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## War by Other Means

'Invisible Armies,' by Max Boot



S.M./SZ Photo — The Image Works (1934-35)

Long March: Classic guerrilla warfare tactics helped bring Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communists to power.

By MARK MAZOWER

Published: January 25, 2013

For the counterinsurgency experts of a century ago, the extension of European empire into the Middle East offered exciting possibilities. The Italians bombed Libyans on the eve of World War I, but that was just the beginning. From 1919 onward, the fledgling Royal Air Force was busy dropping bombs on Afghan, Somali and Iraqi tribesmen. In 1926, French artillery shelled the center of Damascus. It was in this context that Elbridge Colby, an American Army captain, wrote an article, "How to Fight Savage Tribes," in order to educate his countrymen and challenge what he saw as their naïve faith in international law.

### INVISIBLE ARMIES

**An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare From Ancient Times to the Present**

By Max Boot

Illustrated. 750 pp. Liveright Publishing. \$35.

America has come a long way since then. As the country finds itself embroiled in one unconventional conflict after another, "precision" airstrikes, drones and the use of other robotic weaponry of ever increasing sophistication have steadily pushed the military further and further away from anything resembling classical notions of the laws of war. Today it is

those who seek to remind Americans of the importance of observing international law who are on the back foot.

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If we have anyone to thank for this, it is men like Elbridge Colby's son, William. He fought behind enemy lines for the O.S.S. in Nazi-occupied Europe, then set up anti-Communist stay-behind cells in Italy (unfortunately some went rotten and started blowing up civilians), before running the C.I.A.'s shadow war in Vietnam and ending up as the director of central intelligence. Colby junior belonged to that generation of Americans who came to terms with the world that gives Max Boot the title of his book "Invisible Armies." Indeed, they formed and fought in invisible armies themselves.

Not that invisible armies had been entirely absent earlier in American history; as Boot, whose previous books include "The Savage Wars of Peace," reminds us, the country owes its independence to a successful insurgency of its own. But it was the era of decolonization that turned the United States into a global policeman. Since then, Washington has spawned a vast counterinsurgency bureaucracy, complete with its own training schools, foreign exchange programs and research institutes. Even before the challenges posed by invading Afghanistan and Iraq, an awful lot of people were having to think very hard about how to fight "savage tribes." Like Elbridge Colby (who is not mentioned here), Max Boot wants to help them; unlike Colby's, his way is through history.

The result is a sweeping panorama that ranges over a vast terrain. It starts and finishes in the Middle East, but in between there is a span of some four millennia (give or take the odd century) and a journey that covers much of the globe. Though full of good stories readably told, "Invisible Armies" could have been pruned back a bit. The early history feels sketchy, and the use of terms like "counterinsurgency" and "guerrillas" anachronistic when applied to Huns, Picts or Romans. A distinction between empires and their irregular opponents runs through the book, yet in much of the millennium following the collapse of Rome the world's greatest empires were themselves former nomad confederacies, among them the Mongols and the Ottomans, who founded states lasting centuries and, because of their origins, always knew how to come to terms with, or utilize, irregular forces.

The story proper begins only with the emergence of certain modern conventions — the widespread use of standing armies in set-piece battles; the development of legal norms with international applicability — in the 18th and 19th centuries. In this strict sense, the history of guerrilla warfare is no more than two centuries or so old, and in fact Boot's book becomes a lot more effective once he enters the modern era.

Even then there is a great deal going on — some three separate subjects more or less rolled into one. We get the story of guerrilla warfare, and also an account of how soldiers have tried to combat it. And then, mostly at a tangent to the other two, there is the history of terrorism.

The effort to link guerrillas and terrorists does not come off. One has the impression that Boot himself was uneasy about the connection, because he begins with some sensible observations not only about the similarities between the two categories, but also about the differences. True, sometimes insurgents turn to terror tactics: EOKA in Cyprus, the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Tamil Tigers are three fairly recent examples. It is also common for powerful armies to decry their weaker opponents as terrorists — this is how the Wehrmacht described European partisans during World War II. But in reality, the two categories often have very little to do with each other. The history of 19th-century anarchist terrorism in Europe, for one, should not really be linked to a history of 19th-century insurgency. More recently, the Red Army Faction in West Germany and 17 November in Greece were terrorist groups, not insurgencies.

As for counterinsurgency, we certainly need a good intellectual history of it. The story of how and what American soldiers, among others, have learned, and forgotten, about fighting insurgencies is unquestionably important. Boot's cast of characters consists mostly of fairly familiar figures — wise men like the French marshal Hubert Lyautey, the British general Sir Gerald Templer, the quiet American Edward Lansdale and so on, ending up with David H. Petraeus himself. For many readers these portraits will serve as effective introductions. But the wider military cultures they sprang from, and the reasons



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they were sometimes listened to and sometimes not, get short shrift. There is nothing here, for example, to challenge the conventional image of General Petraeus as the man who put the United States military back on the proper path in fighting insurgencies, nor any means of understanding why he should have then apparently changed course when he moved to the C.I.A. in favor of a militarization of intelligence and extensive use of targeted assassinations. This shift is not incompatible with his earlier policies, but it is not easy to square with them either.

"Invisible Armies" really has two authors, sometimes working together, sometimes not. There is the popular historian, thoughtful, smart, fluent, with an eye for a good story and the telling quotation. And there is the policy adviser, the senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. The historian can see questions from different angles and is generally careful not to take sides. The policy adviser wants to be useful and to make the deployment of American power more effective. This is what explains the emphasis, in the last part of the book, on fighting Islamic radicalism. It also explains Boot's constant emphasis on sensible versus misguided ways to fight.

"Invisible Armies" thus forms part of a conversation that American policy makers, commentators and historians have been having with one another since Elbridge Colby's day as they grapple with the burdens of power. Its tenor is moderately upbeat: Boot believes lessons can be learned if only we look at history the right way. The war in the shadows may be here to stay, but we should not despair, he insists, because even now the odds are against the insurgents, provided armies tackle the job with patience, good sense and a consciousness of the importance of winning over hearts and minds. Terror, after all, is often self-defeating. I think Elbridge Colby would have approved.

*Mark Mazower is the author, most recently, of "Governing the World: The History of an Idea." He teaches history at Columbia.*

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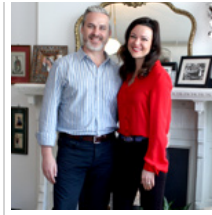


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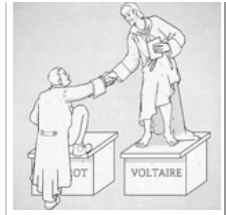


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