American Revolution Reinvents Guerrilla Warfare

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In the new book *Invisible Armies*, author Max Boot traces the role of guerrilla warfare through history, starting in the Roman Empire all the way up to Afghanistan. He tells Steve Inskeep the American Revolution was the turning point in guerrilla warfare.

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STEVE INSKEEP, HOST:

(Reading) Listen my children and you shall hear of the midnight ride of Paul Revere.

That's the start of a poem that tells a story almost every American kid learns in some form. In 1775, a Boston silversmith rode to warn Americans colonists that British troops were on the way. Barely trained American militiamen shot the elite British force to pieces.

So, let's think about this for a moment. The British were the world's policeman - smart and technologically advanced - while the Americans were the insurgents.

The historian Max boot cannot help but notice the irony.

MAX BOOT: Today, we're used to having Americans soldiers be the forces of the government. And, of course, in our revolution, we were the insurgents and the British were the role of the counterinsurgency. And, in fact, many of the strategies which the American rebels used against the British are similar in many ways to the strategies now being used against us around the world.

INSKEEP: Now, the American revolutionaries eventually did form a regular army. But guerrilla tactics played a huge role in securing their independence. Max Boot sees modern lessons in that story, as told in "Invisible Armies," his new history of guerrilla warfare.

What were the strategies that the American rebels used when they were rebels?

BOOT: Well, it first of all, comes down to not coming out into the open where you could be annihilated by the superior firepower of the enemy. The British got a taste of how the Americans would fight on the very first day of the Revolution, with the shot heard around the world, the Battle of Lexington and Concorde, where the British regulars marched through the Massachusetts countryside.

And the Americans did not mass in front of them but instead chose to slither on their bellies - these Yankees scoundrels, as the British called them - and fired from behind trees and stone walls. And not come out until the kind of open gentleman's fight that the British expected, and instead, took a devastating toll on the British regiment.

INSKEEP: Well, you tell us that the British in the Revolutionary War realized that they had this problem. And that they weren't fools, they tried to be creative, to pick out elite forces, to conduct certain types of raids. Why did it not work for them in the end?

BOOT: They were facing a much more sophisticated guerrilla foe than they had been used to facing. They had experienced fighting the Indians, for example, in North America. What the British are really not ready for in the American Revolution was the marriage between these hit and run tactics, and a very potent political strategy designed to undermine the will of the British people to continue the battle.

Documents like Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" and the Declaration of Independence were aimed not just at winning support in the colonies for the Revolution, they were also very quickly exported to Great Britain, to make the case to the British people as to why they should not be fighting their American brothers. And that had a very potent impact in the long run, in undermining the support in Britain for continuing this long and costly war.

INSKEEP: Something that feels very familiar is your description of the British trying to fight a civil conflict against a civilian population, and understanding that they need to treat people gently - if they can.

BOOT: Well, there is a division in the British ranks, as there often is. Many of the leading British generals thought that they should try to win over the hearts and minds of the Americans - a famous phrase which was first used by General Sir Henry Clinton, who is one of the British commanders in North America. But his desire to win over the hearts and minds of the Americans was undermined by many of his harsher subordinates.

So the British did not have a consistent policy of conciliation, nor did they have a consistent policy of harshness. Instead, they were confused and there was this strategic muddle that, as much as anything, led to their defeat.

INSKEEP: So I'm thinking of lessons here that any general should know, that guerrilla armies can be very effective; that they're hard to fight; that public opinion is very important; that winning over hearts and minds can be fraught with peril. There are certain lessons and carry on.

BOOT: To my mind, the American Revolution is in many ways a turning point in the history of guerrilla warfare. Because prior to that, before the advent of any kind of democracy, unelected emperors and kings could pursue counterinsurgency campaigns almost indefinitely. I mean, just imagine what would've happened if the American colonists had been rebelling against the British Empire, but against the Roman Empire.

No matter what setbacks the Roman Empire would've suffered on the battlefield, they would've come back and they would've crucified George Washington and the Founders, quite literally. But the British are not able to do that because Great Britain, in the 1770s and 1780s, was no longer this absolute monarchy. It now had to respect the power of public opinion as expressed in parliament. And when parliament turned against the war in 1782, and they voted to discontinue offensive operations, that was it.

INSKEEP: Did the modern day United States military establishment forget those lessons in recent years?

BOOT: Well, this is a recurring problem, that armies do not like fighting guerrilla wars. They regarded as being beneath them, because they don't regard guerrillas as being worthy enemies. Unfortunately, they keep getting forced into these guerrilla wars. And what normally happens is they do learn how to fight after a period of trial and error, and after suffering costly defeats. But then as soon as they leave that war behind, they tend to forget what they've learned.

INSKEEP: Let me ask you as someone who, if I'm not mistaken, supported the Iraq War at the beginning. Did civilian leaders and experts also overlook the costs, or the potential costs, of plunging into a foreign country and risking this kind of extended conflict, with all the disadvantages that you lay out in your history?

BOOT: I think there was a lot of wishful thinking at the start of the Iraq War, by a lot of people in the military and in the civilian world, including me. You know, a lot of people did not anticipate how prolonged the war would be war, or how much resistance there would be, or how clumsy the U.S. would be in trying to deal with that in ways that actually exacerbated the conflict, rather than solving the problems.

INSKEEP: You know, Max Boot, as I'm sure you know very well, armies often think they have a technological fix to this guerrilla problem. And there does seem to have been a radical change in warfare in recent years, because of the prevalence of drones.

Has warfare changed because of that technological change?

BOOT: I would be very skeptical of the idea that there are technological fixes to such deep-rooted problems. You always hope that you can push some button, blow somebody up and end a war. History doesn't usually cooperate in that kind of arrangement. Sure, you can kill a few leaders by remote control. But then they tend to get replaced. And you don't really have a good fix on who your enemy is, unless you have a lot of human intelligence; unless you have a very good understanding of the local culture - the area of where you fight. And all of that is very, very hard to develop - almost impossible to develop from long range.

So drones can be an effective tactic in a very limited way. But they are not the end-all and be-all. They are certainly not going to be a substitute for the kind of counterinsurgency expertise, for the kind of language and cultural expertise that you need to deal, effectively, with deep-rooted insurgencies.

INSKEEP: Max Boot's book is called "Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare From Ancient Times to the Present."

Thanks very much.

BOOT: Thanks for having me on.

INSKEEP: You hear him on MORNING EDITION from NPR news. I'm Steve Inskeep.

RENEE MONTAGNE, HOST:

And I'm Renee Montagne.

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