Principles, Imperatives, AND Paradoxes OF COUNTERINSURGENCY

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AMERICA began the 20th century with military forces engaged in counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in the Philippines. Today, it is conducting similar operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and a number of other countries around the globe. During the past century, Soldiers and Marines gained considerable experience fighting insurgents in Southeast Asia, Latin America, Africa, and now in Southwest Asia and the Middle East.

Conducting a successful counterinsurgency requires an adaptive force led by agile leaders. While every insurgency is different because of distinct environments, root causes, and cultures, all successful COIN campaigns are based on common principles. All insurgencies use variations of standard frameworks and doctrine and generally adhere to elements of a definable revolutionary campaign plan. In the Information Age, insurgencies have become especially dynamic. Their leaders study and learn, exchange information, employ seemingly leaderless networks, and establish relationships of convenience with criminal gangs. Insurgencies present a more complex problem than conventional operations, and the new variants have a velocity that previous historical insurgencies never possessed.

Principles of Counterinsurgency

The principles and imperatives of modern counterinsurgency provide guideposts for forces engaged in COIN campaigns. However, counterinsurgency is a strange and complicated beast. Following the principles and imperatives does not guarantee success, which is just one of the several paradoxes of counterinsurgency. Understanding such paradoxes helps illuminate the extraordinary challenges inherent in defeating an insurgency.

Legitimacy as the main objective. A legitimate government derives its just powers from the governed and competently manages collective security and political, economic, and social development. Legitimate governments are inherently stable. They engender the popular support required to manage internal problems, change, and conflict. Illegitimate governments are inherently unstable. Misguided, corrupt, and incompetent governance inevitably fosters instability. Thus, illegitimate governance is the root cause of and the central strategic problem in today's unstable global-security environment.

Five actions that are indicators of legitimacy and that any political actor facing threats to stability should implement are—

- Free, fair, and frequent selection of leaders.
- A high level of popular participation in and support for the political process.
- A low level of corruption.
- A culturally acceptable level or rate of political, economic, and social development.
- A high level of regime support from major social institutions.

Governments that attain these goals usually garner the support of enough of the population to create stability. The primary objective of any counterinsurgent is to establish such a government. While military action can deal with the symptoms of loss of legitimacy, restoring it can only be accomplished using all elements of national power. Unless the government achieves legitimacy, counterinsurgency efforts cannot succeed.

Unity of effort. Ideally, a counterinsurgent would have unity of command over all elements of national power involved in COIN operations. However, the best that military commanders can generally hope for is unity of effort through communication and liaison with those responsible for the nonmilitary elements of power. The ambassador and country team must be key players in higher level planning, while similar connections are achieved down the chain of command. Even nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can play important roles in improving lives. Many such players will resist being overtly involved with military units, but they must make an effort to establish some kind of liaison.

Connecting with joint, interagency, coalition, and indigenous organizations is important to ensuring that objectives are shared and that actions and messages are synchronized. The resulting synergy is essential for effective counterinsurgency. Unity of effort must pervade every level of activity, from national to neighborhood. Otherwise, well-intentioned but uncoordinated actions can cancel each other out or provide a competent insurgent with many vulnerabilities to exploit.

Political primacy. While all the elements of national power have a role in successful counterinsurgency, political objectives must retain primacy. All actions, kinetic or nonkinetic, must be planned and executed with consideration of their contribution toward strengthening the host government's legitimacy and achieving the U.S. Government's political goals. The political and military aspects of an insurgency are usually so bound together as to be inseparable, and most insurgents recognize this fact. In counterinsurgencies, military actions conducted without proper analysis of their political effects will at best be ineffective and at worst aid the enemy.

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Understanding the environment. A key aspect in an insurgency is the population. Analyzing the effect of any operation is impossible without understanding the society and culture within which the COIN operation occurs. Soldiers and Marines must understand demographics, history, and the causes, ideologies, aims, organizations, capabilities, approaches, and supporting entities for every player in the conflict. The interconnected politico-military nature of insurgency requires the counterinsurgent to immerse himself in the lives of the people in order to achieve victory. Successful U.S. COIN operations require Soldiers and Marines to possess a clear, nuanced, empathetic appreciation of the essential nature of the conflict, particularly the motivation, strengths, and weaknesses of insurgents and indigenous actors.

Intelligence as the driver for operations. Without understanding the environment, one cannot understand and properly apply intelligence. Without good intelligence, a counterinsurgent is like a blind boxer wasting energy flailing at an unseen opponent. With good intelligence, a counterinsurgent is like a surgeon cutting out the cancers while keeping the vital organs intact. All operations must be shaped by carefully considered actionable intelligence gathered and analyzed at the lowest possible levels and disseminated and distributed throughout the force.

Isolating insurgents from their cause and support. Cutting an insurgency off to die on the vine is easier than it is to kill every insurgent. Dynamic insurgencies regenerate quickly, so a skillful counterinsurgent must cut off the sources of that recuperative power. Ideological support can be sundered by redressing the grievances that fuel the insurgency. Physical support can be cut off by population control or border security. In the 20th century, population control often meant resettling people; in the 21st century, biometric identification cards will accomplish the same objectives with much less disruption to people's lives. International or local legal action might be required to limit foreign financial support to insurgents.

As the host government increases its own legitimacy, the people will more actively help achieve this principle. Victory will be gained when this isolation is permanently maintained by the people's active support.

Security under the rule of law. The cornerstone of any COIN effort is security for the populace. Without security, no permanent reforms can be implemented, and disorder will spread. To establish

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legitimacy, security activities must move from the realm of major combat operations into the realm of law enforcement. Insurgents seen as criminals will lose public support. If they are dealt with by an established legal system in line with local culture and practices, the legitimacy of the host government will be enhanced. This process will take time, but Soldiers must be aware of the legal procedures applicable to their conduct and support them. They must also help establish indigenous institutions (police forces, court systems, and penal facilities) that will sustain that legal regime.

Long-term commitment. Insurgencies tend to be protracted conflicts. Counterinsurgency always demands considerable expenditures of time and resources. The insurgent wins if he does not lose. The counterinsurgent loses if he does not win. Insurgents are strengthened by the belief that a few casualties or a few years will cause adversaries to abandon the conflict. Only constant reaffirmations of commitment backed by deeds will bolster public faith in government survivability. People will not support a government until they are convinced the counterinsurgent has the means, ability, stamina, and will to win.

Contemporary Imperatives of Counterinsurgency

Recent experiences with counterinsurgency highlight the following additional imperatives that we must keep in mind for success.

Manage information and expectations. Information and expectations are related, and a skillful counterinsurgent must carefully manage both. To limit discontent and build support, a counterinsurgent and host government must create and maintain realistic expectations among the populace, friendly military forces, and even the international community. Information operations will be a key tool to accomplish this.

Americans have a disadvantage because of our reputation for accomplishment, resulting in what has been termed the Man on the Moon syndrome. To people in Afghanistan and Iraq, it seems unbelievable that a nation that can put a man on the moon cannot restore electricity. American agencies trying to fan enthusiasm for their efforts must avoid making exorbitant promises. In some cultures, failing to deliver promised results is interpreted as deliberate deception, not simply good intentions gone awry.

Managing expectations also involves showing economic and political progress as part of the campaign to show the populace how life is improving. In the end, the people must be convinced that their lives will be better with the counterinsurgent in control rather than with the insurgent in control. Both the counterinsurgent and the host nation must ensure that their deeds match their words. Any action has an information reaction, so they must carefully consider its effect on the many audiences involved and work to shape responses that further desired ends.

Use measured force. Any use of force generates a series of reactions, so, it is best to use the minimum possible force in resolving any situation. At times, an overwhelming effort is necessary to intimidate an opponent or reassure the populace, but the amount of force and who wields it should be carefully calculated. Mounting an operation that kills 5 insurgents is futile if collateral damage leads to the recruitment of 50 more. Often it is better that police handle urban raids, even if they are not as well-armed or as capable as military units, because the populace is likely to view that application of force as more legitimate. Also, a local police force reinforces the rule of law.

Learn and adapt. A COIN force must be a learning organization. Insurgents shift between military and political phases and approaches. In addition, networked insurgents constantly exchange information about enemy vulnerabilities. A skillful counterinsurgent must be able to adapt at least as fast as the opponent. Every unit must be able to make observations, draw lessons, apply them, and assess results. Higher headquarters must develop an effective system to circulate lessons learned throughout the organization. Insurgents shift their areas of operations looking for weak links, so widespread competence is required throughout the counterinsurgent force.

Empower the lowest levels. The learning process must go on at every level of the COIN effort. The mosaic nature of an insurgency means that local commanders have the best grasp of their own situations. They must have the assets to produce

actionable intelligence and manage information operations. Also, COIN operations must be decentralized, and higher commanders owe it to their subordinates to push as many capabilities as possible down to lower levels. Lower level initiative has to be supported and encouraged in order to create a COIN force that can adapt as quickly as insurgents.

Support the host nation. American forces must remember that they are conducting COIN operations to help a host government. The long-term goal is for that government to stand on its own. In the end, the host nation must win its own war. While U.S. forces and agencies can provide invaluable assistance, they must be able to hand off responsibilities to indigenous elements. And, while it might be easier for U.S. military units to conduct operations themselves, it is far better for them to help strengthen local forces. In successful COIN operations, host governments have the final responsibility to solve their own problems.

Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency

COIN operations present complex, often unfamiliar missions and considerations. In many ways, conducting COIN operations is counterintuitive to the traditional American approach to war and combat operations. Some representative paradoxes follow:

The more you protect your force, the less secure you are. The counterinsurgent gains ultimate success by protecting the populace, not himself. If military forces stay locked up in compounds, they lose touch with the people who are the ultimate arbiters of victory and who could concede the streets and fields to the insurgent. Forces must conduct patrols, share risk, and maintain contact to obtain the intelligence to drive operations and to reinforce the connections with the people who establish legitimacy.

The more force you use, the less effective you are. Any use of force produces many effects, not all of which can be foreseen. The more force applied, the greater the chance of collateral damage and mistakes. Enemy propaganda will portray kinetic military activities as brutal. Restrained force also strengthens the rule of law the counterinsurgent is trying to establish.

Sometimes doing nothing is the best reaction. Often an insurgent will carry out a terrorist act or guerrilla raid to entice the counterinsurgent to overreact or, at least, react in a way that the insurgent can exploit. If a careful analysis of the effects of a response reveals that more negatives than positives might result, Soldiers should consider an alternative.

Dollars and ballots will have a more important effect than bombs and bullets.

The best weapons for counterinsurgency do not fire bullets. Counterinsurgents achieve the most meaningful success by gaining popular support and legitimacy for the host government, not by killing insurgents. Security is important in setting the stage for other kinds of progress, but lasting victory will come from a vibrant economy, political participation, and restored hope. Dollars and ballots will have a more important effect than bombs and bullets; information is even more powerful when correctly wielded. T.E. Lawrence once observed that "[t]he printing press is the greatest weapon in the armoury of the modern commander. . . ."[1] This is even truer today than it was when Lawrence wrote it nearly a century ago—except that the truly effective counterinsurgent requires not just a printing press, but radio and television programs and an Internet presence. Soldiers and Marines must be prepared to engage in a host of traditional nonmilitary missions to support COIN operations.

Them doing something poorly is sometimes better than us doing it well. Who performs an operation is just as important as how well it is done. The United States is and will be supporting host nations in a counterinsurgency, and long-term success requires establishing viable institutions that can continue without significant U.S. support. The longer that process takes, the more popular support in the United States will wane and the more the local populace will question the legitimacy of their own forces. Lawrence said of his experience leading the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Turkish Empire: "Do not try and do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not win it for them."[2]

If a tactic works this week, it will not work next week; if it works in this province, it will not work in the next. Today's competent insurgents are adaptive and are often part of a widespread network that constantly and instantly communicates. Successful

COIN practices and appropriate countermeasures pass rapidly throughout the insurgency, and insurgents can implement changes quickly. COIN leaders must avoid complacency and be at least as adaptive as the adversary.

Tactical success guarantees nothing. When Colonel Harry Summers told a North Vietnamese counterpart in 1975 that "[y]ou know you never defeated us on the battlefield," the reply was: "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant."[3] Military actions alone cannot achieve success. Tactical actions must be linked to operational and strategic military objectives and essential political goals. Without those connections, we might waste lives and resources for no real gain.

The Future of Warfare

America's extraordinary conventional military power makes it likely that many of our future opponents will choose irregular means, including terrorism and insurgency, to achieve their political objectives and prevent us from achieving ours. The U.S. Army prides itself on its system of lessons learned. We must understand that others study us no less carefully than we study them. We reflect on tactics, techniques, and procedures; our enemies consider those as well, but they also pay attention to the operational and strategic levels of irregular warfare.

To the extent that our reaction to new manifestations of old forms of war consists chiefly of improved ways to protect vehicles against improvised explosive devices, or refined sniper tactics, or more adroit cordon and search techniques, we expose vulnerabilities that others will exploit. As painful as it might be to admit, future opponents have already drawn comfort from our missteps in Afghanistan and Iraq and, before that, in Somalia, Haiti, and elsewhere. They respect our immense firepower and logistical capabilities; they do not have equal regard for our strategic acumen or operational skill in fighting such wars.

After Vietnam, the U.S. Army reacted to the threat of irregular warfare chiefly by saying "never again." The study of counterguerrilla and COIN operations was leached from the various military college curricula, and the hard-won experience of a generation of officers was deliberately ignored. The Army told itself that the failure in Vietnam was the fault of an overweening civilian leadership, a timorous high command, a feeble domestic base of support, a hostile press, and the sheer impossibility of the task. These judgments were grounded in reality, but the Army's institutional failures deserved no less attention. Instead, although Army officers developed skills and achieved successes in irregular warfare in places like El Salvador and the former Yugoslavia, the institution continued to treat irregular warfare as an exception, an additional duty, or simply as a mistake. The result was an Army that was not as well-prepared to battle sophisticated insurgent enemies in Iraq and Afghanistan as it could have been.

We are at a turning point in the Army's institutional history. By considering the principles, imperatives, and paradoxes of counterinsurgency presented here, we can learn the lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan needed to prepare for the insurgencies and small wars we will have to fight in the future. Our enemies are fighting us as insurgents because they think insurgency is their best chance for victory. We must prove them wrong. ***MR***

NOTES

1. T.E. Lawrence, "The Evolution of a Revolt," *Army Quarterly and Defense Journal* (October 1920). Reprinted by the Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, with permission. On-line at <www-cgsc.army.mil/carl/resources/csi/Lawrence/Lawrence.asp>, accessed 2 March 2006.
2. Lawrence, "The 27 Articles of T.E. Lawrence," *The Arab Bulletin* (20 August 1917), on-line at <www.d-n-i.net/fcs/lawrence_27_articles.htm>, accessed 1 March 2006.
3. COL Harry Summers, quoted in COL Robert Killebrew, "Winning Wars," Professional Writing Collection, *Army Magazine* (April 2005): on-line at <www.army.mil/professionalwriting/volumes/volume3/may_2005/5_05_2_pf.html>, accessed 1 March 2006.

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