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In Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present, Max Boot, an expert in military and national security studies, chronicles the history of unconventional warfare. Boot's comprehensive study spans more than five thousand years, covering Jewish uprisings against the Romans, to modern conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Boot's work is notable for its exceptional blend of history, political science, and military strategy. He emphasizes that the weaker side in unconventional warfare must have the support of the people and use international media to influence public opinion. Additionally, unconventional forces must have outside help from some source. Historically, these common threads have run through centuries, and without these factors, unconventional forces cannot succeed.

Three major examples from Boot's study include the American Revolution, where colonial forces could not have stood up against the British Empire without French support and a general lack of will among British citizens and politicians. After World War II, European colonial powers armed local Nationalists to fight the Axis powers. However, when many of these people decided to form independent nations, they used the same weapons against former colonial masters. In the United States, the Vietnam War provides another example, where the communist powers provided outside aid to North Vietnam, and our country's commitment to the conflict was limited by political considerations and a lack of support from the people.

Boot's work highlights the importance of understanding unconventional warfare and how it has evolved over time. It is a valuable resource for students, researchers, and practitioners of military and national security studies.
of understanding of the military tactics which should have been employed against unconventional forces.

General George Washington was inclined to fight a conventional war against the British forces in the American Revolution. Fortunately, as Boot illustrates in his book there were other commanders who had different approaches, especially in the Southern colonies. Although Yorktown was a conventional victory of major proportions, the battle was won with major support from the French. European empire builders tried conventional tactics to hold on to colonies after World War II, and General William Westmoreland’s strategy in Vietnam did not achieve the military success which was represented to the American people during the conflict.

Max Boot points out, quite convincingly, that the myth of unconventional forces being almost impossible to defeat is totally false. The majority of the examples in history show these weaker forces can be overcome with the appropriate military strategy and the required considerations for political and cultural sensitivities. He records British General Sir Henry Clinton’s comment on the need “to gain the hearts and subdue the minds of America.” After Vietnam the phrase “hearts and minds” has become a cliché, but that does not make the need to achieve these goals less important.

Boot’s discussions of some of the well known unconventional warfare figures are as interesting as the wars themselves. As illustrated in this work, the most successful unconventional warfare leaders on either side of a conflict have exceptional personalities and extremely strong wills. Boot illustrates this point with such examples as Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, T.E. Lawrence, Ord Wingate; and of course, our most successful commander in Iraq and Afghanistan, General David Petraeus. Many successful leaders in the fight against unconventional warriors are somewhat eccentric and all seem to offend the more conventional leadership in military hierarchies. There is a bit of lore often repeated in military circles, “we always prepare for the last war.”

What does this mean for those who serve in national security positions in intelligence and counterintelligence? First, every military and national security professional should read Max Boot’s book. It is also a cliché to state “those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” Nonetheless, this is a true statement and for the sake of our nation we would all do well to examine these historical studies to pick up the threads and lessons we can apply in our changing world. Who is better equipped to help military commanders understand the culture, customs, and subtle shifts in perception, of civilians in a conflict than the specialists in these fields? Irregular warfare cannot succeed without the support of the larger population and understanding that population, winning the people over, and employing the proper military tactics, are the keys to defeating these unconventional forces.

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