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OCCASIONAL PAPER

# Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence

## The U.S. Military and Counterinsurgency Doctrine, 1960–1970 and 2003–2006

Austin Long

Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

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## Summary

The publication of a new COIN doctrine manual in late 2006 was widely heralded as an indication that the U.S. military was finally coming to understand the problems it has recently faced in Iraq and Afghanistan. This interpretation assumes a tight linkage between doctrine as written and operations conducted. As one way to test this proposition, this paper compares modern COIN doctrine and operations with those of the 1960s.

In the 1960s, two periods of COIN doctrine can be observed. The first is 1960 to 1965, the period after John Kennedy was elected President but before U.S. combat troops were committed to Vietnam. The second is 1965 to 1970, the period of heaviest U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. In both cases, COIN doctrine as written by both the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps emphasized the role of the population (so-called hearts and minds), civil-military relations, small-unit operations, intelligence gathering, and related concepts. Yet operations seldom matched this written doctrine; instead, the military attempted to attrite the insurgency through large-scale operations and heavy reliance on firepower. In short, doctrine as written and operations conducted were not tightly linked.

As at least a partial explanation for this weak linkage, this paper posits a deeper set of organizational concepts and beliefs that has a much greater influence on operations than written doctrine. While a set of beliefs can often be helpful to organizations in conducting their preferred missions, it can be detrimental in other contexts. Much of the U.S. military prefers high-intensity warfare, a mission for which the organization is mentally and materially well prepared. However, mental preparation for this mission makes the military poorly suited to COIN.

Altering the set of beliefs oriented toward high-intensity warfare will require more than just new doctrine and some additional professional education. It will require significant reorientation of the services both mentally and materially. If correct, this paper casts doubt on the military's ability to truly be a "full-spectrum force," because attempting to optimize for the full spectrum of conflict may produce a force that is not particularly good at any one aspect of that spectrum.