

6. Insurgency: Theory and Practice

An *insurgency* “is an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion or armed conflict.”¹ Insurgency—sometimes called guerrilla warfare—presents unique problems for the host government:

*Analogically, the guerrilla fights the war of the flea, and his military enemy suffers the dog’s disadvantages: too much to defend; too small, ubiquitous, and agile an enemy to come to grips with. If the war continues long enough—this is the theory—the dog succumbs to exhaustion and anemia without ever having found anything on which to close his jaws or to rake with his claws.*²

Insurgencies, whether classical or contemporary, tend to be protracted conflicts where the insurgents bet their assets, support, and will against a weak government’s staying power, its generally superior resources, and outside support. Rather than force-on-force conventional operations, where combatants fight to destroy one another, capture terrain, or break alliances, opponents in insurgencies fight for the support—some would say control—of the populace. And contrary to Taber’s prediction, the dogs (counterinsurgents) often conquer or outlast the fleas (guerrillas).

The most prominent theorist of insurgency was Mao Zedong. His writings were central to his party’s securing victory in mainland China and inspired many other movements, especially the Vietnamese, who took his theory and adapted it to a more modern age and a different milieu. Other movements were inspired by Mao but adopted their own techniques. In Maoist guerrilla warfare, the insurgents move through

three stages though not always in a consistent, uniform, or coordinated fashion: an agitation-propaganda phase, where they would establish bases and prepare the battlefield and the population for the struggle; a defensive phase where they would begin guerrilla warfare operations against the government and terrorism against the resistant population; and finally an offensive phase, where the increasingly powerful guerrilla bands—grown strong on their successes in phase 2—could fight as conventional forces, confronting government forces in direct combat.³

Insurgents today often bypass Mao's first phase and let armed conflict speak for itself, filling in around the edges with subversion, terrorism, dispute resolution, and, at times, humanitarian aid to enhance the appeal of their arms. Modern insurgencies take various forms and can be divided according to ends, ways, and means.⁴ In Afghanistan, the Taliban can be characterized as a reactionary-traditionalist insurgency. It wants to turn the clock back to a form of government that would fit the year 800. It is fighting to regain political power, oust the foreign occupiers, and restore its version of sharia law. Al Qaeda, for its part, seeks to regain or at least maintain a sanctuary in a friendly country, while bleeding the United States and its allies. Afghanistan was the initial state in the development of a multiregional caliphate. The al Qaeda position in Afghanistan was far more secure and productive than its underground existence today in Pakistan.

Throughout their operations, guerrillas emphasize deception and survivability. In Mao's terms, they attack where the government is weak; where the enemy is strong, they refuse battle; where it is temporarily weak, the guerrillas harass, always ready to run away, a tactic that has to be a specialty of insurgents if they are to survive. Most theorists agree with the old saw popularized by David Galula. A revolutionary war—his

umbrella term for insurgency and counterinsurgency—“is 20 percent military action and 80 percent political.”⁵ For the government’s forces to win, in his words, they must isolate the insurgents from the people, and “that isolation [must] not [be] enforced upon the population but maintained by and with the population.”⁶

There are two basic approaches to counterinsurgency (COIN): counterguerrilla, which emphasizes the destruction of the guerrilla formations and cadres while downplaying nation-building and efforts to gain popular support; and population-centric, which focuses on protection of the population and winning its support. The latter is the U.S. style of COIN. David Galula is its patron saint, and its current bible is Marine Corps and Army Field Manual (FM) 3–24, *Counterinsurgency*.

Most population-centric counterinsurgency theorists believe that the population’s perception of the host government’s legitimacy—its right to rule—is essential to victory even if it is hard to define and varies from culture to culture.⁷ The troubled host government must cultivate and reinforce its legitimacy as the insurgents fight to destroy it, ultimately overthrowing the government to thereby win the victory. Being able to provide security contributes, in great measure, to the perception of legitimacy. Other indicators are regularized leader selection, high levels of political participation, “a culturally acceptable level of corruption,” “a culturally acceptable level and rate” of development, and “a high level of regime acceptance by major social institutions.”⁸

In a population-centric COIN operation, a counterinsurgent nation and its coalition partners will likely favor a “whole-of-government” or even a “whole-of-society” approach to defeating the insurgency. This unified effort is difficult to achieve. At the same time, military personnel will find themselves enmeshed in military and nonmilitary lines of

operation: combat operations and civil security, developing host-nation security forces, delivering essential services, governance, economic development, and information operations.⁹ Diplomats, aid workers, international organizations, and NGOs will have close and often uncomfortable working relationships with military forces in insurgencies. The aid organizations' discomfort will be magnified by the fact that aid workers and international organizations are soft targets for insurgents eager to show the government's impotence.

The current U.S. approach to COIN has often incorrectly been portrayed as primarily nonkinetic efforts to “win hearts and minds.” While the doctrine is essentially population centric, it allows for offensive, defensive, and stability operations in varying degrees, depending on objectives and local circumstances. For example, in an initial phase where the counterinsurgents are fighting to clear areas of insurgents, offensive operations might dominate the mixture. During the “hold” phase, defense and stability operations might dominate. In the “build” and “transition” phases, stability operations—humanitarian activities, reconstruction, and police and army training—might dominate the counterinsurgent's agenda.¹⁰ Both the surge operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have been marked by controlled, offensive kinetic operations.

Other theories stress the importance of counterguerrilla operations and deemphasize nonmilitary lines of operation. A recent book by Mark Moyar of the Marine Corps University suggests a third approach: that counterinsurgency is “‘leader-centric’ warfare . . . in which the elite with superiority in certain leadership attributes usually wins. The better elite gains the assistance of more people and uses them to subdue or destroy its enemy's elite and its supporters.”¹¹ No one can downplay the importance of creative and dedicated leadership in any form of warfare, but

this approach to counterinsurgency is security-focused and, at the limit, is more akin to counterguerrilla operations than population-centric counterinsurgency.¹² All that said, an insurgency can end in a victory of arms even if counterguerrilla operations are the focal point and the support of the people appears a lesser concern. A strong, strategically focused counterinsurgency effort, coupled with progress in governance, rule of law, and basic economic development, can cover all of the approaches to dealing with insurgency.

Twenty-first-century insurgencies are affected by globalization, the Internet, and the explosion of global media. They are often referred to as “fourth generation warfare,” or evolved insurgencies.¹³ Information and communication today are paramount. Religion can play the role of ideology, and clerics the role of a party leadership. Sadly, terrorism against the resistant population has always been a constant. Information operations, where the creation or reinforcement of a message or theme is the objective, are an important part of evolved 21st-century insurgencies. In Afghanistan, Lieutenant General Dave Barno, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005, has often noted that the Taliban design the message and then plan the operation around its creation, while the U.S. tends to see information operations as an after action issue.¹⁴ In Afghanistan, the word gets out quickly, aided now by nationwide cell phone service and many radio stations. Civilian casualties and collateral damage are favorite enemy propaganda themes, even though the Taliban was responsible for over 70 percent of civilian casualties in 2010.

Among the most pernicious messages used by al Qaeda and the Taliban is that the United States and its coalition partners are occupying forces who are in Afghanistan to make war on Islam or Afghan culture. In reality, the contest is between Muslims over what their faith is

and will be, and whether they will be governed by a backward-looking authoritarian theocracy or a decent civil government. The Taliban wants a radical Islamic state with recourse to terrorism. Most Afghans oppose that radical way, especially its emphasis on indiscriminate killing and promotion of suicidal acts. Many moderate Afghans, however, are outside the protection of the government and its international partners. They may have to sit on the fence and not resist the Taliban.

In addition to the hardcore Taliban, many of whom have never known anything but war, there are what David Kilcullen, an influential advisor to the U.S. Government on COIN issues, calls “accidental guerrillas” who fight because foreign forces are there, or because there is adventure in combat.¹⁵ Allied with the accidental guerrillas are what one might call economic guerrillas, the “five (some say ten) dollar-a-day” Taliban who fight for money. There may be as many motives behind the Taliban insurgency as there are Taliban fighters. Some follow their leaders and are fellow travelers of the radicals in al Qaeda. Many more local Taliban have more prosaic motives.

Drugs, smuggling, kidnapping, and extortion go hand-in-hand with evolved insurgency in Afghanistan. Opium is at the root of these problems. The cultivation of the opium poppy has deep roots in the southern part of the country, the poppies themselves are hardy and drought resistant, and although the farmers are exploited by the drug lords, the farmer’s profit per acre from poppy exceeds nearly all other cash crops. Moreover, the farmers are heavily in debt to the drug lords and local money lenders. These debts are matters of honor. The poppy farmer will defend his crops because his deepest interests are in the success of his harvest. Eradication programs can alienate the poppy growing (or reliant) population.

Drug traffic in Afghanistan is among the main sources of funding for the Taliban, which is sometimes involved directly with drug production, but otherwise taxes it or protects it for large fees and payoffs to the leadership in Pakistan. “Charity,” mainly from people in the Persian Gulf region, is another source of Taliban funding, and some intelligence analysts believe it is more lucrative than the drug trade.¹⁶ Some experts believe that, through taxation and other payments in kind, the Taliban as a whole may net as much as a half billion dollars a year from the drug trade, which also exerts a corrupting influence on host governments.¹⁷

Measuring progress in an insurgency is as important as it is tricky. Without metrics, the counterinsurgent will neither learn nor adapt. Input metrics are readily available but are not very useful. Output or achievement measures need to be developed and then tailored for the environment and the state of the operation. As always, staffs will have to fight for information and build their systems on small unit reporting. For their role, unit commanders have to be dedicated to collecting intelligence and feeding the unit metric systems. The reader can find guides to COIN metrics in FM 3–24 or a recent book by Kilcullen.¹⁸

Without access to detailed metrics can an understanding of counterinsurgency theory help to assess where we are in Afghanistan? Yes, but only generally. Galula suggests that there are four key conditions for a successful insurgency: a sound and lasting cause based on a serious problem; police and administrative weakness in government; a supportive geographical environment; and outside aid to the insurgency. These criteria tell us that we are in for a stressful contest in Afghanistan, but victory is not guaranteed for either side.¹⁹

The Taliban’s primary cause is religion and the need to gain political power by ousting foreign powers and their Afghan “puppet” allies. This

cause, on the one hand, creates some fervor, but on the other hand, it brings bad memories to the people. The Taliban's version of Islam rubs many Afghans the wrong way. The inadequacies of Taliban cadres and the disastrous 5 years of Taliban rule are well remembered by all. The Taliban's inhumane treatment of Afghans—especially non-Pashtuns—will work against it in the long run.

The weakness and corruption of the government and the limitations of its coalition partners reinforce the Taliban's efforts and give credence to its cause. The Taliban's ability to use its version of sharia law and its ubiquitous mullahs to settle disputes is a further help. The government's inability to control narcotics not only mocks its power and authority, but it pays the Taliban handsomely and fuels corruption throughout the country. Afghanistan has flooded Western Europe and Russia with opiates. There are growing urban drug problems in Afghan cities, Iran, and Pakistan. There are even drug abuse problems within the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). These weaknesses in the Karzai regime and the ANSF can be redressed. The current surge of NATO forces and their efforts to build capacity and combat corruption may help in that regard. In 2011, the allies and the Afghans are close to achieving the troop to population ratio recommended by FM 3-24—20 counterinsurgents for every 1,000 people—and outnumber the Taliban by more than 10 to 1.²⁰ Better security nationwide is in sight.

At the same time, the geographic environment—especially in southern and eastern Afghanistan and the adjacent areas of Pakistan—is favorable to an insurgency. Road building, local security forces, and creative security assistance can work against this terrain advantage. Outside help from elements in Pakistan, which serves as a secure sanctuary with ample material resources, is adequate for the insurgency today. Paki-

stan reportedly has begun to work with Taliban groups to make peace with Afghanistan, which appears increasingly in its interest due to the growth of radical behavior in the anti-Islamabad Pakistani Taliban. Sadly, Pakistan maintains a relationship with other radical groups, such as the Lashkar-i-Taiba, a violent, Pakistan-based international terrorist group. So far, outside aid to the legitimate Afghan government can balance aid and the value of sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban. A guerrilla, however, needs far less funding than a legitimate government.

Breaking down overseas support for the Taliban, disrupting their sanctuaries, effective counternarcotics programs, well-selected drone strikes, and working with Pakistan to put pressure on its “guests” should be the order of the day. Building Afghan security and governmental capacity might well be the most important policy focus in this counterinsurgency. But all of this takes the reader ahead of the narrative. To see what must be done, one must first analyze the record from 2002 to the present.

