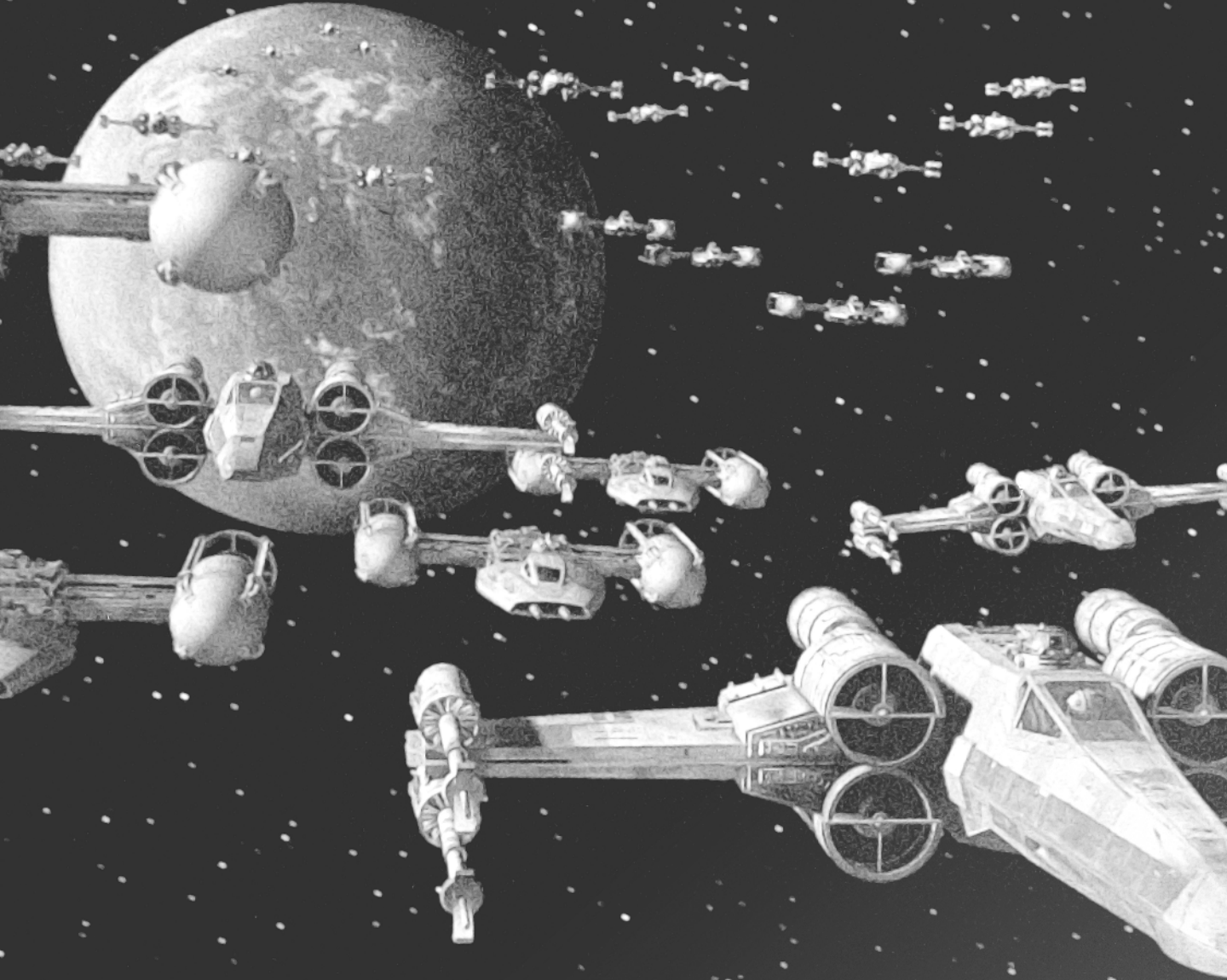


PART I

“Only Imperial
Stormtroopers Are
So Precise”

THE WARS IN STAR WARS



“The more you tighten your grip,
Tarkin, the more star systems will slip
through your fingers.”

—Princess Leia Organa, *A New Hope*



1

Why Rebels Triumph

How “Insignificant” Rebellions Can Change History

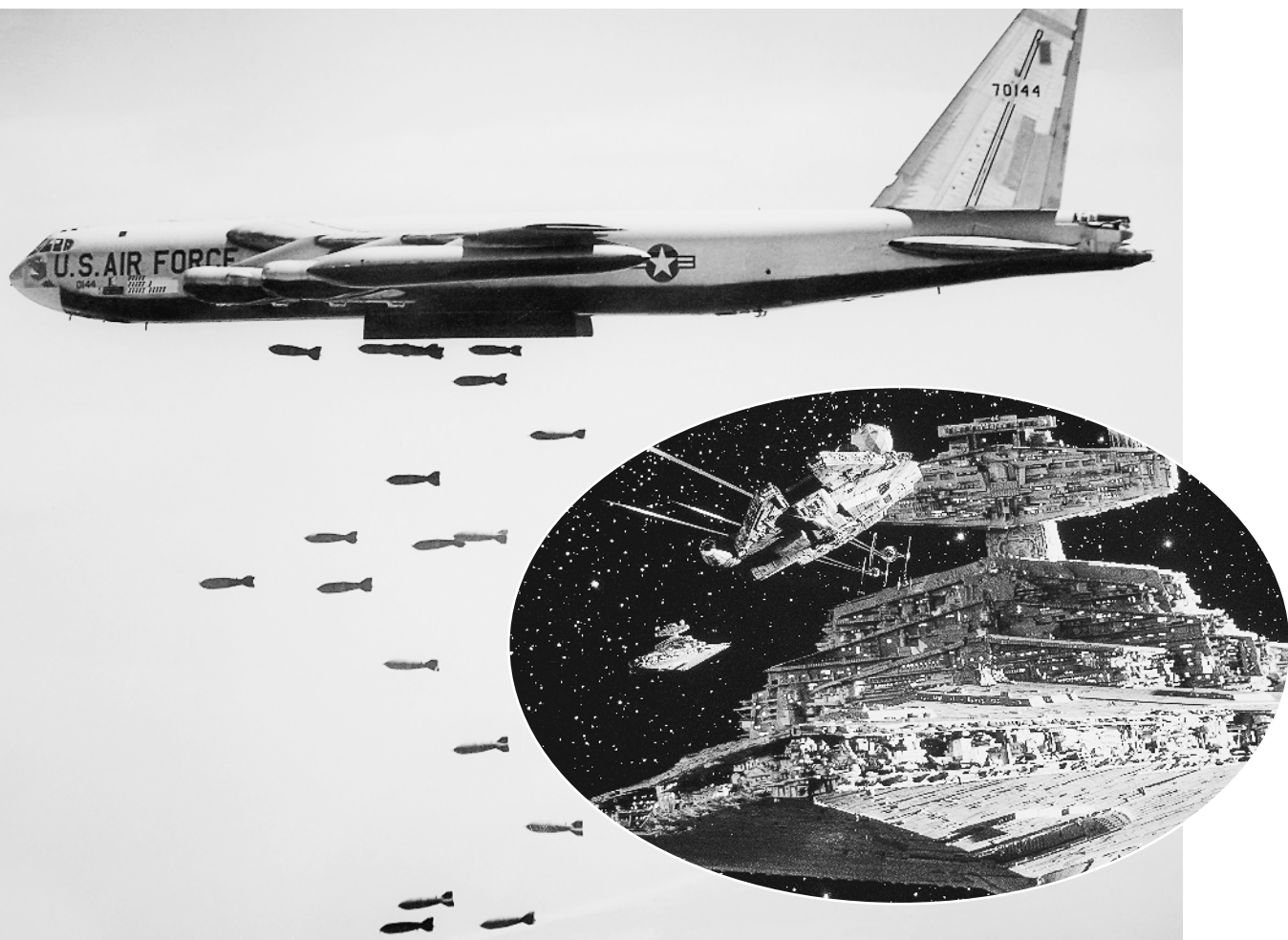
William J. Astore

In the climactic battle scene of *Return of the Jedi*, an openly contemptuous Emperor boasts to Luke Skywalker that he is about to witness the end of his “insignificant rebellion.” Such was not the case, as the Rebels end up triumphing against the longest of odds. Interestingly, in 2003, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, the U.S. commanding general in Iraq after Operation Iraqi Freedom, dismissed the growing insurgency in that country as “strategically and operationally insignificant,” an assessment that was proved very much wrong by subsequent events.¹ Rebellions are indeed often very significant and very difficult to defeat, especially when they are driven by powerful ideologies and sustained by committed believers willing to sacrifice all.

Whether in real life or in the *Star Wars* galaxy, history is not always on the side of the bigger battalions.

B-52 dropping bombs over Vietnam; (inset) Imperial Star Destroyer and TIE fighters pursuing the *Millennium Falcon*. (*The Empire Strikes Back*)

Whether in real life or in the *Star Wars* galaxy, history is not always on the side of the bigger battalions. Consider the American Revolutionary War. The British Empire had a larger and more professional army than the American rebels, a far larger and more powerful navy, and a wealth of recent military experience, yet the upstart rebels prevailed. To cite just one year, in 1776 Britain's General William Howe landed thirty-two thousand troops at Staten Island supported by ten ships-of-the-line and twenty frigates manned by ten thousand sailors. Clearly outclassed, George Washington and his Continental Army suffered serious setbacks in New York and New Jersey but still managed to keep a viable presence in the field. Sustain-



ing them throughout these defeats was a shared belief in the cause of freedom, as made manifest by that year's Declaration of Independence.

Next, consider the Vietnam War. In the 1960s, the American Empire was a global superpower with enormous firepower and space-age technology, yet "pajama-clad" Vietnamese insurgents armed with relatively primitive AK-47s prevailed. Indeed, the Vietnamese had nothing remotely comparable to American military might. A caption stamped on the back of an official U.S. Air Force photo of a B-52 Stratofortress dropping bombs on Vietnam illustrated the "Goliath versus David" theme: "The high-flying, heavy bomber delivers bomb loads of more than 38,000 pounds in strikes against Viet Cong strongholds in the Republic of Vietnam." Yet as awesomely destructive as B-52 bombing raids were, the enemy remained unbowed.²

Now, consider the *Star Wars* galaxy. An empire with enormous reach and firepower, with a ruthlessness to match the planet-shattering abilities of its Death Star wonder weapon, meets its demise at the hands of a precocious farm boy from Tatooine wielding a primitive lightsaber and a Rebel Alliance that has little more than a ragtag fleet and a fervent belief in the righteousness of their cause.

Princess Leia briefing the snowspeeder pilots on Hoth.
(*The Empire Strikes Back*)



Beneath all of the thrills of lightsabers, Star Destroyers, and Death Stars, the true audience attraction of *Star Wars* is the triumph of hope over oppression at the longest of odds. Indeed, George Lucas titled Episode IV (the original *Star Wars* movie released in 1977) *A New Hope*. That hope was based on the compelling power of belief in *freedom*: freedom from the tyranny of a power-mad Emperor and his murderous henchman, Darth Vader.

This belief is first manifested in the original trilogy by Princess Leia Organa. Throughout the original *Star Wars* trilogy, a determined Leia never wavers in her belief in political freedom, a belief that sustains her quest to restore the Old Republic and its empowerment of individual autonomy. So strong is her belief that it survives torture, administered at the orders of Vader (later revealed as her father), as well as severe personal and organizational setbacks (the capture and freezing of her beloved, Han Solo; the rapid retreat under fire of the Rebels from the Hoth system at the beginning of *The Empire Strikes Back*). It is Leia's backbone that stiffens the resolve of the young Luke Skywalker and that provides a serious counterpoint to the "scoundrel" Han Solo, and it is she who gives the pep talks to pilots before they set off into deadly combat against the Empire. Leia's belief in, and allegiance to, the cause of freedom and restoration of the Old Republic is the force multiplier that proves decisive; such belief is the *sine qua non* of successful rebellions, whether in the galactic wars of long ago in *Star Wars* or in the real events of the American Revolutionary and Vietnam wars.³

Keys to Rebel Success: A Trilogy of Wars

Looking solely at the balance of forces in the American Revolutionary War, in the Vietnam War, or in *Star Wars*, one would be excused from concluding that in each case, the rebels had no chance of prevailing. The material odds overwhelmingly favored the British in the 1770s,

the Americans in the 1960s, and the Empire after the collapse of the Jedi and the rise of the Sith Emperor. The results of all three of these wars, factual and fictional, remind us that “might” does not always “make right.” As Abraham Lincoln famously noted in his Cooper Union address in 1860, being on the side of the “right” may also make might.⁴ Belief in being in the right can sustain a rebellion even at its lowest ebb, whether it be George Washington and the Continental Army at Valley Forge in 1777, the North Vietnamese after the Tet Offensive of 1968, or the Rebel Alliance after Darth Vader’s capture of Han Solo and defeat of Luke Skywalker at the end of *The Empire Strikes Back*.⁵

Rebels, in other words, can be vanquished only when their ideas and idealism are extinguished, when their faith in the movement is destroyed. That said, even with a just cause, it is hardly easy for rebels to defeat an enemy in possession of superior material resources and seemingly overwhelming firepower. To borrow an expression from Yoda, rebels must unlearn what they have learned; they must believe they are capable of the impossible, a tall order but one they must sustain through the most harrowing of events and the most trying of times. For although one may not be able to kill an idea, one can kill enough adherents to discourage the rest; such unbounded ruthlessness is not unknown, either in history or in the *Star Wars* galaxy (consider here the annihilation of Leia’s home planet of Alderaan by the Empire’s Death Star).

Put in concrete terms, rebel movements seek to advance an ideology and to overthrow an existing order by following a strategy known to military theorists as “People’s War.” Often associated with Mao Zedong, who put its maxims to work in his successful bid to gain control over China during and after World War II, People’s War is compelling in its boldness.⁶ Its goal: the overthrow of an existing order and its replacement with a rebel-led new order.

Think here of the American Revolutionary War. Its “rebels” spoke of inaugurating a *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, a new order of the ages, an idea



Mao Zedong, successful practitioner of People's War, with Richard Nixon in 1972.

they enshrined in the Great Seal of the United States.⁷ As misguided and megalomaniacal as he proved to be, Mao Zedong succeeded in inaugurating a new, communist order in China. Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam sought independence from colonial domination and the imposition of a communist system in a united Vietnam. And in *Star Wars* Leia and her allies seek nothing less than the overthrow of a totalitarian dictator and a recasting of galactic rule along democratic, rather than autocratic, lines; a rule by republican consensus rather than by imperial fear and fiat.

The rebels' goal in People's War may be easy to state, but the means to achieve a "new order" often prove incredibly complex. These means typically encompass social, economic, psychological, military, and especially political dimensions. As long as the rebels remain convinced of the rightness of their cause, strength of will and endurance usually favor them. Because they are fighting for a belief and an ideal, a quasi-religious

calling, they often outlast their opponents, who may be fighting strictly out of duty and for little more than a paycheck.

Consider here the motivation of Hessian mercenaries in the American Revolutionary War, of American draftees in Vietnam, or of the nameless and faceless Imperial stormtroopers of *Star Wars*, and contrast this with the “Give me liberty or give me death!” motivation of the American Sons of Liberty, of revolutionary Viet Cong cadres, or of the Rebel Alliance in *Star Wars*.⁸ The latter believe that “the Force is with them,” that their cause is just and that they are on the right side of history. This “force” sustains them through the darkest of days and is ultimately the difference between victory and defeat.

Leia and her allies seek nothing less than the overthrow of a totalitarian dictator and a recasting of galactic rule along democratic, rather than autocratic, lines; a rule by republican consensus rather than by imperial fear and fiat.

People’s War: A Trilogy of Phases

Military theorists see “People’s War” as passing through three phases.⁹ In Phase One, the rebels (or insurgents, hence the term *counterinsurgency*) attempt to build a political infrastructure, while seeking allies among the people, which they do in part by spreading their ideas (or propaganda, depending on one’s point of view). Every insurgent—every rebel—should be a “true believer” and thus an ambassador for the cause. At the same time, due to their comparative military weakness vis-à-vis their opponent, they seek to establish safe havens, often on the periphery of the state or the empire (or the galaxy), in inaccessible or impoverished areas where they can draw sustenance from the misery or alienation of the people. The more difficult the terrain for their enemy to negotiate, the better for the rebels, whether it be the narrow streets and forested trails of New England of the 1770s, the central highlands and triple canopy jungles of Vietnam of the 1960s,



U.S. soldiers
confront the punishing
terrain of Vietnam.

or the blast furnace heat of Tatooine and the freezing wastes of Hoth in the *Star Wars* galaxy of long ago.

In this political/cadre-building phase, intimidation may be necessary, to include fending off rivals to the rebel cause. Serious arm-twisting may be needed to convince fence-straddlers (such as an ambivalent Han Solo) to join the cause. Once revolutionary cadres are formed, the rebels take action that is aimed both at undermining the legitimacy of the established order and at rallying more recruits and converts to the cause. Naturally, such actions will be labeled by the prevailing powers as terroristic and treasonous. Thus, in the original *Star Wars*, while operating under a thin veil of diplomatic immunity, Leia steals secret plans to the Empire's latest wonder weapon, the Death Star, an act of treason, as seen from the perspective of the Empire's leaders. Her





The “inhospitable” terrain of Hoth. (*The Empire Strikes Back*)

mission to Tatooine is a classic case of “Phase One” operations, for her goal is to recruit General Obi-Wan Kenobi to join the Rebel Alliance in an attempt to destroy the Empire’s latest terror weapon. By the Imperial definition, however, she herself is a weapon of terror, a traitor plotting seditious acts against a legitimate government of which she is a privileged representative.

Leia, of course, sees herself not as a terrorist but as a freedom-fighter. For her, the Empire is a tyrannical monstrosity and is therefore illegitimate. In the view of American revolutionaries, Britain’s King George III had similarly made tyrannical demands and had therefore forfeited his “divine” right to their allegiance. In the case of the Vietnam War, the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese allies saw Americans as foreign invaders and their South Vietnamese allies as American stooges.

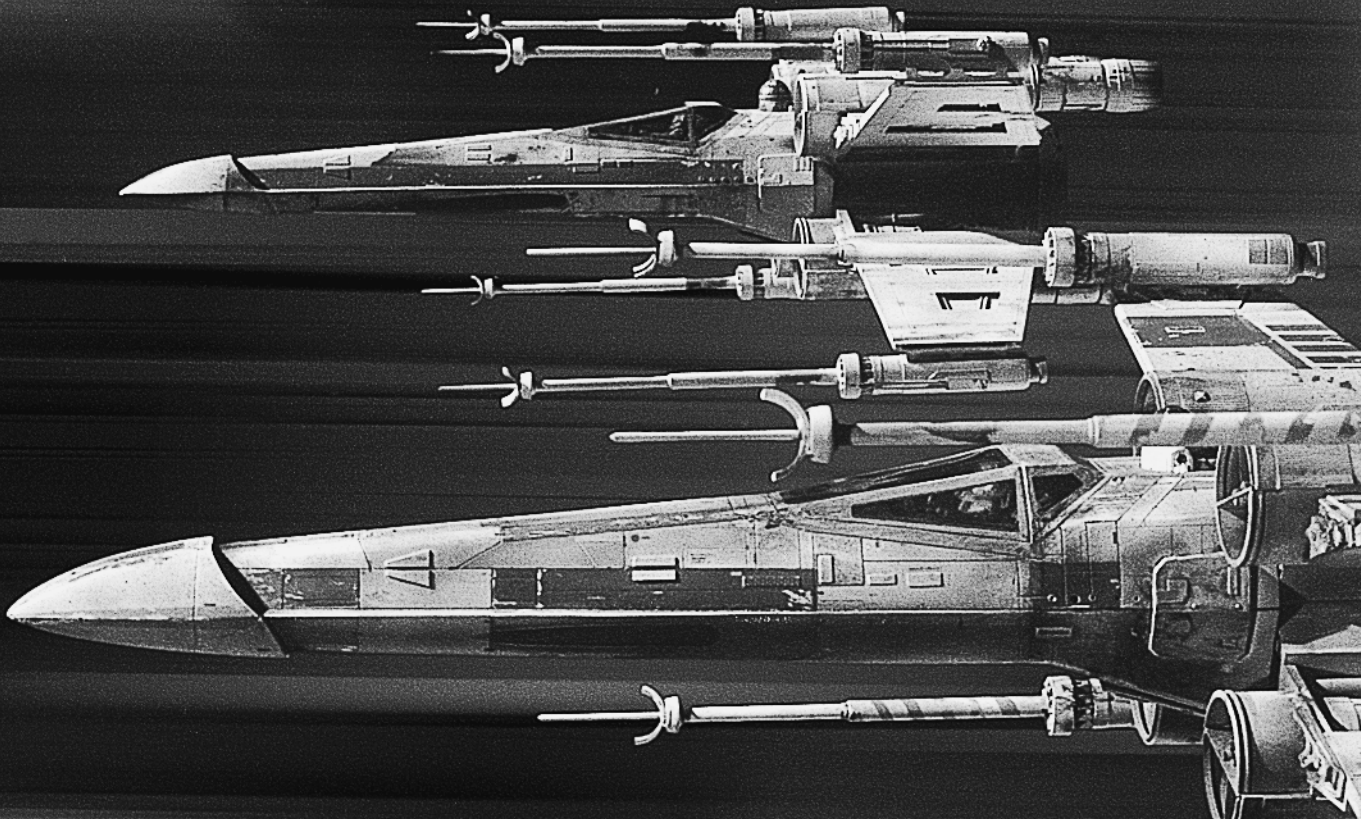
Yet it is not enough to organize against illegitimate power: one must act to overthrow it. In all three cases, the rebels recognize that

Leia, of course, sees herself not as a terrorist but as a freedom-fighter. For her, the Empire is a tyrannical monstrosity and is therefore illegitimate.

risky acts—acts that they know will be denounced as terroristic by the powers-that-be and punished as such—are needed both to weaken the empire and persuade more people to join the rebel cause.

Hence, when enough recruits are enlisted and enough arms are gathered, rebels may then move on to Phase Two of People's War: larger-scale action (to include military operations) to gain control over the political landscape, while further weakening the legitimacy of the establishment. This is when so-called guerrilla tactics come to the fore.¹⁰ Such tactics are typically of the small-unit, hit-and-run variety and place a premium on surprise and political impact. They are designed

Attack of the Rebel
Alliance on the Death
Star. (*A New Hope*)

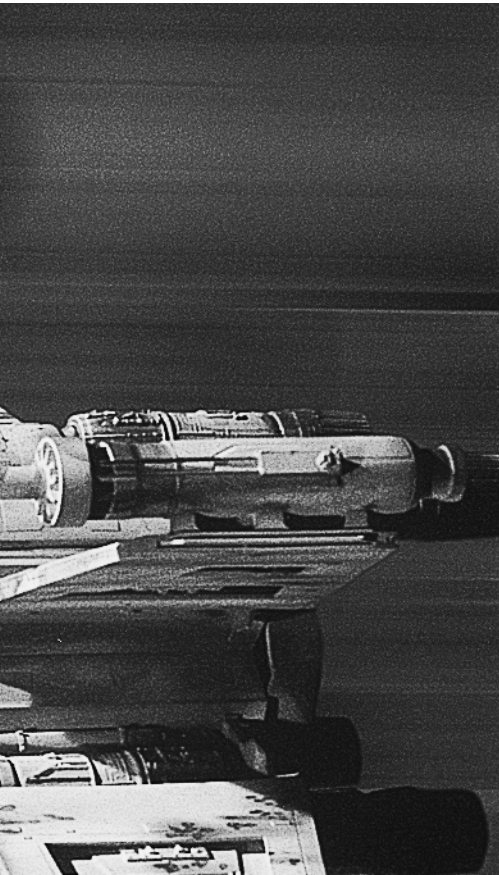


not so much to defeat an empire militarily but rather to wear it down, to erode its political will, while perhaps provoking it as well into making further and harsher reprisals that, in breeding resentment and accelerating recruitment among the people, ultimately serve rebel ends.

Thus, the main target of guerrilla operations is not the empire's troops but rather the will and legitimacy of its leaders, although striking at a high-profile military target is often the best way to target that will and legitimacy. Consider the original *Star Wars* movie. The attack against the Death Star is a classic case of guerrilla tactics, of Phase Two of People's War. The rebels obviously have no "death star" of their own

to wield against the Imperial version. Their only hope is a David versus Goliath scenario: a well-timed, well-aimed shot by an intrepid fighter that somehow manages to fell a giant.

At the same time, Leia's very act of stealing the plans to the Death Star touches off a harsh Imperial reprisal that proves vital to the success of the attack and, ultimately, to the Rebellion in general. Although unknown to Leia, Luke Skywalker is key to the Rebellion, but he is at first reluctant to join Obi-Wan Kenobi and leave his home. Yet on discovering the ruthless murder of his aunt and uncle by a vindictive Empire, Luke willingly follows Kenobi into a new life of training to become a Jedi to avenge these murders (and, ultimately, to avenge his real father's seduction to the dark side of the Force, as orchestrated by the Sith Emperor).¹¹





American Revolutionary forces accept the British surrender at Saratoga, a surprising Phase Two rebel victory in 1777.

Whenever outnumbered and out-gunned rebels stand and fight against a militarily superior enemy, they take a gamble. In *A New Hope*, if the Rebel Alliance had failed to destroy the Death Star, the Rebellion would have been crushed. The Rebels' resolute yet highly risky decision to stand and fight pays off when Luke Skywalker is able to call on the Force to make a kill-shot against the Death Star, seconds before this planet-pulverizing machine is able to deploy its own kill-shot against the Rebel base. This stunning victory, achieved at the longest of odds, demonstrates that the Rebels are a force to be reckoned with.

Like the Battle of Saratoga in the American Revolutionary War or the Tet Offensive in the Vietnam War, the Battle of Yavin that ends with the Death Star's destruction is a key turning point: the "end of the beginning" of an incredibly audacious but ultimately successful rebellion.¹² Winning a major battle, after all, is usually not enough to win a war; powerful empires do not give up their power easily, and they do indeed strike back. When they do, rebel forces, obeying the dictums of People's War, must be prepared to retreat when necessary, to fight delaying actions, to ratchet back military operations, even to go into hiding, licking wounds and marshaling reserves to fight when the timing and conditions are again opportune.

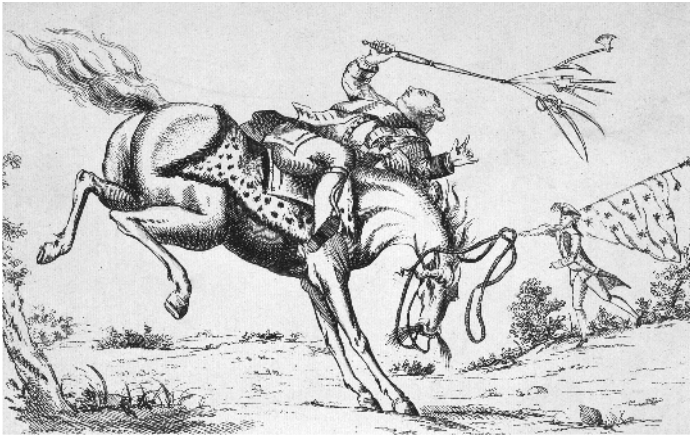
In any rebellion, opportunism is key; so, too, is boldness, with the most dangerous step for rebels to take occurring in Phase Three, the final phase of People's War. In this phase, rebel forces risk it all in a major military assault whose aim is to overthrow the existing order. In *Star Wars*, we witness Phase Three operations in *Return of the Jedi*. In

the climactic battle of the trilogy, the Rebels marshal all of their forces in a conventional, all-out assault on the Imperial fleet and its latest iteration of the Death Star. The assault proves to be a trap, one that is sprung by an Empire in full confidence of its colossal power. Yet in Luke the Rebels possess a secret weapon of their own: a leader who gains access to the very core of the colossus but who refuses to betray the Alliance, despite promises of unimaginable power.

In a sense, Luke is a Trojan Horse inserted into the command nexus of the Empire. The Emperor (wrongly) sees him as Vader's natural successor, his new henchman and future enforcer of Sith hegemony. For the Emperor to have turned Luke to the dark side would have been like Britain's King George III turning George Washington back into a Loyalist, or Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger convincing Ho Chi Minh to give up the fight and accept a divided Vietnam under an American umbrella. Considered in these terms, the Emperor's fervent

Luke as Trojan Horse confronts the Emperor and Darth Vader.
(*Return of the Jedi*)





The rebel American horse unseats its imperial master, King George III, in this 1779 satirical drawing.

For in the end, Luke succeeds in turning his father, Anakin Skywalker, back to the Rebel cause. His father ceases to be Darth Vader and returns, if only for a brief moment, to his former place as Anakin Skywalker, the chosen Jedi protector to the Old Republic. This turnabout, a true revolution, marks the symbolic return of republican autonomy and a political process enabled by free debate guided by a philosopher-warrior elite (the Jedi), of which Luke is now the sole surviving member and Master.

This return to the “old ways,” this triumph of the Rebellion that ends in the recruitment of Vader to the cause and the death of the Emperor, highlights a vital reality of People’s War: its flexible, often nonsequential, nature. For example, while conducting guerrilla operations (Phase Two) against a prevailing power, rebels also continue to build their infrastructure, conduct acts of terror to delegitimize the state, and spread propaganda, all of which are associated with Phase One of People’s War. Even during Phase Three—the general offensive—rebels continue efforts associated with the previous two phases. If Phase Three fails, as it did for the North Vietnamese in the Spring Offensive of 1972, the rebels simply return to the previous two phases, biding their time until the next opportunity presents itself for a general offensive, which it did for North Vietnam in 1975.

desire to turn Luke makes perfect sense, for he is the linchpin of the Rebellion. When the Emperor fails in the attempt, however, his true evil blazes forth in a murderous fury that is undeniable even to Vader, who is moved at long last to break free from the Emperor’s powerful grip and save his son.

Interestingly, the powerful climax of *Return of the Jedi* represents a return to Phase One of People’s War.

The complex and nonlinear nature of People's War was expressed by the historian John M. Gates when describing the U.S. military's difficulty in coming to grips with the decisive North Vietnamese invasion of 1975. In his words:

American conventional war doctrine does not anticipate reliance upon population within the enemy's territory for logistical and combat support. It does not rely upon guerrilla units to fix the enemy, establish clear lines of communication, and maintain security in the rear. And it certainly does not expect enemy morale to be undermined by political cadres within the very heart of the enemy's territory, cadres who will assume positions of political power as the offensive progresses. Yet all of these things happened in South Vietnam in 1975.¹³

Even in cases where the rebels overestimate the weakness of the enemy and lose large-scale battles, they have the option, if managed correctly, to slip back into the earlier two phases of People's War, striving to weaken the established order before the next general offensive aimed at securing victory. What ultimately sustains them through setbacks and dark times is belief: a belief that may become a quasi-religion, a force (or the Force, if you will) that multiplies their efforts, making them far more powerful than the sheer size of their army would indicate on a bloodless balance sheet.

In *Star Wars* and in the two historical analogs (the American Revolutionary and Vietnam wars) considered in this chapter, we witness the triumph of People's War against seemingly long, if not impossible, odds.¹⁴ One can almost hear the voice of Yoda intoning, "Judge me by my size, do you? And well you should not. For my ally is the Force, and a powerful ally it is." A small, seemingly "insignificant," rebellion can grow to remarkable strength when the proper strategy is followed, the right recruits are marshaled, and a compelling belief provides a luminous, force-multiplying vision.



Yoda lifting Luke's X-wing out of the swamp on Dagobah. (*The Empire Strikes Back*)

After Yoda lifts Luke's X-wing fighter out of the swamp in *The Empire Strikes Back*, a chastened Luke gasps and then says, "I don't believe it." "That is why you fail," the wizened Jedi Master replies. Princess Leia believes in the Rebel cause of freedom; Luke Skywalker comes to believe; so, too, in the end does Darth Vader; and that is why they do not fail.

Why Empires Lose: A Trilogy of Reasons

Well, it is a little exaggerated. We're applying an \$18,000,000-solution to a \$2-problem. But, still, one of the little mothers was firing at us.

—U.S. pilot in Vietnam¹⁵

History, whether in a purely fictional-cinematic form as in *Star Wars* or in the very real dramas of the American Revolution and Vietnam, is fascinating precisely because one can imagine alternative events and

endings.¹⁶ By imagining how the Empire could have prevailed in *Star Wars*, how the British could have put down the American rebellion, and how the United States could have achieved its objectives in Vietnam, one can draw some suggestive lessons and have some fun. Yet in all of these cases, three critical flaws hampered imperial attempts to maintain their grip. In order of importance, these were overconfidence that led to underestimation of the enemy, indiscriminate reprisals that led to renewed rebel opposition, and an overreliance on technology and firepower that led to civil and nonmaterial factors being undervalued to victory.

People's War, however, is no fail-safe strategy to victory; it is difficult but not impossible for empires to counter. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the United States defeated a serious insurrection in the Philippines, and after World War II, Great Britain put down a communist insurgency in Malaya.¹⁷ Rebels, in other words, do not always win. Yet key to any lasting imperial triumph is never to underestimate the rebel enemy. As Luke Skywalker says to the Emperor in *Return of the Jedi*, "Your overconfidence is your weakness." The Emperor's riposte "Your faith in your friends is yours" proves untrue, but only with help from a most unexpected quarter (more on the Ewoks in a moment).¹⁸

Consider the U.S. war in Vietnam. Until 1968, Americans were nothing but confident that they would ultimately prevail in defeating the communist insurgency, thereby preserving a (somewhat) independent South Vietnam. Indeed, despite clear evidence to the contrary, such as the decisive North Vietnamese victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, U.S. military officers agreed with President Lyndon Johnson that North Vietnam was basically a "raggedy-ass little fourth-rate country," which had no hope of prevailing against the world's foremost superpower.¹⁹ That events soon proved otherwise was due in large part to American overconfidence. Similarly, the British believed in 1776 that a sufficient show of force would cow the American rabble into dour acceptance of the established order, but ill-managed

efforts to split New England from the rest of the colonies succeeded only in driving more colonists from a wider area into the ranks of the rebels.

When it comes to resisting rebel insurgencies, overconfidence often emerges as a cardinal, even fatal, flaw of empires. As overconfident empires stumble, dashed hopes for quick and easy victories often lead to internecine fighting and savage reprisals that only exacerbate previous setbacks at rebel hands. In classic People's War, both sides vie for the hearts and minds of the people, who are much more than passive spectators. In a classic metaphor used by Mao Zedong, the people are the "sea" in which the rebel "fish" swim. If an empire can make the sea do its bidding, the fish cannot thrive and have nowhere to hide. Yet if the rebels can wrest control of the sea from the empire, the latter will wither and eventually die.

In the American Revolutionary War, as well as in Vietnam, enough of the people turned against the empires involved to allow the rebels space in which to swim and thrive. The people did so often because of heavy-handed, even murderously violent, repression and reprisals by these empires that generated resentment, recruitment, and rebel resurgence. Such a dynamic is captured in the *Star Wars* trilogy. As mentioned earlier, Luke joins the Rebellion only after the Empire murders his innocent aunt and uncle. Though left unsaid in the original *Star Wars*, it is logical to assume that the Empire's apocalyptic destruction of the planet Alderaan generated as much sympathy for Leia and the rebellion as it terrified wavering star systems into toeing the Imperial line. And in *The Empire Strikes Back*, Lando Calrissian sells Han Solo to Vader, only to join the Rebel cause when Vader ups the ante, insisting as well on the surrender of Leia and Chewbacca, a demand he backs up with a threat of a permanent military occupation of Lando's profitable but less-than-entirely-legal gas mine.

Because unprincipled empires believe only in themselves and their own prerogatives of power, they have a habit of acting imperiously, even viciously, when they are frustrated in their (overconfident)

designs—a flaw that opportunistic rebel troops exploit to their benefit. When not intimidating or torturing or killing them, empires may also be oblivious to the “little people” within them, another weakness that a crafty rebel force can readily exploit. Consider events on the forest moon of Endor in *Return of the Jedi*. Its indigenous civilization of Ewoks is literally beneath the Empire’s notice. The Ewoks themselves are not so much persecuted as they are shoved aside or flattened under the feet of Imperial Walkers. In the eyes of the Empire, a subject society such as the Ewoks that relies on spears, rocks, booby traps, and similar “primitive” weapons and techniques is a nonfactor.

It is not so much what the Empire does to the Ewoks as what it fails to do that proves decisive to the Rebellion. On first encounter, the Rebels themselves are not immune to dismissing the Ewoks as feckless “primitives” and therefore of little use. Finding themselves snared in a booby trap, Luke and Han confront a band of Ewok hunters whose small stature and cute furry faces initially amuse more than they impress. Amusement turns to concern as Luke and Han are trussed up and marched off. It quickly becomes apparent they are to become the main course at a feast in honor of C-3PO, the translator-droid whose golden sheen makes him something of a minor deity among the Ewoks.



Ewoks in action against Imperial stormtroopers, using rocks to disrupt their mission. (*Return of the Jedi*)

George Lucas has said that he had the Viet Cong in mind when he created the Ewoks, and one can see why.

The torturous terrain of Vietnam was alien to U.S. soldiers, but not to members of the Viet Cong, like this man.



Yet it is not the Force that Luke employs to levitate C-3PO that wins the Ewoks over to the Rebel cause. Rather, it is the respect the Rebels come to show for the Ewoks, as they share with them their collective struggle against the Empire. In a light-hearted and seemingly inconsequential moment, Ewok tribal elders proudly proclaim that Luke, Han, Leia, and the rest of the Rebel team are now members of the tribe, an event that has profound implications for the victory to come.

George Lucas has said that he had the Viet Cong (VC) in mind when he created the Ewoks, and one can see why.²⁰ Like the VC in the Vietnam War, the Ewoks are smaller in stature than their enemy and possess little in the way of advanced weaponry (whereas the VC dug pits and employed bamboo Punji sticks as weapons, the Ewoks have a

hankering for logs, swinging, and rolling, as well as nets). Like the VC, what the Ewoks do possess is superior knowledge of the local terrain and an ability to blend into that terrain. Their eventual revolt demonstrates that clever tactics aided by the element of surprise can prove effective even against an enemy that possesses superior technology and devastating firepower.

Despite their stature and low-tech weaponry, there are just enough Ewoks to confuse an elite Imperial force at a crucial moment, a diversion that enables the Rebel Alliance to disable the new Death Star's protective energy field. Without this brave (and costly) diversionary assault by the humble Ewoks, the crucial offensive would have failed, even if Luke had somehow still prevailed in his personal duel with the Emperor.



Indeed, the Battle of Endor sequence in *Return of the Jedi* illustrates the Rebel Alliance's growing sophistication as they combine all three phases of People's War to disrupt the Empire's entire system of command and control simultaneously. Whereas the Empire is strait-jacketed by its dependence on the Emperor's personal attention and control, the Rebels rely on decentralized execution and improvisation within a general strategic framework. At Endor, the Rebels launch a combined arms assault by collected forces (the Rebel fleet and the Ewoks) against the full span of Imperial conventional forces, while selected elites of committed Rebel units (Rogue Squadron and Lando Calrissian against the new Death Star; Han, Leia, and the commandos against the Imperial Legion on Endor; even Luke against the Emperor and Vader) engage, disrupt, and ultimately destroy crucial command nodes. With the Emperor fully engaged in personal combat with Luke, Imperial forces are bereft of timely and authoritative instruction to supplement the orders already in place. Thus, they fail to develop a coherent and appropriate response that would allow them to bring their superior strength to bear.²¹

However transitory it proved, the Ewoks' success on Endor highlights another key weakness of many materially driven empires: an overreliance

The Millennium Falcon and other Rebel ships confront the Imperial fleet at the Battle of Endor. (*Return of the Jedi*)

on technology and firepower as being decisive. Consider the U.S. military in Vietnam. It employed every advanced (and terrifyingly destructive) technology it could think of (short of nuclear weapons) to defeat the VC insurgency. B-52 strategic bombers on “Arc Light” raids (incredibly, the U.S. military dropped 6.7 million tons of bombs on Southeast Asia, the equivalent of more than four hundred Hiroshimas in explosive power), defoliants such as Agent Orange, napalm and cluster munitions, tanks and artillery, helicopter gunships, even electrified fences and sensors.²² Virtually every high-tech weapon in the U.S. inventory was tested in the Vietnam laboratory, and all came up wanting.

Even worse from an American perspective: the widespread devastation wrought by these weapons convinced many Vietnamese to join the rebellion, even as it persuaded many Americans of the immorality of their own military and senior civilian leaders. An undeniable lesson emerged (that many Americans still seek to deny): The U.S. military did not lose the war because the American people lost patience on the home front or because antiwar protesters stabbed the military in the back. Rather, military excesses and overly optimistic assessments (“We see the light [of victory] at the end of the tunnel,” General William Westmoreland, the U.S. commanding general in Vietnam, was saying in 1967), driven by overconfidence, led a “silent majority” of Americans to lose faith in their military and its leaders, so much so that a minority of Americans turned against their own government to sympathize with the plight (and even the goals) of the Vietnamese rebels.²³ Thus, the U.S. military lost the Vietnam War not because it was betrayed by the people but because its leaders betrayed the ideals of the people.²⁴ One of the key betrayers here was President Richard M. Nixon, Lucas’s model for the Emperor (Palpatine/Darth Sidious), as discussed further on.

The same is true of the Empire in *Star Wars*. Its approach to Rebel dissent is to build ever-bigger and more powerful weapons to annihilate the dissenters. Rule by fear, by shock and awe, is the method to its growing madness. As Grand Moff Tarkin says to Leia in *Star Wars*, once the Empire demonstrates the power of its Death Star vengeance weapon,

dissent will be quashed forever.²⁵ Only Vader sees more clearly. In reply to Admiral Motti's boast that "This station is now the ultimate power in the universe," Vader tells him not to be "too proud of this technological terror you've constructed. The ability to destroy a planet is insignificant next to the power of the Force."

Putting a less mystical spin on Vader's dissenting insight, a clear lesson of Vietnam is that destructive space-age technology is not enough to compel assent to imperial demands, especially when rebel resistance is supported and sustained by a powerful ideology. By highlighting the spiritual and nonmaterial factors that sustain successful rebellions, *Star Wars* provides an invaluable reminder to military theorists of all stripes.

Because of this trilogy of critical flaws—the Emperor's overconfidence, his belief in violent reprisals and rule by terror, and the Empire's faith in "Death Star" technology—the Emperor and his minions hardly bother with political suasion and mobilizing popular support, a key tenet of counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy. A less cocky, less power-mad Emperor would recognize that the iron fist of murderous reprisals needs to be balanced by the velvet glove of conciliatory rhetoric. Subject peoples can tolerate considerable oppression if it is softened by reassurances of safety and security. Put differently, victory in COIN is derived not so much from military action per se as it is from military action that creates time and space for civil means (to include police action) that seek both to marginalize the rebels and preserve the people's support.²⁶ Empires can do this by focusing on the pro-establishment minority, rallying them to the cause of neutralizing the rebels, while at the same time encouraging compliance (often in the name of security and order) among the rest of the people.

Yet the Sith Emperor will have none of it. Instead of seeking inclusion and a broader base of support, his actions are exclusive and narrow his base of support. Indeed, his "base" rests on the jackbooted excesses of stormtroopers, the intimidating power of Star Destroyers, and the sorcerer ways of the Sith. When the former are neutralized and the latter (Darth Vader) is turned to the Rebel cause, the Emperor is lost.

Evil Incarnate?: The Emperor, Vader, and the Rebel Cause

At first glance, the *Star Wars* universe appears incredibly simple, a Manichean realm in which the Rebels are the forces of good, and the Empire and especially its leaders are the forces of evil. Certainly, the Emperor and Vader recall real-life totalitarian analogs such as Adolf Hitler and Heinrich Himmler (the head of the notorious SS, or *Schutzstaffel*) in Nazi Germany or Josef Stalin and Lavrentiy Beria (the head of the NKVD, or secret police) in the Soviet Union. Yet interestingly, in portraying the ascent of Senator Palpatine, who becomes the evil Sith Emperor, Darth Sidious, Lucas says he had Richard Nixon in mind as a parallel, as well as other historical dictators who subverted democracies.

Surely, this is less than fair to Nixon, who, despite all of his faults, had positive qualities to go along with his paranoia, his abuse of power, and his betrayal of the U.S. Constitution.²⁷ Yet Lucas is making a more subtle point here, one in which we can view Nixon and even Senator Palpatine as fallen figures, talented men who fell prey to their own overweening ambition and all-consuming paranoia.

All of us have tendencies toward the dark side, Lucas suggests in *Star Wars*. As Yoda confesses, the path to the dark side is easier, quicker, more seductive. It grants to its followers the illusion of limitless power. Palpatine, in his quest for absolute power, gives himself up entirely to the dark side. He may cloak his quest in polite, diplomatic language, coyly asking for “emergency” powers, so that he might restore order and calm to an increasingly unruly galaxy. Yet his true megalomania is revealed in *Revenge of the Sith*, when he baldly states, “I am the Senate,” echoing the absolutist illusions of King Louis XIV of France, who famously declared “I am the State.” Even worse, Palpatine seduces Anakin Skywalker, Luke’s father, by twisting Anakin’s honest, yet forbidden, love for Padmé into a fevered pursuit of boundless power



Emperor Palpatine,
also known as
Darth Sidious.
(*Return of the Jedi*)



President Richard Nixon
flashes a V for victory on
the campaign trail in
California in 1968.

whose goal it is to cheat death for the sake of his beloved. Her death in childbirth completes Anakin's tragic descent into evil, his bottomless despair being exploited by the pitiless Sith Emperor to complete Anakin's transformation into Darth Vader.

In detailing the psychodrama of the Emperor and Vader, we appear to have traveled far from rebellions and People's War. Yet surely the *Star Wars* universe is a reminder that power corrupts us all, and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. Even Senator Palpatine emerges as something more than a wolf in sheep's clothing. Like Nixon, perhaps, he is a man of considerable gifts who is led down a dark path by an unquenchable thirst for power, a thirst unconstrained by moral qualms due to Palpatine's (and Nixon's) mistrust of nearly everyone around him.

As grim as that reading of human nature may be, *Star Wars* also serves as a reminder that power, however dark or evil, will never fully extinguish hope, and that its relentless exercise will always generate resistance. Hitler and Himmler, after all, met their demise; so, too, did Stalin and Beria. Anger, fear, and aggression may triumph in the short term, but goodness, if fought for with conviction, courage, and faith, will triumph in the end. Or so the ending of *Return of the Jedi* suggests.

Nevertheless, Lucas's revelation that Nixon was an inspiration for Palpatine casts the *Star Wars* passion play in a new light. Lucas, I believe, is affirming here that there is a thin line between good and evil,

love and hate. Put differently, good and evil, love and hate, are dualities that are more labile than we care to admit. Negative emotions and unrestrained compulsions for power and control can channel the noblest of causes—even love—into the darkest of avenues.

If Lucas ever returns to *Star Wars* and completes the final cinematic trilogy that was to follow the events of *Return of the Jedi*, one hopes he will develop this theme further. For there will be future perils for Luke, Leia, and Han: the perils of victory, as they strive to adjust to their new status as leaders and power-brokers of an inherently disputatious and disordered galaxy. In the unavoidable reality of the messiness of life, the Sith desire for total dominance in the name of “order” and “security” will never be extinguished, whether in a galaxy far, far away or right here and right now on planet Earth.

The *Star Wars* universe is a reminder that power corrupts us all, and that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

A Coda: The United States in Iraq and Afghanistan

In the aftermath of the attacks by al Qaeda on September 11, 2001, are subsequent actions by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan more

consistent with an “Old Republic” advised by Jedi or with an Empire motivated by hatred and revenge? Interestingly, U.S. troops have themselves adopted the Jedi label to describe both their military skills and their noble intent. In the 1980s, field-grade officers who graduated from the School of Advanced Military Studies at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, became known within the U.S. Army as Jedi Knights.²⁸ These officers designed the invasion plans both for Desert Storm and the liberation of Kuwait in 1991 and for Operation Iraqi Freedom and the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003 (the apparently decisive success of the latter leading to celebrations of their military and specifically their “Jedi” prowess).²⁹ Eight years later, Navy SEAL Team Six’s mission in Pakistan in 2011 that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden led the *New York Times* to gush that the SEALs were “America’s Jedi Knights.”³⁰

Yet the rapid collapse of Iraq into chaos and civil war from 2004 to 2008 and the stalemate (as of 2012) of Afghanistan raise questions whether the American military can accurately describe itself as being guided by an elite corps of Jedi-like masters. Indeed, since 9/11, the American way of war has often seemed more imperial than benevolent. Consider the U.S. military strategy of the moment in Afghanistan. It is designed to put down Taliban rebels or insurgents, hence the descriptive term *counterinsurgency* or COIN. Yet its goal is also to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people by protecting them from violence, as well as by offering them hope, usually in the form of billions of dollars in aid. It further involves moving heavily armed and armored troops into close contact with the locals (who are not always pleased with what they see as a foreign and potentially menacing presence in their midst) and of partnering with them in ways that are intended to be attuned to local cultural concerns and priorities.

Such an approach seems tailor-made for U.S. Special Operations forces, one of those branches of “Jedi Knights” the U.S. military fancies it possesses. At the same time, however, the United States has adopted a far more aggressive and destructive approach to “winning”

in Afghanistan. Call it the imperial or “Death Star” approach. How else to describe the building of a colossal U.S. embassy in Kabul and a sprawling network of steroidal military bases?³¹ These are arguably American analogs to the Imperial Death Star and Star Destroyers of *Star Wars*. The United States proceeds to garrison these bases with “warriors” and mercenaries, while at the same time isolating them (in the name of “force protection”) from the majority of the Afghan people.

Amazingly, few Americans sense the tension—indeed, the contradiction—inherent in these approaches. In places such as Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States seems to believe it can be both Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader, both cunning and courteous Jedi Knight and kinetic Dark Lord of imperial power projection. Whether the aggressive jackboot of imperial military action is consistent with the “knowledge and defense” actions of skilled Jedi advisers remains to be seen. Yet

Imperial stormtroopers;
(inset) American forces in
anonymizing body armor.
(*A New Hope*)



it is difficult to envision how a country can have it both ways. Over time, the elite skills and good deeds of the U.S. military's "Jedi" will likely prove insufficient to erase the looming and darker presence of its militarized embassy, its sprawling network of bases, and the destructive power of its weapons among the Afghan people.

As the U.S. military engages in what is now euphemistically termed *kinetic* operations (deadly combat, in plain speak) in Afghanistan, the Afghan rebels have demonstrated a surprising ability to weather American firepower, while employing indigenous knowledge and homegrown technology of their own. American war-making relies heavily on high-tech weaponry and the profligate expenditure of ammunition and munitions, from .50-caliber machine gun rounds to grenades to 30-mm cannon and heavier mortar and artillery rounds to 2,000-pound bombs dropped by B-1 bombers, all in support of platoon- and company-level operations.

Pacification by massive firepower, however, inevitably leads to non-combatant casualties and collateral damage that undermine the counterinsurgency strategy of winning Afghan hearts and minds. In his book *War*, the celebrated journalist Sebastian Junger recounts how, after one such instance of unintended civilian casualties, the Afghan elders of Yaka Chine met to declare jihad against American forces in the valley, despite apologies and appeals made by the U.S. commander at the scene.³²

In countering this massive use of firepower, Afghan rebels make do mainly with rifles, even World War I-vintage bolt-action Lee-Enfields, the Afghan equivalent to the Rebel lightsaber, together with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and a few machine guns. Like the Ewoks, however, the Afghan "primitives" have "force multipliers" of their own, as Junger, who was embedded with U.S. combat troops, recounts:

For every technological advantage held by the Americans, the Taliban seemed to have an equivalent or a countermeasure.

The United States has adopted a far more aggressive and destructive approach to "winning" in Afghanistan. Call it the imperial or "Death Star" approach.

A menacing Tusken Raider.
(*A New Hope*)



Apache helicopters have thermal imaging that reveals body heat on the mountainside, so Taliban fighters disappear by covering themselves in a blanket on a warm rock. The Americans use unmanned drones to pinpoint the enemy, but the Taliban can do the same thing by watching the flocks of crows that circle American soldiers, looking for scraps of food. The Americans have virtually unlimited firepower, so the Taliban send only one guy to take on an entire firebase. Whether or not he gets killed, he will have succeeded in gumming up the machine for yet one more day.³³

In the eyes of the Afghan people, one might imagine that U.S. troops, with all of their heavy weaponry, ordnance, and armor, recall the heavy-handed presence and trigger-happy cockiness of Imperial stormtroopers in *Star Wars*. For the self-anointed American Jedi, such an image would naturally be difficult to perceive.

I have also heard, from U.S. officers stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan, of a tendency for U.S. troops to refer to Iraqis and Afghans as “Sand People” (the violent and vicious desert nomads of Tatooine in *Star Wars*) and to comment disparagingly about their dirty homes and disgusting habits.³⁴ For troops hailing from the material comforts and the antiseptic luxuries of twenty-first-century America, such comments are predictable, if not exactly expedient. More important, such

comments (and there are far worse) reveal a certain contempt that is more consistent with a high-handed and hegemonic empire than it is with an enlightened corps of Jedi.

As U.S. troops deploy across the “galaxy” of planet Earth (and estimates suggest that in 2011, U.S. Special Forces were deployed to an astonishing seventy countries, with plans to expand to a further fifty), seeking ostensibly to combat terror and to spread freedom and democracy, will they use their considerable “force” for knowledge or defense, or will they forever be on the attack?³⁵ In the increasing production and use of robotic aerial drones (with such nicknames as “Predators” and “Reapers”) on assassination missions, so eerily reminiscent of the replicated clones of *Star Wars*, will they succumb to the temptation of the dark side in a febrile quest for “full spectrum dominance” of the globe, however it may be couched in benevolent terms?³⁶ Or will they come to recognize, in the wise words of Yoda, that “wars not make one great”?

Such questions, stimulated by the richness of the *Star Wars* galaxy, are not easily answered, even as they grow ever more vital by the day.

Yoda tells Luke that
“wars not make one great.”
(*The Empire Strikes Back*)

