

David and Goliath

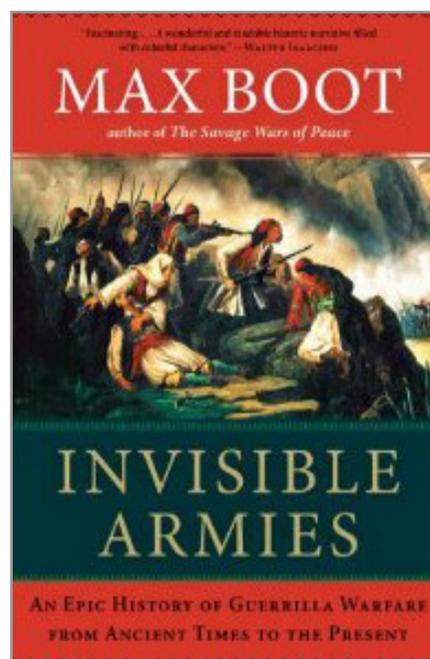
INVISIBLE ARMIES:

AN EPIC HISTORY OF GUERRILLA WARFARE FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO THE PRESENT

REVIEWED BY **MARTIN WALKER**

THE SIOUX AND APACHE TRIBES OF NORTH America had something profound in common with the colonists who established the United States. Like the Viet Cong, the Spanish irregulars who frustrated Napoleon, and the Afghan tribesmen who defeated the Soviet army and continue to challenge U.S. and NATO forces in our own day, they were guerrillas. The word “guerrilla” comes from the Spanish for “little war,” used to describe Spain’s 1808 uprising against Napoleon’s troops, but such a way of fighting is as old as human civilization itself. Guerrilla warfare is a rational response to overwhelming and organized force, the means by which the weak can frustrate, wear down, and overcome the strong, whether they be British troops at Lexington and Concord, French and later American troops in the Mekong Delta, or Hitler’s Wehrmacht in Yugoslavia.

It is the great merit of Max Boot’s



By Max Boot

Liveright

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study of guerrilla war that he stresses the venerable history of this style of fighting, starting with Thucydides’s account of how the Aetolian highlanders used their maneuverability and knowledge of the local terrain to defeat the hoplites of Athens in 426 BC. As soon as organized states began to form and to equip themselves with disciplined armies, they were opposed by enemies fighting in an older style. Boot writes, “Throughout most of our species’ long and bloody slog . . . warfare has been carried out primarily by bands of loosely organized, ill-disciplined, lightly armed volunteers who disdain open battle. They prefer to employ stealth, surprise, and rapid movement to harass, ambush, massacre, and terrorize their enemies



THE GRANGER COLLECTION, NYC

American guerilla Francis Marion, the “Swamp Fox,” operated in the wilds of South Carolina, as depicted in this 19th-century engraving, to help defeat the British during the Revolutionary War.

while trying to minimize their own casualties through rapid retreat when confronted by equal or stronger forces. These are the primary features both of modern guerrilla warfare and of primitive, pre-state warfare.”

This does not necessarily imply that the guerrilla is a primitive. The surviving gold artwork of the Scythians of the sixth century BC demonstrates that they were a sophisticated people who

preferred the nomadic existence that was suited to their grassland steppes. When the Persian emperor Darius demanded that they stand and fight, the Scythian leader Idanthyrsus replied, “We Scythians have neither towns nor cultivated lands, which might induce us, through fear of their being taken or ravaged, to be in any hurry to fight with you. . . . We shall not join battle unless it pleases us.”

Armies are large and complex organizations, with training academies for officers and their own medical, financial, judicial, and logistics services; and they are usually designed to fight other armies of similar type. Sometimes armies develop the necessary skills and doctrine in time to prevail over unconventional forces. At the turn of the last century, the British eventually defeated the Boers of South Africa, brilliant guerillas of Dutch descent who had trekked north from the Cape

Colony in a vain attempt to escape British rule. And British troops were able to quell a mainly Chinese and communist insurgency in Malaya in the 1950s. But they lost to the Jewish irregulars in Palestine in the 1940s, and spent 30 grim years after 1968 convincing the Republicans of Northern Ireland that democratic politics would be preferable to continued urban guerrilla warfare.

Given the extraordinary range of

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experience the British Empire accumulated in fighting various guerrilla campaigns, Britain's armies have a better record than most. But their leaders could still be convinced, as in Palestine, that the possibility of success was too remote and too expensive to justify the effort. The Obama administration, having reviewed the results of a decade of war, seems to have made a similar appraisal of the current Afghan campaign.

Professional military men usually find such calculations difficult to make. They are trained to apply force and accept casualties in order to achieve military victory. A great merit of democratic government is that the politicians can overrule the generals and apply political considerations to the overall strategy, which is what President Richard Nixon did in Vietnam, reducing the American investment in the draining conflict and leaving another president to swallow defeat in 1975, when Saigon finally fell. Sometimes the politicians find it hard to persuade the soldiers. French president Charles de Gaulle was confronted with a military coup and then a prolonged terrorist campaign by the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète, a French paramilitary group, when he gave up on the cause of French Algeria in 1961.

For a political leader, the decision to pursue or to end a war comes down to a cost-benefit analysis: Can the political price of military defeat be afforded? In wars of choice, when little save prestige and moderate strategic advantage are at stake, the price is often worth paying if the opponent is sufficiently determined to keep inflicting costs and casualties. Opponents tend to understand this, and their target is not simply the enemy forces but their political will. This was

how Vietnamese revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh fought the French and the Americans. It was also how George Washington endured the winter at Valley Forge, before going on, with help from the American guerrilla Francis Marion, known as the Swamp Fox, to outlast the British resolve to continue the war. (Boot makes the neat point that the term “public opinion” made its first appearance at this time, in the works of historian Edward Gibbon. As Boot comments, “A parliamentary government could not prosecute a war that did not enjoy popular backing.”)

For the guerrillas, the stakes are usually much higher than they are for their enemies. The guerrillas are fighting wars of necessity rather than of choice, against foreign (or heretical) domination or intolerable rule. The Swamp Fox wore a leather hat with a silver plate engraved with the motto “Liberty or Death.” But one contradiction inherent to guerrilla warfare is that in order to survive, guerrillas usually have to impose at least as draconian a level of discipline and punishment as their opponents do. The guerrilla cannot afford to give quarter to traitors, spies, or deserters; and atrocities against enemy troops and their civilian sympathizers are common in waging war on the enemy’s morale and political

will. The line between a guerrilla and a terrorist can be a fine one.

Marion, a guerrilla of genius who had learned his trade fighting the Cherokees, raided British and Loyalist outposts, attacked their supply trains, and eluded capture by fleeing to the South Carolina swamps. Directed by South Carolina governor John Rutledge to target escaped slaves who had joined the British in return for their freedom, Marion was also ordered to execute slaves who had helped the British with supplies or intelligence. It is worth recording that at least one of Marion’s own slaves ran away to fight for the British, a detail excised from the hagiographic Hollywood film *The Patriot* (2000), in which Mel Gibson’s character was based in part on Marion.

Another contradiction is that in order to achieve full success, the guerrilla usually has to build a conventional army, or at least find an allied army for the final, decisive battles. It was North Vietnamese regulars who took Saigon, not the Viet Cong, and regular French and American forces who forced the British surrender at Yorktown in 1781, just as it was Wellington’s troops who finally ejected from Spain the Napoleonic armies that had been shredded by six years of guerrilla war.

And a hazard of guerrilla fighting is that organized armies can themselves exploit guerrilla tactics, as was done, for example, during World War II, when Britain's Long Range Desert Group sent commando troops deep behind German lines in North Africa to destroy warplanes at their bases, a trick the British repeated in the Falkland Islands in 1982. Britain wasn't the only country to use such tactics during World War II: The Red Army fought a conventional war against the Wehrmacht while partisans behind German lines attacked the railways and logistics bases on which the Germans depended.

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The lesson of the endless examples Boot cites is that guerrillas can be militarily defeated, if a conventional army is itself prepared to go guerrilla and form small, fast-moving units for hunting down the enemy, often with the help of

local trackers and renegades. Boot notes that in 1886 General Nelson Miles finally hunted down the Apache fighter Geronimo with "a picked force of 55 soldiers, 30 mule packers, and 29 Apache scouts" after "one of the most arduous operations in the history of the U.S. Army."

Boot made his name with *The Savage Wars of Peace* (2002), an accomplished history of America's small wars that made him a useful source of advice for American generals in Iraq and Afghanistan. *Invisible Armies*, after an exhaustive but brisk canter throughout the small wars of history, brilliantly sums up the lessons of the centuries. Guerrilla warfare is deeply political, since the fighters' lack of formal organization means they depend on civilians for food and intelligence. The civilians thus become a strategic factor in the battle, wooed and also targeted by both sides, and sometimes removed from the battlefield altogether, as in the Boer War, when the British were finally able to defeat the Boer farmers by removing their wives and families to concentration camps. As the cases of the Irish Republican Army and the Basque separatist force known as the ETA show, guerillas can sometimes be bought off with political concessions. But the conflict does not simply hinge on winning the hearts and minds of the

local population from whom the guerrillas draw fighters and support. Just as important is the state of the people's physical security and their assessment of which side is likely to prevail.

Guerrillas must be fought tactically on their own terms, hunted down, denied bases and support, and forced to keep moving and to abandon (or kill) their wounded. Strategically, however, they are fought through the politics of effective local administration. The British won in Malaya because they took the landless Chinese laborers from their shantytowns and installed them in well-run and well-guarded "New Villages" with medical services and sanitation, an arrangement that made the Chinese amenable to the daily searches that ensured that no rice was being smuggled out to the guerrillas. The British dried up the sea in which the guerrillas swam, even as their own guerrilla-style troops hunted down the bands relentlessly, one by one. When the Americans tried to do the same in South Vietnam, their good intentions were frustrated by corrupt local administrations that stole funds and supplies and extracted bribes or free labor from occupants. The "strategic hamlets" cordoned off by U.S. forces became unpleasant for their inhabitants and thus counterproductive.

Thanks to its experience against Iraqis and Afghans, and to the wisdom of thoughtful soldiers such as General David Petraeus (who was the driving force behind the excellent new U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual), the Army should now be well equipped to wage guerrilla warfare and to pursue the joint civil-military operations such conflicts require. Ironically, it is seeking to do so just as American politicians appear intent on withdrawing from Afghanistan. The public seems to have had quite enough of such distant fights, and the rise of a strategic peer competitor in China is focusing U.S. military attention back on conventional strategies. This may be a mistake. An army often finds itself fighting a war for which it is not well prepared, since that is precisely the kind of war an intelligent enemy will choose to wage. And if there is one arena where the hit-and-run and clandestine tactics of the guerrilla seem likely in the future, it is the electronic swamps and jungles of cyberspace. The next Swamp Fox may be armed with a laptop. ■

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