from the epithet ‘Black September,’ the results of Arafat’s decision were disastrous for the Palestinians.”⁸ The Palestinians suffered heavy losses and sought refuge in Lebanon. Contrast the results of having the sanctuary state itself crack down to those of an invasion, an approach Israel took with Fatah’s new sanctuary state. The Israeli invasion succeeded in forcing the relocation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Fatah, but Israel also gained new enemies. Arafat, the PLO, and Fatah were able to escape and benefited over the long term from the effects of Israel’s invasion.

Past failures to secure borders and cut off logistics have had decisively negative impacts on the ability of U.S. forces to win a war. In Vietnam, rather than secure the border to stop infiltration from the Ho Chi Minh trails, the U.S. Armed Forces chose to just bomb the trails. The effectiveness of this strategy was doubted even at the time, but it proceeded nonetheless. Even with heavy bombing, the number of insurgents getting into Vietnam increased over time. U.S. intelligence estimated that 35,000 guerrillas got into South Vietnam in 1965;

in 1967, estimates put that number at 90,000.⁹ The Viet Cong could meet its conventional logistic needs to fight its guerrilla war. Its state support from North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia was neither effectively hindered nor removed. Attacking conventional needs would force insurgents to refocus. By putting states supportive of insurgencies into situations where they must choose between their own security or that of the nonstate group, the United States could begin to maneuver insurgents into the trap that Vegetius recommends. While this strategy may have an adverse effect on relations between the United States and those sanctuary states, it has the potential to improve relations—as those sanctuary states come to realize that the dependent insurgents are as much of a threat to them as they are to others.

Pakistan, for example, has already come to this realization. It has been rightfully accused in the past of being a sanctuary for the insurgents fighting coalition forces, just as it was to insurgents fighting Soviet forces. But the situation did not evolve as Pakistan expected; rather than sponsoring other groups as tools for Islamabad's agenda, groups like the Taliban have taken advantage of Pakistan.¹⁰ The Pakistanis themselves have recognized the significance of their border problem and have been constructing barriers on the Durand Line, the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹¹ This is a great opportunity. Pakistan, previously the haven of bin Laden, is taking steps to address the logistics of the insurgency in Afghanistan. These efforts should be praised by the United States and reciprocated on the Afghan side of the border because they begin to lock insurgents into Vegetius's trap.

Just as the freedom of insurgents to move abroad must be hindered, their local movements must be hampered by addressing civilian security, terrorist recruitment, and even economic concerns. Minimizing the negative impacts of a counterterror campaign on the lives of civilians might help them understand that eliminating terror could improve their lives, which could adversely affect recruitment efforts. Improvements to the lives

of citizens in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan could have two major positive effects. First, a citizen whose life is being improved by the campaign will be more invested in its success. Second, an insurgent who is being paralyzed by the campaign—while seeing improvements in the lives of those who are not—will become more likely to desert the cause.

The United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization do make efforts to improve civilian life in missions such as Operation *Resolute Support*, which has helped make several enhancements to the Afghan quality of life.¹² Despite such efforts in Afghanistan, a survey by the Asia Foundation showed that just 36.1 percent of Afghans believe their country is moving in the right direction; for those who answered it was moving in the wrong direction, security was cited as the main concern.¹³ In 2020, attacks throughout the month of November killed over 400 Afghan government forces and civilians.¹⁴ Many Afghans are nervous about the withdrawal of U.S. forces because of the failure to achieve security. Some fear the Taliban will regain power. Others welcome the withdrawal; they reason that, because the United States has failed to achieve security, the withdrawal may at least lower their chances of being caught in the crossfire.¹⁵ The violence has meant that the people have a continuous grievance against the counterterror campaign, despite some security improvements throughout their country. For insurgents to be effectively tempted out of their respective organizations, security and economic progress must be achieved in unison.

The failure to achieve security is itself an immense burden on the Afghan economy, which further stresses the security problem. In Afghanistan, for example, migration is a strategy the Afghan people use to cope with insecurity. The migrants are primarily unemployed males, who may resort to measures they deem necessary for survival.¹⁶ These measures may be instigating terror itself or simply doing something that aggravates the problem of establishing stability, such as criminal activity. At the same time, the constant population movements make efforts to

secure civilian safety difficult. To secure the people, it is necessary to negotiate directly with them, on a local level, rather than with their national leaders.

Moreover, the United States should encourage the formation of local communities; doing so would not only help protect community members but would also demonstrate an element of trust between the militia and the group it serves. In the past, disarmament achieved mixed results—for example, in 2005, when the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups program began. At this time, the insurgency was growing and Afghan forces were weak, resulting in fewer local armies available for achieving security.¹⁷ Achieving security on a local level would allow improved economic progress on a local level, allowing the populace to remain where they are. A fixed populace with both a stable economy and a local militia is less susceptible to being recruited by or becoming part of the logistics network of an insurgency.

Allowing communities a chance to defend themselves is not abandoning them to take charge of their own defense; rather, it is the same logic the United States uses at home regarding civilians and law enforcement. Civilians may arm themselves with certain weapons and can use lethal force to defend themselves under certain circumstances. If they cannot, law enforcement is there to help. The long war in Afghanistan has caused Afghans to develop a gun culture of their own. They have referred to their weapons as “an insurance policy,” and disarmament was already controversial and not popular early on in U.S. involvement.¹⁸

When communities stood up for their own defense, the results were positive. In 2009, 160 local Shinwari tribal leaders in Nangarhar Province made a deal to publicly denounce the Taliban, in the hopes this statement would get them some say over their own security. The coalition, they hoped, would remove corrupt officials from the national government and allow the tribes to have a say over who would lead the Afghan national police in their area. When the tribal leaders took this stand, their people stopped assisting the Taliban, delivering a considerable



U.S. Special Operations Servicemembers conduct combat operations in support of Operation *Resolute Support*, in Southeast Afghanistan, May 2019 (U.S. Army/Jaerett Engeseth)

blow to its capabilities. The stand also gave Afghans a chance to improve local governance. Despite the success of this approach, encouraging future deals at the tribal level was forbidden thereafter due to the complaints of the national government.¹⁹ The successes in this example, however, suggest that bypassing national governments to negotiate directly with the communities where terror takes place could bring about decisive results. If this approach angers national governments, then perhaps the United States could, in the future, encourage national governments to make these agreements themselves, which would ideally produce similar results and forge trust between the national governments and local communities. Entrusting communities to take a share of their defense would embolden them as it did these tribal leaders.

There is a risk, however, in allowing communities to arm and share in their own defense: Warlords could take

control. But this is a risk the United States already runs when it supports certain states with corrupt governments. This risk could be mitigated by reorganizing the idea behind the militias in such states as Iraq and Afghanistan. Militias in these war-torn states are rightfully feared due to their size and political influence. The United States should ensure that militias are organized and legitimized as smaller units, with limited armaments around their actual communities rather than large regions of land. They would be less of a threat to national government yet still invested in their future through defense of their communities. In 2009, for instance, coalition and Afghan forces—out of concern over militias challenging the national government—lost an opportunity to bring local defense initiatives in Nangarhar under their control.²⁰ The bigger threat to the national government would be local defense initiatives without legitimization through the

national government; local defense forces may then take more matters into their own hands.

Simply put, local support is essential for security progress. Without it, insurgents could take advantage of the disconnect between local and national efforts to combat them, sustain the means of continued resistance, and therefore maintain hope for their cause. Against an enemy that still has hope and means to fight, Vegetius's suggestion of allowing an escape would have no effect.

Insurgent groups could be weakened, however, if state and local support is greatly reduced. It is perhaps to the advantage of U.S. forces that insurgents have organized into groups, such as al Qaeda and the Taliban, and not remained as individuals. An organization needs a logistics system capable of supporting it. Clausewitz himself believed that, if an armed group of individuals became organized, it could be crushed, causing

remaining individuals with similar hopes to see the war as already decided, ceasing their resistance.²¹ With support hindered, individuals' flight from the insurgency could be facilitated. So, as Vegetius suggests, offer these insurgents a way out. If a way out is not offered to them when their cause seems pointless, a terrorist group will likely resort to increasingly desperate and violent measures as it tries to gain space and attention. Quite simply, when the terrorist cause is hopeless, a general amnesty should be offered—though not to those in leadership positions or to those known to have committed atrocities. Such an offer would throw a terrorist insurgency into disarray as its lower ranks, those who have to do the actual fighting, see that their lives would be better if they were allowed to return to their homes in peace. Trapping them with no hope for mercy, even if they surrender, would only spur them on.

Where the United States should employ such a method of pardons for the sake of further peace is Iraq. As Iraq finishes dealing with its IS problem, its solution is violent retaliation against all members and collaborators. In June 2018, for example, in response to the kidnapping of some of its soldiers, the Iraqi government executed 13 IS prisoners and then ordered the hangings of hundreds more.²² This action is only a short-term gain; it makes the Iraqi government look as though it has a strong resolve. Should IS members be expected to surrender if what awaits them and their families is execution? Perhaps a better method would be to release, observe, and, if necessary, report members if they return to terrorist activity. A state such as Iraq does not possess this capability, or even the will to carry it out, but the United States does.

A defeat coupled with the temptation of a better life should be the goal of coalition and joint forces combating insurgents. Better conditions, such as those being built in *Resolute Support*, are not enough. Inflicting a defeat is equally insufficient. Achieving security in conjunction with improvements to quality of life ensures three things. First, security measures mean that insurgents

will have great difficulty operating undetected; their cause will be an uphill battle. Second, a secure nation with an improved quality of life will yield fewer recruits. Third, an enhanced quality of life outside the ranks of the insurgency will tempt existing insurgents to lay down their arms for peace. Of course, this approach will not work for everyone; there are inevitably those who would still die for the cause. Many, however, will take the opportunity to have their lives spared, forsaking the cause for their own physical well-being. Our adversaries, under proper conditions, could be hurt more by desertion than by slaughter. JFQ

Notes

¹ Publius Flavius Vegetius Renuatus, *De Re Militari: The Classic Treatise on Warfare at the Pinnacle of the Roman Empire's Power* (Driffield, UK: Leonaur, 2012), 97.

² Franz Halder, *The Halder War Diary, 1939–1942*, ed. Charles Burdick and Hans-Adolf Jacobsen (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 446.

³ Tim Judah, "Ukraine: A Catastrophic Defeat," *New York Review of Books*, September 5, 2014, available at <<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/09/05/ukraine-catastrophic-defeat/>>.

⁴ Roger R. Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought: The Red Army's Military Effectiveness in World War II* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

⁵ Natalia Anteleva, "Obama Presses Pakistan over Bin Laden's Support Network," BBC, May 9, 2011, available at <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-13328083>>.

⁶ Jonathan Owen, *#Fail: Why the U.S. Lost the War in Afghanistan* (Fayetteville, NC: Blacksmith Publishing, 2017), 10–11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁸ James L. Gelvin, *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: One Hundred Years of War*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁹ Robert S. McNamara, with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 244.

¹⁰ Kerry Lynn Nankivell, "Afghanistan at a Crossroads: Transnational Challenges and the New Afghan State," in *Issues for Engagement: Asian Perspectives on Transitional Security Challenges*, ed. David Fouse (Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2010), 117–127.

¹¹ Raza Khan, "The Significance of Pak-Afghan Border Fencing," *Cutting Edge*, March 16, 2020, available at <<https://weeklycuttingedge.com/the-significance-of-pak-afghan-border-fencing/>>.

¹² Resolute Support Mission, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Mission," available at <<https://rs.nato.int/rsm/about-us/mission>>.

¹³ Tabasum Akseer et al., *Afghanistan in 2019: A Survey of the Afghan People* (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2019), 41.

¹⁴ Fatima Faizi and Fahim Abed, "Afghan War Casualty Report: November 2020," *New York Times*, updated November 26, 2020, available at <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/05/magazine/afghan-war-casualty-report-november-2020.html>>.

¹⁵ Kathy Gannon, "Accelerated U.S. Troop Withdrawal Rattles Afghan Allies and Adversaries Alike," *Military Times*, November 19, 2020, available at <<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/11/19/accelerated-us-troop-withdrawal-rattles-afghan-allies-and-adversaries-alike/>>.

¹⁶ *Fragility and Population Movement in Afghanistan* (Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, October 3, 2016), available at <<https://www.refworld.org/docid/582b0ccb4.html>>.

¹⁷ Deedee Derksen, *The Politics of Disarmament and Rearmament in Afghanistan*, Peaceworks no. 110 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2015), 44, available at <<https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/05/politics-disarmament-and-rearmament-afghanistan>>.

¹⁸ Declan Walsh, "Afghans Hold On to Their Insurance Policy," *Guardian*, October 18, 2004, available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/oct/18/afghanistan.declanwalsh>>.

¹⁹ Daniel Glickstein and Michael Spangler, "Reforming the Afghan Security Forces," *Parameters* 144, no. 3 (2014), 100.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

²¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 481.

²² Patrick Cockburn, "Iraq Executes 13 and Orders Hanging of Hundreds More Amid Fears of Isis Resurgence," *Independent*, June 29, 2018, available at <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-executions-hangings-isis-baghdad-kirkuk-haider-al-abadi-a8423416.html>>.