



## Essential Reading

Important New Strategic Literature

# Contrarian Lessons in Surrogate Warfare

*Contra Cross: Insurgency and Tyranny in Central America, 1979-1989.* By William R. Meara. Annapolis, Maryland, 2006: US Naval Institute Press. ISBN: 1-59114-518-X. 192pp, hardcover, 16 photographs, 2 maps, notes, index. \$26.95.

**T**HE ONGOING COALITION CONFLICTS AGAINST INSURGENCY in Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated just how difficult a challenge conventional expeditionary forces face in adapting to asymmetric threats. Nowhere is this difficulty of adaptation greater than within the US Armed Forces, currently the most powerful and technologically-advanced military in the world.

What is significant is that failure to adapt at a theater, or even tactical, level engenders dysfunction at a strategic level, and creates deeply-paralyzing or divisive morale problems which eventually pervade the political structures of democratic societies. Indeed, the damage to (or impact on) the society is often evident even before the damage caused by the failure to adapt to asymmetric warfare shows up in the overall capabilities of the military forces itself. The result can often be a “hollow force”: a monolithic defense structure, incapable of acting against the adversaries who besiege it daily, and yet waiting, becoming more bureaucratic by the day, for a “worthy [symmetric] adversary” who may come but once in a lifetime, if at all.

It is the persistent failure of much of the US conventional military leadership as well as the US political leadership to understand how to successfully prosecute warfare against a fluid, informal adversarial structure, operating within a broader psychopolitical environment, in Iraq (and Afghanistan) which is the Achilles Heel of the US as a strategic power into the 21st Century.

These are lessons which should have been learned after the Vietnam War ended in the 1970s. After all, the Vietnamese, the Soviets, and the leadership of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) all emphasized that they had defeated the US in the media, and by sowing disenchantment (and narcotics) within US and Western society; in other words, by irregular, contextual, and psychopolitical stratagems. But peace after the Vietnam War — as with the peace which followed World War I and World War II — merely allowed the rump of the conventional US forces to re-assert the formal, highly-bureaucratized doctrine and methodologies

which suit a rigidly hierarchical command and control system. Today’s “Net-Centric Warfare”, for example, is designed to use modern technologies, such as computerization and communications, imagery, and the like, to give true battlefield advantage to the field commanders, down to platoon level. Instead, it has been used repeatedly to afford centralized, remote micro-management of conflict, denying fluidity and cultural insinuation in the conflict zone by the forces there, where field officers should be able to exercise the command mandates of their commissions.

Significantly, many of the failures attributed to outgoing US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld were caused by his determination to bring change and greater flexibility to the US defense structures. He may have had other failings, but his attempt to force change on the services is what created many of his enemies within the uniformed leadership, those who are reluctant to change, and to learn the lessons of history.

What better time, then, for a book about an aspect of the “lost history” of the Cold War to emerge, giving profound lessons from the battle front on the business of asymmetric warfare.

William R. Meara’s new book, *Contra Cross: Insurgency and Tyranny in Central America, 1979-1989*, is a profound contribution to thinking about strategic doctrine, as the US — and all major industrial powers — face a watershed of introspection following the US electorate’s decision to essentially retire from the global battlefield. Meara’s great contribution is the fact that his book recounts the impact of doctrine and the strategic environment on the battlefield of that “small” war against the Nicaraguan *Sandinista* leadership which projected one the last aspects of the

Soviet grand strategy against the West before the end of the Cold War.

The book is also timely in that it reminds a new generation of strategic thinkers of the real origins of the Sandinista Government which has now returned to Nicaragua, following the re-election of former *Sandinista* Pres. Daniel Ortega — now 60 years old — with the November 5, 2006, Nicaraguan Presidential election. But more than that, Meara’s book, told from the perspective of a “boots on the ground” true Cold Warrior, has the true grit of realism. It is not a book of theory, but a book which shows how theory translates on the ground in an asymmetric conflict.

William Meara was a US Army Special Forces officer who trained as a Foreign Area Officer (FAO), and then specialized in, and relished, psychological operations. His field of expertise was Central America. His book cover, and the name of his book, reflect the “*Contra Cross*”, the *Contra* crucifix memento made from a neutralized M-16 5.56mm ammunition by wounded *Contra* veterans in the hospitals which housed them after their personal war was over. Meara carried with him the memento, and the draft of his book, for a couple of decades before deciding to finally publish his writings.

The US Armed Forces and Government — operating mostly from Honduras, supporting the Nicaraguan *Contras* against the *Sandinistas* — were at this time still nursing their wounds after Vietnam. Many of the US military policies being pursued in Central America were based on either lessons learned from Vietnam and other Cold War theaters, or on a stubborn persistence in the view that a monolithic military machine — the Green Machine of the Army, as Meara reminds us — could roll over any adversary with “superior firepower” and technology. Clearly, the mainstream US Army had little time for psychological warriors or for grubby little wars. But there were those who understood this kind of warfare, such as the “crusty old SF (Special Forces) team sergeant” who embraced

what he called “Low Intensity, High *Per Diem* War”.

Meara, who left the US Army for the US Foreign Service (he remains a US diplomat) where he essentially continued his liaison and support work with the *Contras* of the ERN (Army of the Nicaraguan Resistance) until the end, highlights the profound importance of understanding the language and culture of the environment in which any war is being conducted. He knew that he had made the breakthrough when, as he put it, he was able to “swear like a *Contra*”, and be able to converse at a truly meaningful level with the forces and cultures in which he had to operate. His time in Nicaragua, before he became part of the US-supported war supporting the *Contras*, gave him a good understanding of the *Sandinistas*, who took their name from the 1920s nationalist Nicaraguan fighter, Augusto César Sandino.

But before he was engaged in supporting the *Contras*, Meara was also engaged in US Army support operations in El Salvador where he also learned not only how Latin American armed forces shaped their priorities and doctrine, but also how guerilla forces, such as the Faribundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), functioned. He also faced the more enduring adversary: US Army “milicrats”.

Apart from the profoundly timeliness of the book, as Sandinista Daniel Ortega returns to power in Nicaragua — this time ostensibly within the framework of an ongoing process of democratic elections (we have yet to see whether he abides by the process, or whether he continues to think of “one-man, one-vote, once” as the process of re-entrenching pseudo-marxist-leninist governance) — *Contra Cross* has real lessons for warfighters and planners considering Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, or Sudan.

William Meara also highlights the distinctions which often exist between the actual combatants in the guerilla wars and their political leaders, citing the case of the *Contras*, whose political leadership was based in Miami, Florida, where sophistry and political expediency prevailed to the detriment of the forces in the field. Meara highlights the disservice done to the Nicaraguan rebellion by the *Contra* political leadership in Miami, which was the principal interface with the US political system.

Meara’s final chapter, *Contrarian Conclusions*, outlines some of his maxims for conducting irregular or asymmetric warfare, and particularly the aspect of this which is conducted by great powers at arm’s length: surrogate warfare. But before that, Meara had to defend, even resurrect, the image of the *Contras*, noting: “My positive sentiments about the Nicaraguan resistance put me clearly in contrarian territory. It would be hard to exaggerate the extent to which the *contras* were vilified in the United States.”

He added: “But I think the world

should be proud of the *contras*. The young peasants of Nicaragua refused to be enslaved by communism. They waged a courageous struggle against great odds. They persevered when the situation looked very bleak. They sacrificed for the good of their people and the future of their country. They were noble and honorable freedom fighters. The *mucos* refused to be like Longfellow’s ‘dumb, driven cattle’. They were heroes in the strife. ... I give the *contras* most of the credit for the elections held in Nicaragua in February 1990.”

Equally, in saying that he felt that “Americans should be proud of what the Reagan Administration did and tried to do in Central America”, he added: “But I don’t think that everyone has the right to feel good about their actions during the Central American conflict. I think those Americans who gave aid and comfort to the *Sandinistas* and the Salvadoran communists should feel guilty. They were on the wrong side in the Cold War.” These were, he said, what Lenin called “useful idiots”.

In his “lessons learned” in that concluding chapter, Meara notes: “Cultural factors really are the equivalent of a terrain feature that cannot be ignored [in surrogate wars].”

And: “Fluency in foreign languages is the indispensable key to understanding.” “Regional expertise and experience are crucial. People working on insurgencies shouldn’t be doing so on their first trip to the region.”

He went on: “Americans need to be aware of the institutional biases and shortcomings which make it difficult for us to deal with foreign insurgencies. We need to realize that our big, high-tech military machine — our big catapult — might not be much use against an insurgency built around people like Miguel Castellanos [real name Napoleón Romero García, an El Salvadoran FMLN guerilla who later defected to the Government]. I saw many signs of our weakness in this area: the tank traps we were building in the ‘Choluteca gap’ [in Honduras, to face literally a non-existent cross-border threat from *Sandinista* tanks]; our big bucks, high-tech approach to support for the Salvadoran armed forces; our army’s conviction that ‘any good officer’ can work on insurgency. I came to the conclusion that our powerful military is a blunt instrument. It is very capable of performing its primary mission (destroying enemy military forces), but is poorly-suited for cross-cultural battles for foreign hearts and minds.”

“Finally, when we get involved in foreign insurgencies,” Meara says, “we should always strive to conduct ourselves in a manner consistent with our national values ... we should remember our history. We should remember that we were helped by foreigners when we were fighting for our independence. We should remember that we too were once embattled

farmers. ... we should not think of these people [the surrogate fighters] as disposable pawns.”

*Contra Cross* is full of personal insights and anecdotes “from the field”, and is an inspiring and timely read. It is, in fact, essential reading, not just for those psyops and special forces practitioners who already embrace asymmetric warfare, but for the policymakers and those who have found their careers in the bureaucracy of military leadership. That is where the lessons need to be learned.

We all should thank William Meara for carrying this document with him over the decades, and giving it to us at this particular time. — *GRC*

## Asymmetric Classics

**Counter-Guerrilla Operations: The Philippine Experience.** By Napoleon D. Valeriano and Charles T. R. Bohannan; Foreword by Kalev Sepp. ISBN: 0-275-99265-9 (Hardcover); 0-275-99266-7 (paper). 228pp, appendices, *illust.*, *index*. (Originally published 1962.)

**Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice.** By David Galula. Foreword by John A. Nagl. ISBN: 0-275-99269-1 (hard); 0-275-99303-5 (paper). 106pp, *index*. (1964)

**Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency.** By Roger Trinquier. Foreword by Eliot A. Cohen. ISBN: 0-275-99267-5 (hard); 0-275-99268-3 (paper). 94pp, *illust.*, *index*.

**Communist Revolutionary Warfare: From the Vietminh to the Viet Cong.** By George K. Tanham. Foreword by Michael A. Sheehan. ISBN: 0-275-99263-2 (hard); 0-275-99264-0 (paper). 130pp, *index*. (1961)

All re-published in 2006 by Praeger Security International, Westport, Connecticut. All available in hardcover (\$74.95 each), paperback (\$29.95 each), or ebook.

**P**RAEGER SECURITY International has made the timely move to re-publish four of the great military manuals written on irregular warfare. Not surprisingly, they all were originally published in the 1960s, when lessons of the French wars in Vietnam and Algeria were emerging, when the lessons of the communist insurgency in Malaya were becoming clear, and when the US experience in Vietnam was demanding new doctrinal thinking.

The lessons from the long guerilla wars of the Philippines, which preceded the Algerian and Vietnam wars, were re-examined for lessons.

All four books are outstanding, and indeed essential, reading for military officers and intelligence analysts today; their lessons are profound. Praeger took the step of having new forewords written for each book. As Kalev Sepp said in his foreword to *Counter-Guerrilla Operations: The Philippine Experience*: “In the 21st Century these lessons remain important. And they always will.”