

Book Guide

Invisible Armies

In this book, CFR Senior Fellow Max Boot offers a comprehensive history of guerrilla warfare and terrorism, and relates lessons of the past to current national security policy considerations. Teaching notes by the author.

Summary

Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present offers the most comprehensive history of guerrilla warfare and terrorism to date. From the ancient city-states of Mesopotamia to present-day Iraq and Afghanistan, Max Boot guides readers through five thousand years of low-intensity conflict. Through a combination of deft storytelling and colorful portraits—from the iconic figures of Mao Zedong and Che Guevara to lesser-known but equally fascinating characters such as Orde Wingate and Edward Lansdale—Boot brings the history of insurgency and counterinsurgency to life as never before. Along the way, he turns conventional wisdom on its head: Contrary to popular belief, irregular warfare has been the norm over the ages; so-called conventional conflicts between uniformed, national militaries are the anomaly. Boot also explicitly relates history lessons to current national security policy considerations, lending the book contemporary significance for soldiers, students, policymakers, and the general public.

This book is suitable for undergraduate and graduate courses on military history, security studies, and U.S. foreign policy.

Discussion Questions

Courses on Military History

1. What, if anything, is unconventional or irregular about guerrilla warfare?
2. What is the difference between guerrilla warfare and light-infantry operations in conventional warfare?
3. What are the lessons of General Petraeus's counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq?
4. What does the British experience of empire teach us about counterinsurgency? Where (and when) were the British successful, where (and when) did they fail, and why?
5. Why did U.S. strategy fail in Vietnam? Why did the Soviets fail in Afghanistan? Why did the French fail in Indochina and Algeria? What did these events have in common and what, if any, conclusions can be drawn about the factors that influence military failure?
6. Why did counterinsurgency tactics succeed in Northern Ireland, Malaya, and Colombia, among other places? What did these counterinsurgencies have in common and what, if any, conclusions can be drawn about the factors that influence success in counterinsurgencies?
7. What are the most important strategic advantages an insurgency can gain? What do these suggest for counterinsurgent strategy?

Courses on Security Studies

1. What do insurgencies across a wide array of historical contexts have in common? How do power dynamics define them?
2. How might technology affect the insurgencies of the future? How has it affected them already?
3. Which counterinsurgent strategies have had the most success, and why?
4. What does "population-centric" counterinsurgency mean? Why is it effective?
5. How successful have insurgent and terrorist groups been historically, and how has this changed over time? What might account for changes?

Courses on U.S. Foreign Policy

1. What does the history of guerrilla warfare suggest about the challenges the future holds for U.S. military and foreign policy?
2. What is the role of legitimacy in insurgency and counterinsurgency? What are some common sources of legitimacy?
3. What is the role of public opinion in guerrilla warfare? How and why has public opinion's role changed over time? What unique challenge does this present for democratic states?
4. How have popular perceptions of guerrillas changed over time?
5. Was the "surge" in Iraq a success? Why or why not?
6. What is the legacy of the Iraq War?

Essay Questions

Courses on Military History

1. Compare and contrast the experiences of the French in Indochina and the British in Malaya in the 1950s. In your analysis, consider the following: What strategies did they adopt, and what were the outcomes? How did individual leaders shape these counterinsurgencies?
2. Max Boot calls guerrilla warfare "the universal war of the weak." Evaluate this statement with respect to historical contexts that have given rise to irregular warfare, the relationship of guerrillas to their enemies, and their record of success.
3. If the United States were to fight the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq all over again, what tactics would lead to more desirable outcomes? Use specific examples, both from these conflicts and others, to make your argument.

Courses on Security Studies

1. Is it possible for guerrillas to achieve political success without military victory? Drawing on concrete examples, discuss the role of public opinion, the local populace, and ideology in determining the success of insurgencies.
2. What are the similarities between tribal warfare, guerrilla warfare, and terrorism? What are the differences? How might these differences inform strategic responses to them?
3. What does history suggest about the role of "soft power" in defeating insurgencies? How can it be balanced with military force? Which is more important in achieving victory?

Courses on U.S. Foreign Policy

1. How and why should the history of guerrilla warfare inform American defense policy in the coming decades?
2. Defend or refute the following statement: Foreign powers can never win against determined insurgencies because they cannot sustain the political will needed to defeat them.
3. What is the relationship between counterinsurgency strategy and nation-building? Is nation-building by outside powers possible?

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