

# TURNING PAGES

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## Learning to Forget:

US Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq.

By David Fitzgerald. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013. Introduction, Notes, Pp. 285. Hardcover, paper, and Kindle formats available.

A book review by COL Charles R. Bowery, Jr.

David Fitzgerald's book, which began as his doctoral dissertation at University College Cork in Ireland, attempts to do two things, and succeeds in both. On one hand, the book provides a concise and useful survey of U.S. Army counterinsurgency (COIN) and stability operations from Vietnam through the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. On the other hand, it is first and foremost a story of the Army's complicated relationship, through its doctrine, with the concept and practice of counterinsurgency itself. Fitzgerald demonstrates

persuasively that successive generations of post-Vietnam Army leaders and thinkers have used our collective understanding of the Vietnam War to shape how we think about, and prepare to conduct, stability operations.

A series of chronologically-organized chapters lay out Fitzgerald's argument, beginning with Vietnam. This chapter focuses on the debate, continuing to this day, surrounding the two overall American commanders in that war. William Westmoreland was the commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam during the rapid expansion of the American war effort following the introduction of U.S. ground troops in 1965. General Creighton Abrams replaced Westmoreland in June 1968, and presided over the gradual drawdown and withdrawal of U.S. forces. Conventional wisdom has held that Westmoreland conducted a very conventional war in Vietnam, focused on traditional tenets of the "American Way of War," involving large maneuver units, firepower, and technology to reduce casualties,

while perceiving the enemy's conventional forces as the center of gravity. Abrams, this view holds, inherited a deteriorating situation from Westmoreland, and took steps to fight a "better war," focused on local security for the population of South Vietnam, pacification efforts in the countryside, and transition of warfighting responsibility to the South Vietnamese Army. Postwar academic debates have centered around whether or not the U.S. could have won the Vietnam War with an earlier and more comprehensive employment of small unit, population-centric COIN. Fitzgerald shows that in fact, both Westmoreland and Abrams possessed a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of the war than their critics have acknowledged, but that neither could overcome the cultural and institutional biases of the forces they led. In reality, the author concludes,

*"Given the strategic choices available to Generals Westmoreland and Abrams, it is difficult to see what action they could have taken that would have led to success. The enemy was too well supported, the South Vietnamese government too weak and corrupt, and US forces were too ill adapted for the war they fought. Those who argue that General Abrams turned a failing war around overlook both the similarities between his campaigns and those of Westmoreland and the limitations he faced in prosecuting his 'better war.' Westmoreland was not as ignorant of counterinsurgency or the importance of pacification as critics have argued, nor was Abrams as strong an advocate of counterinsurgency as some have contended."* (p.38)

More critically for the book's overall thesis, Fitzgerald assesses that the Army's failure in Vietnam led it to turn away from the war's lessons as it sought to rebuild a shattered force. The post-Vietnam army did this through its doctrinal revival of the mid-seventies and eighties. Led by Training and Doctrine Command, the Army focused its training, education, doctrine, and weapons acquisition programs on the Warsaw Pact threat in Europe, not coincidentally the threat that best aligned with the firepower-intensive, mechanized American way of war. But even as the Army

developed the doctrine of Active Defense, followed in the 1980s by Air-Land Battle, certain portions of the force, most notably special operations, continued to fight small wars and engage in "operations other than war" in Central America and in the Balkans without a concurrent intellectual basis in doctrine and education. The post-Vietnam decades saw a continued atrophy of the Army's doctrinal and educational knowledge of stability operations and COIN, to the point that when U.S. forces encountered a growing insurgency in Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 ground campaign, they approached the threat with a critical misunderstanding of its true nature. In this portion of the book, Fitzgerald constructs a devastating critique of U.S. strategy in Iraq, while highlighting tactical innovations, such as the use of Commander's Emergency Response Program funds, that eventually redeemed some of what was generally considered an irretrievable situation. To the book's larger point, though, these innovations proceeded from individual junior leader initiative and intelligence, not from a "learning institution" that was trained and prepared for COIN.

*Learning to Forget* is a cautionary tale of the dangers of retreating into an institutional "comfort zone" in a postwar or interwar period. In many respects, we are observing disquieting aspects of the same process now, with the end of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and a refocus in professional military education (PME) and the combat training centers on "decisive action" competencies. There is reason for hope that the Army will not make the same mistakes this time around, because the inclusion of "hybrid threat" scenarios demands that leaders understand the simultaneous and fluid interplay of conventional operations and COIN. The advent of Doctrine 2015 also provides us a unique opportunity to institutionalize the tremendous operational and tactical knowledge of COIN that we have gained over the last ten years. This book is an excellent resource for doctrine developers and PME faculty and staff, and will be of interest to all professional soldiers.

