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Democratic Counterinsurgents: How Democracies Can Prevail in Irregular Warfare

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**DEMOCRATIC COUNTERINSURGENTS: HOW DEMOCRACIES CAN
PREVAIL IN IRREGULAR WARFARE**

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ABSTRACT

DEMOCRATIC COUNTERINSURGENTS: HOW DEMOCRACIES CAN PREVAIL IN IRREGULAR WARFARE

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Old Dominion University, 2014
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This dissertation answers the question of whether or not democracies can win counterinsurgency conflicts. This is done first through an analysis of the arguments made by those who claim that democracies are uniquely incapable of doing so due to various limitations imposed by public opinion as well as the arguments of those who argue that democracies can win such conflicts given the correct strategy. Secondly, the question is investigated through an examination of three case studies: Malaysia, Vietnam, and Iraq. This analysis demonstrates that the arguments against the ability of democracies to win counterinsurgencies is not as strong as many scholars currently believe. Secondly, this research demonstrates that a population-based, culturally-informed, counterinsurgency strategy provides a plausible avenue of victory for democratic states faced with insurgencies. Though such a strategy cannot guarantee success, the more closely it is followed the more likely success will be.

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Margaret Sue Carman-Kingsbury, who never forgot.

It is also dedicated to my mother, Amy Sue Dulka, to whom I am indebted for my entire education and for inculcating my desire to obtain one.

And to my wife Erin who supported me throughout.

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I am deeply grateful to my committee, the members of which guided me not only in the writing of this dissertation but through the coursework that got me to this point. The mentorship of my committee chair, Dr. Kurt Taylor Gaubatz, was especially influential. Through conversation and questioning he was instrumental in helping me choose my topic and then narrow its scope, identify the key conceptual problems and questions involved, and develop a research agenda and organization for the project. Through numerous meetings he kept me, and the project, on track. His encouragement and confidence in my ability to complete the task kept me motivated and moving forward. Finally, his suggested revisions improved the quality of the final iteration of this work.

I owe to Dr. William Brenner his guidance in working through some of the key philosophical issues involved in this effort. The concept of legitimacy is an especially difficult one to come to grips with and the substantial investigation of it in this work is based upon discussions with him and readings that he suggested. Since my undergraduate years Dr. Brenner has been a mentor in my study of philosophy and has guided my struggle with complex and abstract philosophical concepts. He has improved not only my knowledge of these and similar issues, but my ability to think about them. He is also a scrupulous editor and his close reading of early drafts helped immensely in improving its readability.

Dr. David Earnest pushed this dissertation further than I had ever intended by urging me to explore not only how democracies can be successful at counterinsurgencies

but how they may be even *more* successful than other regime types. He pointed out that democracies may have several key advantages that may translate into higher levels of success in population-centric counterinsurgencies, such as tolerance of other cultures and the institution of legitimate governance. These suggestions led me to go one step further in the analysis presented here and greatly strengthened my final conclusion.

All three of my committee members were invaluable in guiding me towards the successful completion of this dissertation. It is my hope that their advice and support has enabled me to produce a work that contributes significantly to the literature of counterinsurgency and which may be useful in spurring further research and discussion on that topic. I look forward to continuing that research myself.

None of this would have been possible without my mother, Amy Sue Dulka, who has encouraged me throughout my life to strive for educational excellence. She has always supported me in my endeavors and has made my success possible. It is to her that I owe my primary gratitude. My wife Erin also provided unflagging support for which I will always be grateful.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

THE PUZZLE

We are in a critical part of history when it comes to counterinsurgency warfare. One war, Iraq, is over for the United States and another, Afghanistan, is winding down. Some major goals were accomplished in each place. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein was overthrown, tried and executed and his brutal Baathist regime was dismantled. Furthermore, elections were held which led to the establishment of a government that represents a majority of the Iraqi people. Similarly, in Afghanistan the Taliban were overrun and removed from power and the current government was established by democratic means. Progress has been made on establishing and training Afghan security forces and police and some progress has been made in regards to economic development.

Neither of these conflicts, however, can be considered an untarnished victory for the U.S. Violence has been on the rise in Iraq since the U.S. withdrawal and sectarian tensions continue to prevent political reconciliation and stability. In Afghanistan the Taliban continue to threaten the stability and security of the country and al Qaeda remains a threat. After more than a decade of effort, more than a trillion dollars spent, thousands of lives lost and tens of thousands of severe injuries, the costs of these conflicts have been great. In the wake of such costs many have come to the conclusion that succeeding at counterinsurgency is not possible, especially for democracies that must be responsive to the will of the people. Such conflicts are said to be too lengthy to maintain public approval and they are simply too costly in terms of treasure and lives. Some have

concluded from this that no such efforts should ever be attempted again and that democracies, especially the U.S., should focus their military efforts on conventional threats.

It is not at all clear, however, that this is the correct conclusion to draw. It is too hasty to claim that counterinsurgency is impossible without a close look at the totality of the theoretical and empirical evidence. Furthermore, democracies may not have the convenience of simply proclaiming a disdain for counterinsurgency and pledging to avoid them. It is rare that such conflicts are desired. They are entered into because they are seen as vital to the national security. Failing to prepare for counterinsurgency will only make victory less likely the next time one is unavoidable. It is therefore imperative to draw proper conclusions about the viability of success in counterinsurgency from the vantage point of democratic regimes. The analysis presented here is intended to further clarify the issues at stake and bring us to more firmly grounded conclusions upon which democratic governments can base important defense and military decisions.

The fact that large powerful countries have frequently lost in counterinsurgency warfare against much weaker opponents during the past century is puzzling from the perspective of realist international relations theory. Since power is the predominant factor in realist theory, the larger power should almost always win. While other factors may be significant at the margins and result in an occasional upset, the vast majority of wars will, according to realism, be settled by power differentials. As Ivan Arreguin-Toft explains, "As far back as Thucydides' description of the wars between Athens and Sparta, the link between power and conflict outcomes has been *the* root principle of realist international relations theory. More power means winning wars, and less power

means losing them.”¹ The facts suggest, however, that within the past fifty years strong states, even when vastly more powerful than their opponents, have been losing small wars at a much greater rate than in the past. Calculations by Arreguin-Toft indicate that from 1950 - 1999 the more powerful actor won such wars only 48.8% of the time; less than half! The rate of success by powerful actors in earlier fifty year increments were much higher (1800-49, 88.2%; 1850-99, 79.5%; 1900-49, 65.1%).²

Democratic states are considered especially ineffective at counterinsurgency warfare. Jason Lyall, for example, notes that “To date, a near consensus exists among scholars, policymakers, and journalists around the belief that democracies are uniquely deficient when fighting counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns.”³ Several arguments have been advanced to explain the deficiencies demonstrated by democratic regimes in this regard. Efraim Inbar lists several of them in the introduction to his book, *Democracies and Small Wars*:

By their nature, democracies clearly have greater constraints than autocratic regimes on their freedom of action as they have to meet constitutional, legal and moral criteria in their use of force, and particularly so regarding the management of small wars. There are limits on the ruthlessness to which democracies can recur in subduing their enemies. The relatively slower decision-making processes, due to a less centralized system than in autocracies reduces the amount of flexibility required for waging small wars. Democratic political processes, including engaging in war, also require a certain amount of transparency, which is invariably at the expense of the military operational needs for secrecy. Unquestionably, democracies pay a certain price in combat effectiveness for maintaining their values.⁴

¹ Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

² Arreguin-Toft, 4.

³ Jason Lyall, “Do Democracies Make Inferior Counterinsurgents? Reassessing Democracy’s Impact on War Outcomes and Duration,” *International Organization* 64 (Winter 2010): 167.

⁴ Efraim Inbar, Introduction to *Democracies and Small Wars*, ed. Efraim Inbar, (London: Frank Cass, 2003), viii - ix.

Despite the strong case that has been made by a variety of scholars using an array of arguments to demonstrate that democracies are particularly unsuited to counterinsurgency, there is an opposing literature which is consolidated around an effective counterinsurgency strategy applicable by democratic governments. It has long been a tenet of counterinsurgency doctrine that the local population is the key to winning such conflicts. In his 1964 masterpiece, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, for example, David Galula argued that the First Law of counterinsurgency is that: "The Support of the Population is as Necessary for the Counterinsurgent as for the Insurgent."⁵ In fact, he argues that support from the population is the key determinant of power in counterinsurgency conflicts. "In conventional warfare," he argues,

strength is assessed according to military or other tangible criteria, such as the number of divisions, the position they hold, the industrial resources, etc. In revolutionary warfare [insurgencies], strength must be assessed by the extent of support from the population as measured in terms of political organization at the grass roots. The counterinsurgent reaches a position of strength when his power is embodied in a political organization issuing from, and firmly supported by, the population.⁶

If this is true, power must be measured differently than it is in conventional warfare. A belligerent with more tanks but less support from the population may in fact be less "powerful" than its ostensibly weaker opponent.

This population-centered notion of counterinsurgency has found support among other key theorists, including David Kilcullen,⁷ and has culminated in the U.S. Army and

⁵ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 1964, 2004), 52.

⁶ Galula, p. 55.

⁷ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual under the direction of Gen. David Petraeus.⁸ The strategy involves three primary components: providing security to the population, understanding the needs of the population through close interaction with them and a nuanced grasp of the culture, and developing legitimacy for the government through improved governance, institutions, and development projects. In Iraq and Afghanistan, a strategy called “clear, hold, build” was eventually implemented which essentially followed this approach and improved the situation on the ground in both places.

There is a wide divergence in the literature pertaining to counterinsurgency. On the one hand, there is agreement among one group of experts (mostly academics) that democracies are uniquely incapable of carrying out counterinsurgency warfare while, on the other hand, there is another group, composed of both military practitioners and some academics, which argues that democracies can be successful given that they follow the appropriate strategy. Determining which one of these competing camps in the literature is correct, or, whether or not they both contain elements of the truth, is extremely important to future force structure and national security issues for many democratic regimes, but particularly for the United States.

A demonstrated failure of democracies’ efforts in counterinsurgency, along with a robust theoretical explanation detailing why they are inherently handicapped in such wars, has major policy implications. It may cause democratic governments, believing that it is impossible for them to win counterinsurgencies, to prematurely give in to insurgent demands or not to respond to them at all. It could lead democracies to focus

⁸ The United States Army and United States Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, FM 3-24, MCWP 3-33.5, (Kissimmee, FL: Signalman Publishing, 2009).

military resources, spending and planning towards more conventional forms of warfare, despite the fact that counterinsurgency warfare is much more likely to occur. The belief that democracies can't win counterinsurgency may result in a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby democratic regimes faced with an insurgency may be resigned to failure at the outset and therefore not devote the appropriate resources or implement the correct strategy necessary to prevail. If it is demonstrated, on the other hand, that democracies can win counterinsurgency efforts, and that there exists a fairly strong consensus around the necessary strategy for doing so, such regimes can prepare their militaries for such contingencies and confidently resist insurgent elements when they present themselves. This is not to say, however, that winning such conflicts will be easy.

This dissertation will untangle this puzzle by examining the arguments on both sides of the divide in order to determine which group presents the more plausible case. This will be done first by a conceptual analysis of the arguments and secondly by an examination of three case studies: Malaysia, Vietnam, and Iraq. Through these analyses I will demonstrate that the argument against the ability of democracies to perform in counterinsurgencies is not as strong as many scholars currently believe. Secondly, this research will demonstrate that a population-based, culturally-informed, counterinsurgency strategy, the one advocated by most experts in the field, provides a plausible avenue of victory for democratic states faced with insurgencies. Though such a strategy cannot, of course, guarantee success, and all such conflicts are likely to be extremely difficult and costly, the more closely it is followed the more likely success will be.

ORGANIZATION

The first chapter will grapple with and attempt to define a variety of relevant terms and concepts. Definitions of both insurgency and counterinsurgency will be provided. What it means to “win” a war, which can be a highly complex and sometimes subjective determination, will be explored. Similarly, the concepts of “culture” and “legitimacy” will be examined.

This chapter will also analyze the arguments of those who believe that democracies are uniquely disadvantaged in counterinsurgencies. The reasons for this supposed weakness will be presented and critically examined in terms of the strength of their logic and the weight of the supporting empirical evidence. Following this analysis, a population-centric counterinsurgency strategy will be presented and its plausibility for democratic governments will be considered.

The next three chapters will consist of case studies. Since much of the rationale behind the idea that democracies are uniquely handicapped in counterinsurgencies comes from empirical evidence rather than solely through mere theoretical analysis, an empirical examination in the form of case studies will be useful in demonstrating the plausibility of the counterinsurgency strategy proposed here. A purely theoretical refutation of the idea that democracies are inept at counterinsurgencies would not carry the same weight as one confirmed by case study analysis. One of the case studies (Malaysia) will be that of a democracy actually winning a counterinsurgency and how it was done. Two others (Vietnam and Iraq) will show that the lack of success experienced was not due to the democratic nature of the counterinsurgent but rather to faulty strategy. While counterfactuals are most often impossible to prove, a strong case can be made

demonstrating with a high degree of plausibility that these conflicts could have been prosecuted more successfully had they more closely followed the counterinsurgency strategy proposed here, or one similar to it.

These three case studies will provide a broad analysis of relatively contemporary conflicts that can still offer highly relevant lessons for today. The Malaysian case study will serve as an example of a democracy (Great Britain) successfully countering an insurgency. It will also serve to illustrate a conflict in which the strategy most closely aligned to that laid out in the counterinsurgency literature was followed. Its final virtue is that it is a non-U.S. case and will therefore distinguish it from the other two.

The second case study, that of Vietnam, is an example of a powerful democracy being defeated by a relatively weaker insurgency. Despite massive expenditure, a huge loss of life, and an effort that spanned over a decade, one of the most powerful countries on the planet could not defeat an insurgent movement in an undeveloped country. The study will explore the reasons for the defeat and provide an opportunity to judge whether or not it serves as evidence that democracies are inherently incapable of counterinsurgency, or instead demonstrates only that democratic countries are likely to fail if they diverge from the optimal strategy propounded by counterinsurgency experts. Since the strategy and tactics utilized in Vietnam were not monolithic, this case study draws out the significant differences between the two primary strategies utilized.

Under the leadership of Gen. William Westmoreland, a conventional seek-and-destroy strategy was implemented with the intention of eliminating the enemy through force. While counterinsurgency was recognized as an aspect of the war, Westmoreland thought of it as secondary and left those tasks to the South Vietnamese government and

military. In 1968, Westmoreland was replaced with Gen. Creighton Abrams. Though Abrams continued to seek out the enemy and was by no means opposed to the use of force, he implemented a strategy that was much more in-line with a population-centered counterinsurgency strategy. The results obtained under the two strategies were remarkably different and the use of such within-case comparison is instructive when judging success in counterinsurgency. It strongly supports the contention that a conventional military strategy is not likely to be successful against a committed insurgent. It also demonstrates, however, that such failure does not mean that democracies can't win against such foes. Rather, the success obtained following the implementation of a strategy more in-line with counterinsurgency principles indicates that winning is possible.

Finally, the case of Iraq will provide a more ambiguous case study in terms of victory or defeat. Some of the goals set out by the United States in its efforts to support the constituted government of Iraq against insurgent forces were certainly met, others, however, were not. In some cases, the level of success remains unclear. This case study will provide a particularly good model for judging the success of the proposed counterinsurgency strategy versus a more traditional military approach and whether or not the difference has any broad implications for democratic countries engaged in counterinsurgency. There was a clear evolution over time from a conventional approach to an approach more consistent with the counterinsurgency principles put forward here and by experts in the field. Like Vietnam, the within-case differences between a conventional period and a counterinsurgency period are key to obtaining a more nuanced understanding of success and failure in Iraq. This case demonstrates that the more

rigorously counterinsurgency principles were adhered to, the higher the level of success that was achieved.

The concluding chapter will analyze the lessons arrived at from the conceptual analysis conducted in chapter two and through the three case studies. It will recapitulate the evidence that democracies are not inherently incapable of conducting successful counterinsurgencies but that in order to achieve success an appropriate strategy must be adopted, carried out, and sufficiently resourced. Though winning counterinsurgencies can indeed be done by democracies, it will be expensive and require a great deal of commitment, and most importantly, the right strategy. Democracies can win counterinsurgencies, but only if they institute a strategy that is consistent with democratic capabilities and limitations.

The two major findings of this dissertation are that 1) democracies can win counterinsurgencies, and 2) they are most likely to do so by following a population-centered strategy. It provides a more nuanced picture of past conflicts that are often pointed to as evidence of failure. Rather than just look at the case of Vietnam or Iraq and chalk them up as defeats, the analysis presented here differentiates between different periods of those conflicts and the various strategies implemented. Counterinsurgency cannot be considered a failure in an instance in which counterinsurgency strategy was not implemented, or was implemented too late. This was the case in both Vietnam and Iraq. A conventional approach was tried at the beginning of both wars. Only after it became clear that the conventional approach was failing were population-centered counterinsurgency strategies implemented. The major turnarounds in both conflicts that

followed the switch in strategy is powerful evidence that democracies can be successful counterinsurgents provided that they take the right approach.

This serves as a significant contribution to the literature concerning the ability of democracies to win counterinsurgencies. Coming in the wake of disappointing results in the conflicts in both Afghanistan and Iraq, it is important that the proper lessons from history be learned. A blunt analysis may lead democratic decision-makers to give up on the concept of counterinsurgency and merely to hope that such conflicts will not arise again while focusing military resources on preparing for fights they can win, conventional ones. When examined with the proper nuance, however, these defeats shouldn't be viewed as defeats for counterinsurgency, but instead as evidence that a conventional strategy is unlikely to be a productive one in such conflicts. In order for a democracy to win a counterinsurgency, a counterinsurgency strategy is called for. Furthermore, not any type of counterinsurgency strategy will do. Those academics are right who claim that a strategy reliant upon brutality is not likely to be sustainable for a democratic regime, as the case of the French in Algeria demonstrates. But there is another path. A counterinsurgency strategy based on protecting the people and winning them over through competent and legitimate governance while simultaneously separating them from the insurgents provides the optimal chance of success.

CHAPTER 2

THE ARGUMENTS

The complexity and ambiguity of the subject of counterinsurgency is perhaps represented by the number of terms that refer to it. These conflicts have been called small wars, revolutionary wars, low intensity conflicts, and counterinsurgencies. Though each of these terms has its own subtleties, some of them being broader while others are more narrow, for the most part they are interchangeable. For the purposes of this dissertation the term counterinsurgency, or COIN, will be used throughout, with the exception of direct quotations from other authors who use one of the different terms.

FM 3-24, the Army and Marine Corps' field manual for counterinsurgency, following joint doctrine, defines insurgency as "an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict (JP 1-02). Stated another way, an insurgency is an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control."¹ Counterinsurgency is the effort by the challenged political authority to thwart the insurgency while maintaining its own legitimacy. This effort can entail military, political, developmental, economic, diplomatic and law enforcement elements, among others. Though counterinsurgency is often seen as a military activity, in reality a successful counterinsurgency is likely to require a competent application of the full spectrum of governmental capabilities.

¹The United States Army and United States Marine Corps, 1-1.

Both insurgencies and counterinsurgencies often involve outside actors.

Insurgents often seek external assistance for sanctuary, renewed manpower, supplies, and moral support. In fact, both Jeffrey Record² and a study conducted by RAND³ find that such external support is one of the most crucial factors in whether or not an insurgency is likely to succeed. The counterinsurgent government also often has external support. Democratic states are often the supporting actors for weak allies facing insurgencies. This was the case in both Vietnam and Iraq, for example. As will be shown later, there is some reason to believe that it is the fact that democratic regimes are often conducting counterinsurgency operations in foreign (some would say occupied) countries that explains their unusual record of defeat rather than the nature of their regime.

This chapter will critically examine a variety of reasons that have led scholars to believe that democracies are uniquely inept at fighting counterinsurgencies, along with identifying some of the weaknesses in those arguments. It will also dissect key concepts, such as legitimacy and what winning means when it comes to counterinsurgency, for which a proper understanding is necessary before moving on. The first argument that leads many scholars to doubt the ability of democratic regimes to successfully fight in counterinsurgencies is that they lack the necessary resolve to do so. The basis of this argument, and its possible flaws, are discussed in the following section.

² Jeffrey Record, *Beating Goliath: Why Insurgencies Win* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009).

³ Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2010).

LACK OF RESOLVE

The lack of resolve which democracies supposedly exhibit in the face of counterinsurgency is one of the most prominent arguments advanced in explanation of their presumed ineptitude at winning such conflicts. The root of this argument stems from Andrew Mack's seminal 1975 article, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Warfare" published in the journal *World Politics*. In this article Mack focused on the perceived level of importance placed on the outcome by each participant in an asymmetric conflict. His main argument boils down to this one statement: "for the insurgents the war is 'total,' while for the external power it is necessarily 'limited.'"⁴ The weaker power, the insurgent group, has everything at stake and is using all means at its disposal. The stronger power, however, not having as much at stake and presuming victory to come easily in any case, does not bring its full force to bear at the outset and, having less to lose, is more apt to withdraw from the conflict when the costs start to become too steep.

This disparity of wills applies most particularly when the counterinsurgent is an external occupying force that cannot be threatened with invasion of its home territory by the insurgent. It is the stronger resolve of insurgent forces that has allowed them to be successful. Subsequent to an analysis of insurgent victories, Mack concludes that, "In every case, success for the insurgents arose not from a military victory on the ground—though military successes may have been a contributory cause—but rather from the progressive attrition of their opponents' *political* capability to wage war. In such

⁴ Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (1975): 181.

asymmetric conflicts, insurgents may gain political victory from a situation of military stalemate *or even defeat*.”⁵

The divergence in will-power is also likely to be prominent when a large developed state, what Mack calls a metropolitan state, is involved in the occupation of a smaller state. The insurgent forces of the smaller state are facing annihilation while a defeat for the metropolitan state will presumably be less existentially drastic. If it is perceived that low stakes are involved for the metropolitan state, high costs become less sustainable. Mack argues that if such a war

escalates dramatically, as it did in Algeria and Vietnam, it makes a definite impact on the economic and political resources which might otherwise have been allocated to, say, public welfare projects. Tax increases may be necessary to cover the costs of the war, a draft system may have to be introduced, and inflation will be an almost certain by-product. Such costs are seen as part of the ‘necessary price’ when the security of the nation is directly threatened. When this is not the case, the basis for consensus disappears. In a limited war, it is not clear to those groups whose interests are adversely affected why such sacrifices are necessary.⁶

It may be argued here that democratic regimes are most likely to be adversely affected by such concerns. Since democratic governments must be more responsive to public opinion than autocracies, democracies should therefore be less capable of preventing unpopularity from having a major impact on their resolve and fighting ability. While Mack acknowledges this possibility, he does not claim that his theory applies only, or even more to, democracies. In fact, he points out that “politics, under *any* political system involves conflict over the allocation of resources. In closed or centrist policies, these conflicts will by and large be confined to the ruling elite—but not necessarily so.”⁷ Mack discusses internal conflict among the ruling elite in Portugal over the costs incurred

⁵ Mack, 177 (emphasis in original).

⁶ Mack, 185-186.

⁷ Mack, 189.

by their colonial possessions as demonstrating that the principle applies to non-democratic regimes as well as democratic ones. In fact, there is little *a priori* reason to judge democracies more vulnerable to this problem than autocracies.

It could in fact be argued that democracies are less susceptible to this problem, at least in certain cases. This is so because in democratic regimes discontent can be demonstrated via open debates, popular demonstrations, and elections. These activities certainly present a risk to the ruling party or parties that cannot be ignored. The risks to an autarkic government, however, may be even greater. The leaders of autocracies, when challenged by public discontent, may not face a simple loss at the next election but may risk being deposed through a *coup d'etat* due to military opposition. Public unrest on a large scale is also a major threat as the normal means of dealing with such problems, military force, will be diverted in fighting the insurgency. This is especially the case in autocracies that rely upon military strength to impose their rule. A divergence of that strength to a foreign counterinsurgency effort while increasing opposition at home may leave them highly vulnerable to regime change not through an electoral process but through the use of force. Such tenuously balanced autocracies may feel even more pressure to abandon a foreign counterinsurgency effort than would a democracy. Whether or not a democratic regime is more or less vulnerable to the pressures outlined by Mack is not a determination that can be made merely by considering regime type alone, other variables may be equally, or even more, important.

Leaving regime type aside, it is not clear that Mack's argument is as completely successful at explaining the defeat of metropolitan powers by smaller insurgents as he

would like to think. Jeffrey Record, for example, complains that Mack's case selection biases the outcome of his study.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Mack's analysis makes no reference to examples of metropolitan-government military and political defeats of foreign insurgencies such as Great Britain's defeat of the Indian Mutiny (1857), the Boers in South Africa (1899-1902), and Malayan Races Liberation Army in Malaya (1948-60); Spain's defeat of the Rif rebellion in Spanish Morocco (1921-26); and the U.S. defeat of the Aguinaldo rebellion in the Philippines (1899-1901) and the Sandino insurrection in Nicaragua (1926-33). These and other cases suggest that factors other than political will are at work. Even the strongest will, if hitched to a bad strategy or denied minimum material resources, can be defeated.⁸

Arreguin-Toft also criticizes Mack's thesis on three grounds. He first points out that even when survival is not at stake for the strong actors, they may act as if it were in order to protect other major interests, such as their dominant position in the international system. He argues that this is especially likely when the strong actor believes that defeat could have a domino effect which would impose additional costs in other areas of foreign policy.⁹ Secondly, he argues that Mack's thesis presumes a certain passage of time before the costs to metropolitan power begin to accumulate. "Mack's argument," he says, "assumes rather than explains a weak actor's capacity to avoid defeat and impose costs on its stronger adversary. This leaves us wondering why some asymmetric conflicts are over quickly yet others drag on."¹⁰ Arreguin-Toft's third critique of Mack is that his thesis leaves the increased rate of defeat for metropolitan powers unexplained. If Mack has identified the most important explanatory variable for the defeat of strong powers in asymmetric conflict why did it not apply equally in the past as in the present?

⁸ Record, 9.

⁹ Arreguin-Toft, 14.

¹⁰ Arreguin-Toft, 14.

Mack's case may be strengthened, however, at least as applied to democracies, when buttressed by the issue of casualty aversion. In the wake of America's defeat in Vietnam, the United States' inability to stomach a large number of casualties became a plausible explanation. This hypothesis led John E. Mueller to conduct a quantitative comparison of American public opinion of the Korean and Vietnam Wars and the level of casualties sustained in them. He famously came to the conclusion that popular support for war could be seen "as a function of the *logarithm* of the total number of American casualties that had been suffered at the time of the poll...*In each war, support is projected to have started at much the same level and then every time American casualties increased by a factor of 10 (i.e., from 100 to 1,000 or from 10,000 to 100,000) support for the war dropped by about 15 percentage points.*"¹¹

These findings quickly consolidated into a consensus that the United States in particular, and democracies in general, suffered from a weak stomach and any war efforts that they might engage in were subject to being undermined by weakening public support as casualties mounted. This phenomenon became known as the Vietnam Syndrome. Many hoped that this aversion had been overcome in the United States by the quick success in the Persian Gulf War in 1991. Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, however, point out that:

Contrary to the predictions of those who saw Desert Storm as putting the Vietnam experience to rest, the relatively low U.S. death total in Desert Storm only raised public expectations of bloodless foreign policy and fed perceptions among policy makers that the public had softened in this regard. The further erosion of already fragile U.S. public support that followed the October 1993 deaths of 18

¹¹ John E. Mueller, "Trends in Popular Support for the Wars in Korea and Vietnam," *The American Political Science Review* 65, no. 2, (June 1971): 366 (emphasis in original).

servicemen in Mogadishu evinced the strong pull that U.S. casualties can exert on policy.¹²

These conclusions fit handily with Mack's contention that democracies can't hang tough long enough to win asymmetric conflicts such as insurgencies. Recent research, however, has drawn a more nuanced picture of casualty aversion in democracies, and particularly the United States. The work of several researchers indicate that there are multiple factors involved in how democratic publics react to war casualties. This literature is put in context below.

Richard Eisenberg, in his article "Victory Has Many Friends," which examines American public opinion between the years 1981 and 2005, finds that the aims of the conflict matter when it comes to acceptability of casualties. If the goals of a conflict are considered to be significant and worthwhile, support is likely to remain high despite casualties. This finding is not a positive one, however, for democratic counterinsurgents, especially when the counterinsurgency is carried out abroad. He finds that intervention in civil wars or peacekeeping activities in their aftermaths receive less initial support than do more conventional conflicts. He argues that, "it seems likely that one reason for the public's reticence is the estimate that intervention in civil wars offers uncertain prospects for success. Civil wars are particularly intractable because of their zero-sum nature, and reconciliation of competing factions requires a political rather than a military victory."¹³ Since counterinsurgencies are often similar in nature, it is likely that they will also have lower initial levels of support than do conventional conflicts.

¹² Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, *The Dynamics of Coercion: American Foreign Policy and the Limits of Military Might* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 135.

¹³ Richard C. Eisenberg, "Victory Has Many Friends: U.S. Public Opinion and the Use of Military Force, 1981-2005," *International Security* 30, no. 1 (Summer 2005): 175.

This initial pessimism may be outweighed, however, if military operations are seen as being successful. Eisenberg's second important finding is that "...the public's support is conditioned by the outcome of the military intervention rather than by the number of casualties that are actually suffered."¹⁴ Indeed he found that success can overcome high levels of casualties and a war can remain popular despite them.¹⁵ This may also bode ill for democratic counterinsurgents since it is precisely in such conflicts that military progress may be most difficult to measure. Counterinsurgencies may be able to overcome initial public skepticism if they are perceptibly successful but may suffer even further erosion if not.

Another important factor in determining public opinion was multilateral support. Though this variable was weaker than either policy objectives or the cost-benefit analysis produced by perceptions of success or failure, multilateral cooperation did increase public support for conflict. Eisenberg surmises that this is due to the perception of burden sharing.¹⁶ Moral solidarity may also be an important element. How this factor will affect public opinion about counterinsurgencies will of course be case-dependent, as some counterinsurgencies are highly multilateral while others are less so.

Research conducted by Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler on U.S. public opinion concerning casualties in Iraq corroborates Eisenberg's first two findings.¹⁷ They demonstrate that two key variables directing U.S. public opinion in this case were perceptions of the wars rightness or wrongness (consistent with Eisenberg's

¹⁴ Eisenberg, 175.

¹⁵ Eisenberg, 147.

¹⁶ Eisenberg, 175.

¹⁷ Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, "Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq," *International Security* 30, no. 3 (Winter, 2005/2006).

findings on war aims) and the likelihood of success. They also find that these two factors are interrelated and effect each other but that success is the stronger of the two variables.

Success is such an important variable, they argue, that it trumps the raw number of combat deaths. In contradistinction to Mueller, they contend that public support for the war did not vary with casualty numbers but instead was determined by the public's moral view of the war along with perceived levels of success during the war's various phases. This research leads them to conclude that "...the public does not measure success in terms of body bags. On the contrary, the public claimed to focus on whether the coalition was in fact winning over the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people, as measured by Iraqi willingness to cooperate with coalition forces."¹⁸ These findings have important implications for counterinsurgency campaigns in that it demonstrates the public's understanding of the key importance of gaining the support of the population. Achieving such support is a major plank of the counterinsurgency strategy outlined below, as being the most likely to lead to success for democratic regimes.

Scott Sigmund Gartner remains unconvinced by the argument presented by Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler. He agrees that public opinion is the result of engaging in cost-benefit analyses of war, but rejects their conclusion that casualties don't matter. The results of his statistical analysis indicate that they definitely do matter, though casualty aversion is context dependent. He argues that his data indicate that the impact of recent casualties on public opinion interacts with overall casualty trends. This interaction strongly influences

¹⁸ Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, 45.

public opinion and he finds that the probability of victory cannot substitute as an explanatory variable for public opinion.¹⁹

The research of D. Scott Bennett and Allan Stam may demonstrate the effects of eroding public support in the face of mounting casualties and the other costs of conflict. They find that while democratic initiators of conflict start with a greater overall chance of winning than do autocracies, that advantage declines over time. Their results can be summarized as finding that as long as a conflict continues, "...democratic initiators become less likely to continue fighting, less likely to win, and much more likely to accept a draw."²⁰ Specifically, they find that democratic initiators have a 32% chance of continuing to fight during the first year but only a 22% chance by the fifth year. The probability of a democracy winning a war is 49% in the first year but only 6% by the fifth.²¹ Furthermore, they find that autocracies do not experience the same sharp decline in the likelihood of winning.²²

The totality of this research, Andrew Mack's combined with the casualty aversion literature, would seem to indicate a strong handicap for a democratic regime's ability to win a counterinsurgency. Democracies are likely to be less committed to the outcome of the conflict, be less willing to sustain casualties, and experience a drop-off in their chances of winning a conflict over time which may be particularly harmful in

¹⁹ Scott Sigmund Gartner, "The Multiple Effects of Casualties on Public Support for War: An Experimental Approach," *The American Political Science Review* 102, no. 1, (February 2008): 104-105.

²⁰ D. Scott Bennett and Allan C. Stam III, "The Declining Advantages of Democracy: A Combined Model of War Outcomes and Duration," in "Opening up the Black Box of War: Politics and the Conduct of War," ed. Scott Sigmund Gartner, special issue, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 3 (June 1998): 361.

²¹ Bennett and Stam, 361.

²² Bennet and Stam, 363.

counterinsurgency efforts. Other research, however, may serve to weaken this pessimistic outlook for democracies, at least to some extent.

One important finding stems from a RAND study entitled *How Insurgencies End*. The study finds that the median length of an insurgency lasts ten years, though some can last considerably longer.²³ This is seemingly bad news for democratic counterinsurgents since they may experience a declining willingness to fight over time. The study also finds, however, that longer insurgencies are not disproportionately won by the insurgent side. The study reports that "...the average length of insurgent-won conflicts does not exceed the average length of time of government-won conflicts. Therefore, it is safer to conclude that *insurgents do not necessarily win as long as they manage to 'hold out.'*"²⁴ This is true because insurgencies themselves often lose the support of the public as the conflict runs on. The study notes three possible reasons for this: 1) the insurgents lose their message over time and re-focus on issues that are extraneous to those of the original insurgency, 2) the use of indiscriminate tactics such as terrorism, and 3) government success at undermining the key demands of the insurgency through social, political and economic changes.²⁵

Real examples also serve to undermine the notion that democratic governments cannot determinedly fight counterinsurgency over a long period of time. The three case studies examined in later chapters all demonstrate a considerable willingness by democratic counterinsurgents to continue fighting over long periods of time. The most clear example is that of the Malaysian Emergency. Often called The Long, Long War,

²³ Connable and Libicki, 27.

²⁴ Connable and Libicki, 29.

²⁵ Connable and Libicki, 30-31.

the British fought insurgent forces from 1948 - 1960. In this case, Britain's willingness to continue the fight led to eventual success.

In another example of long-term commitment to counterinsurgency by a democratic regime, the United States was engaged in Vietnam from 1950 - 1975 with a considerable engagement of combat troops from 1965 - 1973. Though the United States of course lost that war, and public opinion likely played a large role in that loss, it is not clear that the application of a more appropriate strategy would not have led to a better outcome (as I argue in chapter five). And despite the outcome it demonstrates American willingness to suffer a large number of combat deaths (over 50,000) for a long period of time.

The Iraq War provides another example of a democratic country displaying significant commitment to a counterinsurgency effort. The United States committed combat troops to the conflict from March 2003 to December 2011 and withdrew combat forces at the behest of the newly constituted government there. The outcome was a mixed one but did result in several key achievements. Its ultimate success or failure will take more time to judge, but what cannot be doubted is that the United States contributed substantial combat troops to a counterinsurgency effort for a sustained period of time while suffering increasing casualty rates.

Other research further militates against the notion that democracies are inept at counterinsurgencies. Jason Lyall, for example, argues that it is not their political system that has led to the unusual number of losses tallied up by democratic counterinsurgents but rather the types of counterinsurgencies that they find themselves engaged in. He

points out that democracies are more likely to be engaged in *foreign* counterinsurgencies and argues that this is the key dependent variable. Democracy itself is spurious.

According to Lyall's analysis, democratic regimes face far less chance of internal war. Therefore, the wars that they do get involved in are foreign wars, which are inherently more difficult to win than are internal ones. Since autocracies are more likely to fight internal insurgencies and democracies more likely to fight more challenging foreign insurgencies, democracies lose more often than autocracies. He also points out that foreign counterinsurgency efforts are easier to withdraw from. For states battling internal insurgent forces, withdrawal is not likely to be an option at all. This may serve as an alternative explanation for why democratic regimes withdraw sooner than autocratic regimes on average. It's not because they suffer from weaker resolve but rather that they enjoy more options.²⁶

In a separate study, Lyall, along with co-author Isaiah Wilson III, find yet another variable that may have been confused with democracy. In the Winter 2009 issue of the journal *International Organization* they convincingly argue that mechanization is a better explanatory variable than is democratic regime type (though they do not claim that regime type is totally irrelevant) through both statistical analysis and comparative case studies of mechanized versus infantry units in Iraq. It is the mechanized nature of democratic militaries, rather than the democratic nature of their regimes, that best explains their tendency to be less effective at counterinsurgency.

Democracies are usually richer and more powerful than are autocracies, which is one of the most puzzling aspects of their failure to be more successful at counter-

²⁶ Lyall, 173.

insurgency warfare. Lyall and Wilson argue that it is this very wealth which undermines their efficacy at counterinsurgency warfare. This is so because they use that wealth to develop highly mechanized war machines that are ineffective in counterinsurgency conflicts. As they put it,

Scholars and practitioners largely agree that successful COIN efforts hinge not on the physical destruction of insurgent organizations but rather on the incumbent's ability to win over local populations. Mechanized militaries thus already begin at a disadvantage since their battle mission may be secondary, and even counterproductive, to the determinants of success. Instead the key to success lies in the efficient collection of reliable information on population characteristics, including its grievances, cleavages, power structures, views of the counterinsurgent, and the nature of the insurgents themselves. Acquiring this information in turn requires a high rate of interaction between counterinsurgent and population so that the requisite skills—including language and cultural awareness—are obtained and connections forged.²⁷

These problems are further exacerbated by the facts that mechanized militaries tend to be less troop intensive, are incapable of traversing certain types of terrain, and usually pass through insurgent areas more quickly, thereby increasing the total area covered but decreasing the longevity of that coverage.²⁸ Furthermore, mechanized militaries may become more culturally and bureaucratically directed towards conventional warfare and view counterinsurgency as secondary, therefore devoting fewer resources to it and reducing their likelihood of success in such conflicts.²⁹ Democracies, due to their generally greater role in the international structure, may view conventional warfare as a greater threat than do less prominent states, thereby reinforcing the need for heavy mechanization and a continued focus on conventional war. Autocracies, on the

²⁷ Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, "Rage Against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency War," *International Organization* 63 (Winter 2009): 76.

²⁸ Lyall and Wilson, 77.

²⁹ Lyall and Wilson, 78.

other hand, which tend to have less mechanized militaries, may view internal insurgency as a primary threat and focus their military planning accordingly.

Despite the abundance of literature purporting to demonstrate that democratic states can't hang tough long enough to win a prolonged counterinsurgency effort, because they aren't playing for the same high stakes and because they are uniquely sensitive to battlefield casualties, other research indicates that democracy is a spurious variable and it is other factors—the types of wars that democracies fight and the types of armies that they have—which truly explain the vulnerability of democracies in counterinsurgencies. At first sight, this doesn't appear to be a very helpful finding for powerful democracies such as the United States. Whether democracy itself is the problem or not, they still face major handicaps if they are to fight counterinsurgencies overseas with highly mechanized militaries. After a second look, however, it may indeed be a positive discovery that other factors are at work in democratic deficiencies in COIN rather than being solely a matter of regime type.

If democracy is truly the main problem, then there may not be much that such regimes could do to ameliorate their problems with COIN, other than become non-democratic which is not a very tempting option. The problems of operating in a foreign environment and with a sub-optimal military force, however, are amenable to correction, to at least some degree. The deployment of a cultural knowledge capability, such as Human Terrain Teams (discussed in the Iraq case study), and an increased focus on working with the host government may help alleviate the problem of operating in a foreign territory. The use of more ground troops engaged in a population-centered, COIN oriented, mission rather than a highly mechanized more conventional mission

might reduce the problems noted by Lyall and Wilson. This research, then, though initially foreboding, may offer democracies some reason for optimism when faced with the prospects of having to conduct COIN operations. There remains, however, another very strong body of research that seems to demonstrate the inability of democracies to conduct COIN. This research focuses on strategy and is discussed in the following section.

STRATEGIC LIMITATIONS

Arreguin-Toft argues that the key explanatory variable for the defeat of the stronger powers in asymmetric conflict is a strategic one. He says that “the best predictor of asymmetric conflict outcomes is *strategic interaction*. According to this thesis, the interaction of the strategies actors use during a conflict predicts the outcome of that conflict better than competing explanations.”³⁰

There are, he argues, two primary approaches to strategy in such conflicts, direct and indirect, and that these two approaches apply to both the offense and the defense. A direct approach for the offense would be a conventional attack and for the defense a conventional defensive posture. The indirect approaches for the offense include barbarism (which Arreguin-Toft focuses on) and other non-traditional approaches such as “hearts and minds.” The corresponding indirect strategy for the defense would be guerrilla warfare. According to Arreguin-Toft’s research, “when actors employ similar strategic approaches (direct-direct or indirect-indirect) relative power explains the outcome: strong actors will win quickly and decisively. When actors employ opposite

³⁰ Arreguin-Toft, 18.

strategic approaches (direct-indirect or indirect-direct), weak actors are much more likely to win, *even when everything we think we know about power says they shouldn't.*"³¹

Arreguin-Toft supports this hypothesis through analysis of five case studies: the Murid War (1830 - 1859), the South African War (1899 - 1902), the Italo-Ethiopian War (1935 - 1940), the Vietnam War (1965 - 1973), and the Afghan Civil War (1979 - 1989). He finds that when the strong power in these conflicts met insurgency with barbarism (an indirect offensive strategy vs. an indirect defensive strategy) that power was successful. When they met insurgency with conventional force, they most often were not. An interesting aspect of these analyses is that in every case the indirect strategy used by the stronger power was barbarism, though Arreguin-Toft notes that there are other possibilities.

This fact is important because according to Gil Merom's research, democratic regimes have a particular challenge in using barbarism as a strategy. He explains the greater frequency of strong powers losing small wars by reference to regime type. Most of the counterinsurgencies carried out during the last five or six decades have been by democracies. He uses the examples of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam. Democratic governments often experience societal pressures to conform to the normative rules of war, therefore ruling out, or at least making much more difficult, the concerted use of barbarism as a strategy. Democracies face a dilemma in which they must balance the normative expectations of society against the pragmatic necessities of warfare, or as Merom puts it, "for democracies, the process that dooms the prospects of political victory in protracted small wars involves an almost impossible

³¹ Arreguin-Toft, 18.

trade-off between expedient and moral dicta that arise from an intricate interplay between forces in the battlefield and at home."³² In essence, domestic pressures forestall democracies from using the indirect strategy of barbarism against the indirect strategy of guerilla warfare.

When put together, Arreguin-Toft's and Merom's explanations for how strong (and democratic) powers lose small wars is extremely powerful. The country that is today most involved in counterinsurgency warfare, the United States, is both democratic and vastly more powerful than the actors it has fought in its two most recent conflicts, those in Iraq and Afghanistan. The research, however, leaves little hope for ultimate victory in these conflicts. If an indirect strategy is necessary to defeat the indirect strategy of the insurgents, if that indirect strategy is barbarism, and if barbarism is not a socially or morally acceptable strategy for democratic states to pursue, then defeat for the United States in these conflicts seems inevitable. The same would also apply to future such conflicts involving the United States or other powerful democratic states.

Though the prospects for strong democracies prevailing in counterinsurgency efforts appears to be grim, I will demonstrate here that the inability of democratic states to rely upon barbarism as a strategy does not imply their inevitable defeat. In fact, Arreguin-Toft leaves the door open to another possibility in his brief mention that barbarism is not the only indirect offensive strategy available (although he analyzes no others in his case studies). Since democracies are precluded from engaging in prolonged barbarism, and rightfully so, an alternative form of indirect strategy must be adopted in

³² Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 24.

order for them to win such conflicts. That strategy is a culturally sensitive population-centric one.

Rather than utilize barbarism as a tool, therefore, powerful democratic states should look to winning the population to their side when engaged in counterinsurgency—the exact opposite of barbarism is called for. The only way that this can be done is by establishing a government that is at least minimally effective and seen as legitimate by the people. Meeting the population's needs in terms of livelihood, justice, and basic development are key to building trust and establishing a functional relationship between the counterinsurgent force and the population. This, in turn, can only be accomplished with a thorough understanding of the population in question and its culture. A population-focused strategy will get nowhere without such an understanding. In order for democracies to successfully counter insurgencies they must apply an indirect strategy consisting of a culturally nuanced effort to win the support of the population. This strategy is more fully outlined in a subsequent chapter. Before discussing how to win a counterinsurgency, however, it is necessary to take a brief look at what it means to win one.

WHAT COUNTS AS WINNING?

Determining who won or lost a conflict may seem like a very easy thing to do. The winning side was victorious in a greater number of key battlefield engagements, forcing the losing side to acquiesce to their demands. But not all conflicts end as clearly as when the Japanese signed a treaty of unconditional surrender on the deck of the U.S.S.

Missouri.³³ In fact, such a conclusive outcome is the exception in modern conflicts. Even in cases in which such seemingly final terms are reached, this may only signal the movement from one type of conflict, conventional, to another type, insurgency. This was certainly the case with the Iraq War in which George W. Bush triumphantly announced the end of major combat operations aboard an American aircraft carrier only for the conflict to quickly morph into an even more deadly insurgency. In contemporary combat situations, the difference between winning and losing is often ambiguous and subject to individual judgment. Such judgments can result in differing conclusions based upon two major factors—differences in the definition of victory and differences in cognitive biases. Both are considered below.

Robert Mandel, in his important book *The Meaning of Military Victory*, argues that there are two primary ways in which to define or measure victory, each of which faces conceptual problems. These two measurements of victory are 1) reaching a desired end state and, 2) attaining a positive cost-benefit ratio over time.³⁴ The first of these is the most traditional and common. As Mandel describes it, “This approach views victory as a relationship between war aims and war outcomes, with successful outcomes of fighting necessitating satisfactory attainment of one’s own war aims and, preferably, frustration of one’s opponents’ war aims.”³⁵ This type of measurement is problematic, however, in that it is possible to achieve the initial war aims while still not being able to claim victory, at least not in an unqualified sense. The U.S. operations in both

³³ The surrender wasn’t quite unconditional as it protected the Emperor from prosecution as a war criminal and secured the maintenance of his status as at least a figurehead in the new government.

³⁴ Robert Mandel, *The Meaning of Military Victory* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006), 5-7.

³⁵ Mandel, 5.

Afghanistan and Iraq are examples of this. Although in both cases the initial war aims were achieved fairly rapidly with conventional forces, the insurgencies that subsequently developed erased, or at least seriously eroded, any claim to victory that the U.S. might be able to make in either place.

In any given conflict there are likely to be multiple war aims, some of which may eventually be achieved and others not. In such cases, victory is unclear. Perhaps the various aims can be ranked according to importance and victory can be judged on achieving those at the top of the list, but in other cases aims might be equally ranked or ranked differently by different persons or organizations. Furthermore, war aims often shift during the course of a conflict. It's possible, and in fact has often happened, that initial war aims may have been unrealistic or irrelevant. Mandel's point on this issue is worth quoting at length:

Beyond ambiguity and fluctuation, measuring victory in terms of achieving war aims raises questions about their appropriateness. What if national security policymakers identify a wrong-headed end state, making its accomplishment meaningless or irrelevant to attaining their actual underlying desires in the aftermath of war? Historical cases abound where the identified war aims of victors have appeared, with the benefit of hindsight, to be misguided. For example, in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, the United States appeared to satisfy many of its strategic objectives, as immediately after a decisive military victory the United States enjoyed a huge boost in international prestige, Saddam Hussein was punished, and other tyrannical despots watched all this with horror; however, these may not have been the right objectives, as they did not include regime change. Given the turmoil that quickly emerged within Iraq, regime change perhaps could have prevented the need for another war twelve years later. In such cases, should victory be judged by what the victor said it wanted to achieve, or by what the victor *should have* said it wanted to achieve?³⁶

Of course it's also possible to argue that the war aims were properly limited, that the victory was complete, and that the decision to engage in the second Iraq War was

³⁶ Mandel, 6.

wrong-headed in itself. War aims are likely to vary by person and organization and through time. What is judged in the immediate aftermath of a conflict to be a great victory may be seen in hindsight as Pyrrhic due to improper war aims. These problems don't make the achievement of war aims completely irrelevant to judgments of victory—but they do muddy the waters.

Because of the problems with the fixed war aims criterion, others attempt to measure victory on a cost-benefit analysis. Did fighting the war lead to greater benefits than costs? If so, according to this view, the war was at least a partial victory. Mandel, however, points out that this approach also has its problems. First, cost/benefit can be measured in various ways. Should it be measured by whether the postwar benefits exceed the costs of fighting, whether the state is better off having fought the war than they would have been if they had not fought it, whether the states gains and losses are greater or lesser than the adversary's, whether the state's military gains match the political objectives, or a combination of these?³⁷ A variety of measuring sticks are available, making it sometimes possible to judge the same conflict a success using one of them but a failure using another. When judging one's own level of success, therefore, it might turn out that one is more likely to choose the measuring stick most amenable to an outcome of victory. This is especially true since, as Mandel says, "...in judging victory there appear to be few if any objective criteria for ranking their importance or choosing some over others."³⁸

Even if the proper measuring stick is agreed upon, carrying on with the measurement may itself be problematic and a matter of judgment rather than an

³⁷ Mandel, 7-8.

³⁸ Mandel, 8.

objectively identifiable fact. The levels of cost and benefit may not be readily apparent in any given case, either because solid metrics do not exist, people weigh the costs and benefits differently, or for some other reason. As with the fixed end state measurement, the ambiguity of the cost/benefit analysis of victory does not make it useless, it only means that it is not infallible or objectively settled in every case. Though an approximate or disputed measurement of victory may not be perfect, it is often better than having no criteria at all. Mandel, however, argues that we can do better through a more thoroughgoing analysis.

He argues that it is first necessary to break conflicts down into two phases: war-winning and peace-winning. It is possible to win the war and lose the peace, as has been demonstrated in Afghanistan and Iraq. War winning "...occurs when a state attempts to bring a war to a successful military conclusion, affecting the mode of battle in terms of how one fights and whether one continues or ceases to fight."³⁹ Peace-winning, on the other hand, "...occurs when a state attempts to reap the payoffs of war, affecting the mode of postcombat activities in terms of how one manages the transition afterward and whether one stays in or leaves the area where the fighting occurred. Clearly involved in this second phase is the extent to which triumph in battle can yield durable postwar stability."⁴⁰ To truly achieve victory, winning in both stages is necessary. Doing so is called "strategic victory."⁴¹

Any true measurement of victory must go beyond mere battlefield success to viewing the final outcomes of both the military and post-military aspects of the conflict.

³⁹ Mandel, 13.

⁴⁰ Mandel, 13.

⁴¹ Mandel, 13.

Military victory opens a path for meeting the political ends over which conflict is waged, but if those political ends are not ultimately achieved the military successes will be for naught. Mandel argues that six key metrics can guide us in our judgments of whether or not strategic victory has been achieved: information control, military deterrence, political self-determination, economic reconstruction, social justice, and diplomatic respect.

Mandel points out that complete success in each element is not necessary. In different conflicts some of the elements may be more important than others. Still, however, some progress in each is likely to be necessary for a lasting strategic victory. Ignoring any one of these elements may detrimentally impact, or nullify, the success achieved in others. Mandel warns that, "Although a temptation may exist to scrap individual elements in cases where the costs of achieving them all seem too high or strain domestic credibility and support, the dangers of leaving some unaddressed—and suffering cascading postwar problems as a result—outweigh these concerns."⁴² A successful war and post-war strategy will take each of these elements into account and can ill afford to completely ignore any of them.

Achieving military victory and addressing the necessary post-war elements may not in themselves, however, be sufficient for claiming victory. In their book *Failing to Win: Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics* Dominic Johnson and Dominic Tierney differentiate between score-keeping and match-fixing for assessing victory in international conflicts. Score-keeping occurs when judgments about victory are made in accordance with actual facts on the ground and metrics such as those presented by Mandel. As they put it, "According to this approach, observers decide the

⁴² Mandel, 16.

winners and losers on the basis of a scorecard listing material gains and losses. When people score-keep, their views about who won and who lost directly reflect the material outcome of the war or crisis."⁴³ There may be various ways to keep score, as Mandel points out, but whatever the metrics used, at least under this approach there is an objective measurement undergirding the judgment arrived at.

The match-fixing approach is quite different, though often applied. When match-fixing obtains it is not just objective metrics that come into play but more subjective perceptions as well. Specifically, Johnson and Tierney argue that mind-sets, salient events, and social pressures often play a role in judgments of victory and defeat and can in fact lead to conclusions opposite of those that would be arrived at by using score-keeping alone.⁴⁴ These may be seen as subjectively created distortions of the actual win/loss metrics.

People's mind-sets can be affected by historical events, biases of various types, cultural beliefs, and expectations. This last can be particularly important in terms of asymmetric warfare. Powerful democracies, due to their military, developmental and economic superiority, are often expected to win easily over less powerful insurgent adversaries. Anything less than out-right victory may, therefore, come to be looked upon as a defeat. Furthermore, minor setbacks may be given significance beyond what the actual occurrences would imply. Mind-sets can also affect perceptions of outcomes due to cognitive dissonance. This is especially the case with metrics selection. If one side is unexpectedly winning or losing, cognitive dissonance may lead to the acceptance of

⁴³ Dominic D.P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, *Failing to Win: Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 24.

⁴⁴ Johnson and Tierney, 38.

metrics that are inappropriate or marginal for arriving at a realistic judgment but which will seem to support the prior expectations. Prior expectations then can lead to either unreasonable pessimism when things don't go perfectly or may cause one to switch metrics in order to continue believing in prior expectations. In either case, the actual events will be misinterpreted.

Salient events may also distort win/loss perceptions. These are events that evoke an emotional or visceral response and alter psychological perceptions of a conflict but which have minor real and tangible effects. Johnson and Tierney point to the Tet Offensive as one example. Though in terms of normal battle metrics, the United States won that particular encounter, the images shown on television made it *seem* like a loss. This perception was never fully overcome and had serious implications for the future of the war. Another example provided by the authors is that of the Cuban missile crisis. They argue that "the fact that Soviet ships physically turned away from a U.S. naval blockade of Cuba created the image that Moscow had backed down and thereby lost the crisis, even though the USSR made tangible gains in the final settlement."⁴⁵

Finally, social pressures can alter or distort perceptions of victory and defeat. These pressures are usually manifested in manipulation by the media, leaders, elites, or the society at large. These pressures come from self-interested individuals or groups that attempt to 'spin' events in their favor or to conform to their positions. Politicians, pundits, special interest groups, and other individuals or groups can knowingly or unknowingly engage in this type of manipulation.

⁴⁵ Johnson and Tierney, 63.

Johnson and Tierney's research is well summated in the final paragraph of their book. They write, "...success on the battlefield does not guarantee victory. Human nature commonly elevates the influence of mind-sets, salient events, and social pressures over and above the outcome on the ground. Without more attention to the way victory is determined by perception as well as by reality, nations may sacrifice copious amounts of blood and treasure, only to find themselves failing to win."⁴⁶

These match-fixing factors may be more powerful in counterinsurgency efforts since they are inherently more difficult to judge through objective score-keeping means. The complexity of counterinsurgencies and the often difficult-to-quantify metrics of population support, legitimacy building, etc., can result in a resort to match-fixing. Johnson and Tierney argue that democracies may be slightly insulated from match-fixing, however, due to freer sources of information. Manipulation of information is more difficult in democracies, making score-keeping easier. The downside for democracies, however, is that when they match-fix they tend to do it against themselves.⁴⁷ Open media can lead to greater self-criticism, political competition means that there are always parties or individuals interested in undermining perceptions of the ruling party, and democracies may have greater expectations of quick and easy victories.

When engaged in counterinsurgencies, democratic regimes should strive to maintain an objective score-keeping approach to judging their success or failure along the lines provided by Mandel's six metrics. Democratic leaders should clearly articulate these metrics while also acknowledging their complexity. Expectations of difficulty and possible set-backs should be communicated early on while still maintaining optimism if

⁴⁶ Johnson and Tierney, 298.

⁴⁷ Johnson and Tierney, 85.

warranted. Expectation management and the identification of appropriate metrics and their priority are key to setting the stage for eventual victory. These expectations and priorities may shift during the course of the conflict but they should do so due to events on the ground rather than misperceptions or match-fixing. Of course misperceptions can never be completely overcome, either in conventional or counterinsurgency warfare, but a concerted effort must be maintained for the decision-makers to utilize appropriate metrics and to communicate honestly with the public. In order to accomplish these goals, and win in counterinsurgencies, democracies must formulate and execute an appropriate strategy which takes into account those appropriate metrics. Such a strategy, drawn from the experience of experts over several decades of counterinsurgency war-fighting, is outlined in the following chapter.

Before moving on to that chapter, however, and delineating a population-centric theory of counterinsurgency that democracies can win, it is first necessary to make a short conceptual and philosophical detour. The notion of legitimacy is crucial to the counterinsurgency approach taken here and therefore important to get a good conceptual grasp of before moving on. In fact, the U.S. military's field manual, FM 3-24, goes so far as to make it the basis of judgment for victory in COIN conflicts: "The primary objective of any COIN operation is to foster development of effective governance by a legitimate government.... Victory is achieved when the populace consents to the government's legitimacy and stops actively and passively supporting the insurgency."⁴⁸

Identifying just what legitimacy is would then seem to be a necessary step in developing any type of successful COIN strategy. Yet it is not a simple notion and it is

⁴⁸ United States Army and United States Marine Corps, 1-113 and 1-14.

all too easy to disregard culture and to blithely apply Western notions of legitimacy to settings in which they may not be relevant and without regard to the population's own ideas of legitimacy. Such disregard would certainly turn out to be counterproductive since it is exactly the population's acceptance of the government's legitimacy that is sought. It is altogether appropriate, therefore, to spend some time dissecting this issue before moving on.

LEGITIMACY⁴⁹

There are many factors that may reinforce, or erode, the legitimacy of a particular government. Some argue that legality is the key ingredient of legitimacy. If the government or ruler has attained power through the appropriate legal means, then their governorship is legitimate. Others argue that consent from the governed is political legitimacy's most important element. If, and only if, a leader's rule is consented to by the governed is that rule legitimate. Others argue that a government is legitimate only in so far as it is just. To these thinkers, the government's conformance to principles of justice is the most important criterion of its legitimacy. Still others believe that all that is necessary for legitimacy is power. If a government has the power to enforce its will, then it is legitimate. Each one of these elements certainly plays an important role in building and sustaining the legitimacy of a government or particular leader. But none of them fully illuminates the concept of legitimacy and none are correct in all circumstances, at least not in isolation from each other or other possible considerations. In order to better

⁴⁹ This analysis is a slightly modified version of a section from an article I first published as: William R. Patterson "To Fight or Not to Fight? The Ethics of Military Desertion," *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (2004).

understand the role that they do play in a government's legitimacy, we will examine each individually.

It cannot be doubted that legality is an important element of legitimacy. A leader who has attained his position through legal means is much more likely to be considered legitimate than one who has not. On the other hand, it is difficult to conceive of legality having much importance unless the government already holds a certain degree of legitimacy. Jean-Marc Coicaud notes that "belief in legality presupposes the legitimacy of the legal order that lays down the law."⁵⁰ This is essential to keep in mind in the case of a foreign counterinsurgency effort in which the legal structure may have been composed, or even imposed, externally.

Furthermore, legal processes themselves are often flawed. If the legal system is itself unjust, it will hardly lend legitimacy to a leader or government that has gained power through it. Raimond Gaita argues that "our sense of the authority and dignity of the law, by virtue of which we consent without servility to its jurisdiction over us, depends on our seeing it as answerable to a conception of justice that transcends and guides its practices and proscriptions."⁵¹ Chinese leaders, for example, may come to power legally, but their legitimacy may be still be drawn into question.

Another problem with the argument that legality is of primary importance to legitimacy is that it may be in conflict with another element that is often considered significant to legitimacy, that of consent. There are many instances, after all, when a government may legally be in power but still not rule with the consent of the people.

⁵⁰ Jean-Marc Coicaud, *Legitimacy and Politics: A Contribution to the Study of Political Right and Political Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 39.

⁵¹ Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 76.

Joseph Stalin and Deng Xiaoping may have become leaders in their respective countries lawfully, but whether or not they maintained the full consent of their citizens is dubious.

Some, like Coicaud, argue that consent is absolutely essential to the legitimacy of a government.

Political institutions require active participation from the members of the community. This contribution of cooperation pries individuals out of their immediate zones of interest and can go as far as the sacrifice of their lives, especially in time of war. This possibility of a radical limitation upon individual freedom, which lies at the heart of political life, engenders a need for consent in order to establish the right to govern.⁵²

While popular election may be important to a governor's legitimacy in democratic societies, it is easy to imagine a society whose citizens would be unimpressed by the outcome of an election, e.g., one which chooses its leaders by single combat to the death.⁵³ Philosopher D.Z. Phillips points out that,

If we think of various political traditions of sovereignty explicit consent plays no part in them. For example, consider sovereignty by inheritance. Where is the explicit consent by the people in that? People will recognize that someone is the legitimate heir to the throne, but would be very puzzled if asked what role their consent played in any of it. But, at various times in history, sovereignty has not been by inheritance, but by conquest. It would, of course, be absurd to suggest that consent played any part in that.⁵⁴

Some writers (not including Phillips) have claimed that, far from having anything to do with legality or consent, legitimacy is merely generated by raw power. Those rulers are legitimate who have the power to seize the reins of government and maintain them. As long as they have the power to rule, they are legitimate. Genghis Khan was not the legitimate ruler of the Mongols because of having gone through some legal process or

⁵² Coicaud, 12.

⁵³ D.Z. Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy: The Challenge of Scepticism*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

⁵⁴ Phillips, 120.

election. Rather, his rule was legitimate because it was backed by power—or so it has been claimed.

Problems arise, however, when the attempt is made to equate legitimacy with power. It is difficult to picture how a ruler could force his people to recognize him as legitimate. The best that could be done would be to force them to recognize that he is powerful. As Peter Winch puts it, “legitimacy...is something which cannot itself be simply imposed by the exercise of power. Legitimacy is something that needs to be *acknowledged* and this ‘acknowledgement’ is an exercise of will on the part of the acknowledger, something, like love, which if it is not freely given is not what it claims to be at all, but something else.”⁵⁵

The exercise of power can force people to obey the ruler, but it cannot morally obligate them to do so. “Whether we obey the sovereign out of prudence or necessity, this is not the same as a sense of political obligation.”⁵⁶ A leader or government may rely on brute force to pass and enforce laws, but without legitimacy those laws will have no moral weight. In order for people to consider it their moral duty to obey the laws and commandments of the government, the government must first believe those laws to be backed by justice and not merely power.

“Legitimacy,” Simone Weil tells us, “is not a primitive notion. It is derived from justice.”⁵⁷ If there is one element that is central to the idea of legitimacy, it is justice. All of its other elements rest on this one notion. Law will be ignored if not seen to be just; elections or hereditary lines of monarchy will only be valid in societies that deem them to

⁵⁵ Peter Winch, “Authority and Rationality,” *The Human World* 8, no. 19 (1972): 15.

⁵⁶ Philips, 118.

⁵⁷ Simone Weil, “The Legitimacy of the Provisional Government,” *Philosophical Investigations* 10, no. 2 (April 1987): 94.

be a just means of acquiring positions of leadership. Power used unjustly may create fear and obedience; never legitimacy.

A main ingredient in the sense of justice is the belief that the ruling government or leader is acting for the benefit of the citizenship. "Power that is exercised for strictly personal ends cannot be legitimate," Coicaud argues. "Indeed as soon as public office is privatized—that is to say, as soon as it serves exclusively private interests—the right to govern is called into question."⁵⁸ Leaders solely concerned for their own welfare, whatever the cost to the people, are plunderers; they are leaders in name only.

We should not be fooled, however, into believing that armed with the discovery that justice is an important element of legitimacy, we now have a steadfast and exact measurement by which to determine the legitimacy of individual governments or rulers. For the concept of justice itself varies across cultures, space, and time. Though Genghis Khan may not seem to us to have been a just leader, his people had a very different conception of justice than we do. To the Mongols, cruelty may have been justified insofar as it strengthened their own society and protected their own people from outside attack. And consider the case of Vietnam; was that a just or an unjust war? While many have extremely strong points of view on that question, others will hold to the opposite view with equal tenacity. Though today war is supposedly governed by the abstract laws of *jus ad bellum* (the justice of war) and *jus in bello* (justice in war), these rules are rarely applied in practice without controversy.

So, despite having found an important indicator of legitimacy, that of justice, this indicator is imperfect and will not alone clear up all of our disagreements regarding the

⁵⁸ Coicaud, 32.

notion of legitimacy. Because the concept of justice is a blurry one, however, does not make it useless. Consider this discussion that Ludwig Wittgenstein has with an imaginary interlocutor:

W: If I tell someone 'Stand roughly here' - may not this explanation work perfectly? And cannot every other one fail too?

I: But isn't it an inexact explanation?

W: Yes; why shouldn't we call it 'inexact'? Only let us understand what 'inexact' means. For it does not mean 'unusable.'⁵⁹

Consider also his discussion about games. "One might say that the concept of 'game' is a concept with blurred edges. - 'But is a blurred concept a concept at all?' - Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need?"⁶⁰ While the concepts of 'justice' and 'legitimacy' may, like that of 'games,' be quite blurry, they are not useless. These concepts serve to give us points of reference about our political obligations and help us ground our moral decisions regarding them.

Though the limits that justice imposes on legitimacy are indistinct, they are still limits. Winch explains that "limits are recognized to the exercise of legitimate state power: limits the extent of which is itself a subject for political disagreement and discussion and undergoes historical change."⁶¹ All of this is not to say that the concepts of justice and legitimacy are completely amorphous and that their meaning must be decided by each individual for himself. These concepts are usually bound up in cultural practices and traditions operating at a particular place and time.

⁵⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), sec. 88.

⁶⁰ Wittgenstein, sec. 71.

⁶¹ Winch, 18.

A problem can arise for counterinsurgents, particularly those engaged in foreign-based counterinsurgency efforts, when their own views of legitimacy are different, or even counter to those in the host nation. When there is a significant difference between the two, FM 3-24 advises that "...the most important attitude remains that of the HN [host nation] population. In the end, its members determine the ultimate victor."⁶² While it's true that the host nation population's acceptance of its government is crucial, it's also true that perspectives held of that government's legitimacy by the assisting nation's population cannot be ignored. An assisting nation's population may not be willing to support the sacrifices of a counterinsurgency operation if the government being propped up in the host nation is seen as barbaric or completely illegitimate. In order to obtain acquiescence in the host nation and continued support by the assisting nation, some type of consensus about legitimacy needs to be reached. The local population must consider their government legitimate, and the assisting nation's population must at least view that government as acceptable, even if not one that they themselves would want to live under. This can be a delicate, but vital, balancing act.

The next chapter outlines a counterinsurgency strategy that is drawn from the academic literature and from FM 3-24. It is amenable to use by democratic regimes and emphasizes the population as the center of gravity. The use of this strategy side-steps Merom's objections since brutality is strictly avoided and is replaced by legitimacy building efforts. Though it certainly doesn't guarantee victory—countering an insurgency is difficult under any strategy—it does offer what is likely to be the best opportunity for success.

⁶² United States Army and United States Marine Corps, 1-118.

CHAPTER 3

A POPULATION-CENTRIC COIN STRATEGY

This chapter will serve to outline a counterinsurgency strategy that builds off of the work of earlier theorists as well as that which has developed in the wake of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq by both academicians and practitioners. It offers a plausible framework for democracies to succeed in future counterinsurgency conflicts. The strategy outlined here will assume a certain type of insurgency, that is an insurgency in a foreign country in which the host government is being assisted by, or occupied by, a democratic country. This assumption is made because most counterinsurgency efforts carried out by democratic governments in recent decades have been of this sort and it is the most likely form of insurgency to challenge democratic regimes in the future.

There are essentially two viable strategies for being successful at counterinsurgency. The first is to engage in extreme brutality. Under this strategy, force is applied without regard to civilian casualties or human rights. Torture is used to extract intelligence during interrogations. And there are few, if any, restrictions on the type of weapons used. This type of strategy places emphasis on destroying the insurgency by any means necessary and pays comparatively little attention to the welfare of the population.

Gil Merom does a good job at explaining why this strategy will not work for democratic regimes. He argues that democratic states which attempt to apply brutal tactics during a COIN conflict will run into three dilemmas. "The first dilemma is how to reconcile the humanitarian values of a portion of the educated class with the brutal

requirements of counterinsurgency warfare. The second dilemma is how to find a domestically acceptable trade-off between brutality and sacrifice. The third dilemma is how to preserve support for the war without undermining the democratic order.”¹

Merom is certainly right that these problems are sure to confront any democratic regime that attempts a strategy of brutality in the conduct of COIN. Information is too freely available in today’s media-saturated world and concepts of international justice and human rights are too developed not to result in a backlash to brutal tactics once made public. Where Merom goes wrong, however, is in concluding that COIN is therefore impossible, or at least excessively difficult, for democratic regimes to achieve success. Rejecting a strategy of brutality does not mean rejecting COIN, it only entails rejecting that form of COIN. A strong literature has developed during the post-World War II era, in fact, which delineates a completely opposite strategy which, if properly employed, may offer a plausible strategy for democratic regimes involved in COIN.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, one of the earliest, and still one of the most pre-eminent, authors of this new COIN strategy was David Galula. His strategy is most cohesively laid out in his book *Counterinsurgency Warfare*. One of the primary findings in his work, confirmed in much of the literature that followed it, is that the support of the population is the “center of gravity” in such conflicts. He argues that,

In conventional warfare, strength is assessed according to military or other tangible criteria, such as the number of divisions, the position they hold, the industrial resources, etc. In revolutionary warfare [COIN], strength must be assessed by the extent of support from the population as measured in terms of political organization at the grass roots. The counterinsurgent reaches a position of strength when his power is embodied in a political organization issuing from, and firmly supported by, the population.²

¹ Merom, 230 - 231.

² Galula, 55.

Galula brings to bear several powerful arguments that demonstrate the importance of the population in COIN. First, even more than most conflicts, COIN is at its core a political conflict. The victory sought in such a conflict is a political one. Such a victory depends upon the support—or at least the acquiescence—of the population. As he puts it, “...the exercise of political power depends on the tacit or explicit agreement of the population or, at worst, on its submissiveness.”³ In the absence of brutality, which has already been ruled out for democratic counterinsurgents, a political regime established without the explicit, or at least implicit, acceptance of the population is not likely to persist for long.

A second reason that Galula points to for identifying the population as the center of gravity is that the population is essential to the insurgency. The population provides recruits, supplies, and places to hide. He writes, “What makes it possible for guerrillas to survive and to expand? The complicity of the population. This is the key to guerrilla warfare, indeed to the insurgency, and it has been expressed in the formula of the fish swimming in water [by Mao Tse Tung].”⁴ By denying this necessary support of the population to the insurgency, it can be defeated.

Support from the population is also essential to a successful counterinsurgent in order to gather intelligence. The strength of an insurgency lies in its anonymity, in its ability to engage in an attack and then to slink away and avoid any counterattack. In order to identify insurgents and locate their secret safe havens, counterinsurgents must rely upon information from the population, for it is they who will know who the

³ Galula, 4.

⁴ Galula, 33.

insurgents are and where they base themselves. Just as police departments rely upon information provided by a cooperative population in order to solve crimes (hence the growing ubiquity and success of community policing initiatives), counterinsurgents must rely upon the population to root out insurgencies.

Contemporary counterinsurgency theorist David Kilcullen agrees with the assessment that the population is the key to winning COIN engagements. "In counterinsurgency the population is the prize," he says, "and protecting and controlling it is the key activity."⁵ Elsewhere he writes, "The center of gravity of an insurgent movement—the source of power from which it derives its morale, its physical strength, its freedom of action, and its will to act—is its connectivity with the local population in a given area. Insurgents tend to ride and manipulate a social wave of grievances, often legitimate ones, and they draw their fighting power from their connection to a mass base."⁶ Since the population is the center of gravity for any COIN operation, and because the insurgency rests so heavily upon the support of the population, the best way to attack an insurgency is through the population. Kilcullen again,

Because the insurgent network needs the population to act in certain ways in order to survive, we can asphyxiate the network by cutting the insurgents off from the people. And they cannot simply 'go quiet' to avoid that threat. They must either emerge into the open, where we can destroy them using superior numbers and firepower, or stay quiet, accept permanent marginalization from their former population base, and suffocate. This puts the insurgents on the horns of a lethal dilemma.⁷

The centrality of the population to COIN warfare has become official U.S. Army and Marine Corps doctrine with the publication of FM 3-24. The manual states that,

⁵ Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, 73.

⁶ Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 7 - 8.

⁷ Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, p. 10.

“Political power is the central issue in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies; each side aims to get the people to accept its governance or authority as legitimate.”⁸ Furthermore, “Long-term success in COIN depends on the people taking charge of their own affairs and consenting to the government’s rule.”⁹

It is safe to say that the paramount importance of winning over the population is one of the fundamental tenets of contemporary democratic counterinsurgency theory as well as in United States military doctrine. This has been most succinctly encapsulated in the phrase “winning hearts and minds.” This realization entails a complete rejection of the brutalitarian strategy and the adoption of a much more population-centric one. Such a strategy will be one that is sensitive to the population’s notions of legitimacy and which will take a whole-of-government approach to ensure that such legitimacy is maintained. It should not be mistakenly believed, however, that this approach is a completely non-military one. The military still plays an essential role in this strategy as keeping the population secure from insurgent violence is one of the key necessities of winning and maintaining their support. Furthermore, the military is necessary in order to accomplish the targeted eradication of irreconcilable elements of the insurgent movement. Military action remains crucial to this COIN strategy, but the military is to be used in a moderated and targeted manner which compliments, rather than contradicts, the political strategy.

The difference between strategy and tactics should be firmly kept in mind in this section. What follows is a broad strategy which will be manifested or enacted differently in any particular conflict. There is no cookie-cutter approach that will be successful in all COIN circumstances, rather each situation will differ according to geographic, cultural,

⁸ United States Army and United States Marine Corps, 1-3.

⁹ United States Army and United States Marine Corps, 1-4.

political, military, or other factors. Rather than an attempt to constrain COIN efforts into specific measures or tactics, what is provided here should be seen as strategic guidelines which are themselves flexible.

A population-centric COIN strategy, which keeps in mind the elements of strategic victory described by Robert Mandel, has several key aspects¹⁰:

1. Direct Action against the Insurgent.
 - A. Secure the population from insurgent attacks.
 - B. Ensure sufficient troop strength to protect targeted populations and destroy or expel insurgent forces.
 - C. Emplace troops in population centers.
 - D. Produce intelligence to identify insurgents and differentiate them from the larger population.
 - E. Prevent insurgent groups from reforming following initial defeat.
 - F. Undermine or destroy insurgent political organizations.
 - G. Develop host nation military capability.
2. Indirect Action against the Insurgent
 - A. Build host-nation legitimacy by demonstrating political, economic, social and developmental competence.
 - B. Undermine insurgent grievances through effective political action.
 - C. Hold elections and develop functional and independent political institutions as soon as practical.
 - D. Develop close partnership between host and assisting nations.
3. Interaction with Population
 - A. Develop substantial and deep cultural awareness and understanding.
 - B. Address political, economic, developmental and social grievances of the population.
 - C. Develop cooperation between the population and counterinsurgent forces in order to improve intelligence.
 - D. Avoid brutal tactics that will alienate the population.
 - E. Deny insurgent forces access to and support from the population.

Having provided a broad outline of a potentially successful COIN strategy, a deeper examination of each element of that strategy is provided in the rest of this chapter. First, however, a few general principles need to be emphasized. One is that a successful COIN strategy must be a whole-of-government approach, meaning that all elements of

¹⁰ The strategy described here is primarily drawn from the work of David Galula and David Kilcullen along with FM 3-24.

state power and resources—military, political, economic, and social—must be brought to bear. Additionally, there must be unity of effort. Military and political personnel cannot work at cross purposes but must act cooperatively and in unison.

Political efforts can easily be undermined by military efforts and vice versa. It is essential that such counterproductive actions are avoided through close integration between civilian and military leaders and the imposition of a clear chain of command and responsibility. Finally, leaders who initiate a COIN effort must recognize the difficulties that will likely be faced and prepare their publics for a sustained and costly effort. Attempts to downplay the long-term nature of counterinsurgency efforts or their potentially substantial costs is likely to backfire. Not only is the support of the host nation's population vital, but so is the support of the assisting nation's people.

DIRECT ACTION AGAINST THE INSURGENT

Despite the political nature of a successful COIN strategy, military force remains a vital aspect of it. Counterinsurgency is, after all, a form of warfare. Though counterinsurgencies cannot be won without careful attention to their political aspects, which are at the core of such conflicts, neither can they be won without the appropriate application of force. Kilcullen reminds us that, "All successful counterinsurgents have been willing and able to kill the enemy, often with great ruthlessness."¹¹ Such use of violence cannot be indiscriminate, as Kilcullen also notes that these counterinsurgents have all "clearly distinguished that enemy from the population in which it hides, have applied violence as precisely and carefully as possible, have acted scrupulously within

¹¹ Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 7.

the law, and have emphasized measures to protect and win over the population,”¹² but violence must be used nonetheless.

Galula argues that incapacitating the insurgent through the use of force is the first, but only preparatory, stage of a successful COIN strategy. “The destruction of the guerrilla forces in the selected area is, obviously, highly desirable, and this is what the counterinsurgent must strive for,” he says. “One thing should be clear, however: This operation is not an end in itself, for guerrillas, like the heads of the legendary hydra, have the special ability to grow again if not all destroyed at the same time. The real purpose of the first operation, then, is to prepare the stage for the further development of the counterinsurgent action,”¹³ which includes a whole-of-government approach.

The use of force is a necessary first step because nothing further can be achieved if the population is not relatively secure from insurgent violence. Security is required for political, economic and social development and the use of force is necessary to ensure security. Without security, all other efforts will be futile. A newly built school, for example, will remain empty if insurgents are able to credibly threaten the population with retaliatory violence if they send their children there, as happened frequently in Afghanistan. In such a case the counterinsurgent has only managed to waste money in building the structure and, even worse, allowed the insurgents an opportunity to demonstrate their own strength and the government’s weakness. Hence, non-military related counterinsurgency efforts may turn out to be counterproductive if the necessary security is not available to support them. According to FM 3-24, “The cornerstone of any

¹² Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 7.

¹³ Galula, 75.

COIN effort is establishing security for the civilian populace. Without a secure environment, no permanent reforms can be implemented and disorder spreads.”¹⁴

Even if other COIN goals could be achieved without first establishing security, the legitimacy of the government surely could not be. One of the primary roles of government, after all, is to establish and maintain security. Any government unable to do so is likely to be viewed by its citizens as weak, ineffectual and incapable of carrying out one of its chief functions. Security is a defining role of government and without the ability to provide it no other success is likely to endow that government with legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

Just how much troop presence is necessary to provide security in COIN warfare has been a contentiously argued issue. Various scholars and practitioners have developed troop-to-insurgent ratios which they argue are absolutely essential for victory. These ratios are proposed as minimal force requirements without which victory will be highly unlikely at best. Unfortunately, these levels are often so high as to be often unattainable.

RAND researcher James T. Quinlivan authored an influential study in 1995 in which he tied appropriate troop levels to population numbers. He argued that COIN operations, which he refers to as stability operations, are particularly troop intensive. He writes that,

a ‘hearts and minds’ counterinsurgency campaign places the focus on the people, the military consequences of which are requirements for population control measures and local security of the population. The static forces that protect the population from insurgents and cut off any support the population might provide to them is essential to the campaign. Consequently, in any stability operation it is almost certain that the force devoted to establishing order will be both larger in

¹⁴ United States Army and United States Marine Corps, 1-131.

numerical terms than the forces dedicated to field combat and more aligned to political aspects of a 'hearts and minds' concept of operations.¹⁵

Through an analysis of historical cases Quinlivan argues that there has been a range of troop levels depending upon the type of conflict but that 20 security forces per 1,000 population is likely to be optimal in most situations. In any large country this can quickly become an impossibly large force to maintain over time. Quinlivan points out about Iraq, for example, that its population of approximately 25 million would have required a constant presence of 500,000 American troops to meet this ratio. In order to sustain that over time would require a force structure of 2.5 million troops.¹⁶ Such troop levels are clearly unsustainable.

An analysis conducted by the Center for Army Analysis and described by Steven M. Goode agrees that the troop levels should be tied to the size of the population. It further argues that the necessary ratio is dependent upon the intensity of the insurgency and the number of host nation forces available. It is also dependent upon the effectiveness of the troops available for deployment. Though the ratio is variable, this analysis found that the average security force ratio should be 2.8 security forces per one thousand population in peacetime situations. More troops will obviously be required, however, in situations of intense violence, making this number merely a starting point. On the other hand, troop levels can be reduced if more local forces are available.

¹⁵ James T. Quinlivan, "Force Requirements in Stability Operations," *Parameters* 25 (Winter 1995): 2.

¹⁶ James T. Quinlivan, "Burden of Victory: The Painful Arithmetic of Stability Operations," *RAND Review* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 29.

Goode stresses the importance of local forces, arguing that “the higher the proportion of local security forces the better.”¹⁷ Though these forces may be less well trained or professional than would be foreign troops, they have several key advantages. They have a substantially better understanding of the area and usually of the language and the culture. They are also likely to be more quickly and fully accepted by the local population, a key goal of population-centric COIN. Goode also points out that local forces are likely to be more committed since it is their own country that they are fighting for. Furthermore, they will have to live with the consequences of defeat while foreign forces will simply go home. One further advantage is that local forces can remain deployed to the same area for a much longer time than can foreign troops who typically serve a rotation of one year or less. This allows for the development of more long-term relationships and trust.¹⁸

In a book published by RAND, researchers Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki warn that not too much should be based on ratios determined by historical case studies. It is unsound to extrapolate from an assessment of historical cases to any given particular case, at best they can provide guidance, but not rules.¹⁹ Determining appropriate force levels will require on-the-ground determinations, especially after operations have begun. “During operations, policymakers will have to depend on the plain-word assessments of their trusted field commanders in order to conduct force planning and to shape

¹⁷ Steven M. Goode, “A Historical Basis for Force Requirements in Counterinsurgency,” *Parameters* 39 (Winter 2009-10): 55.

¹⁸ Goode, 55.

¹⁹ Connable and Libicki, 138-139.

insurgency endings. If they do not trust their commanders to give them accurate assessments, it is their responsibility to replace them with more-competent officers.”²⁰

FM 3-24 stresses the importance of using the appropriate level of force. In some operations, overwhelming force will be necessary. In others, too much force may be counterproductive. “An operation that kills five insurgents is counterproductive if collateral damage leads to the recruitment of fifty more insurgents.”²¹ For this reason, the level of force applied is highly important. Research by Jason Lyall et. al. has found that this is especially the case for a foreign counterinsurgent force. They find that inadvertent harm caused by a foreign, or otherwise out-group, counterinsurgent is more likely to be viewed negatively than a similar degree of harm caused by an in-group insurgent attack. In other words, they find an asymmetric reaction to harm based upon the status of the responsible combatant. Their findings indicate that:

Viewed through the lens of intergroup bias, individuals are more likely to punish out-groups for transgressions, simply confirming biases about the out-group’s disposition. Harm inflicted by the in-group, however, carries a different meaning: victimized individuals, and the community at large, may be more forgiving, since such acts are justified by appeal to extenuating circumstances that forced the in-group’s hand.²²

This means that it is especially important for a foreign counterinsurgent to avoid unnecessary harm to the population, for which it is likely to be disproportionately blamed. A positive finding in the same research, however, indicates that some of the harm caused by unintentional harm can be partly alleviated. They find that culturally appropriate mitigation efforts, at least in Afghanistan where the research was conducted,

²⁰ Connable and Libicki, 140.

²¹ United States Army and United States Marine Corps, 1-142.

²² Jason Lyall, Graeme Blair, and Kosuke Imai, “Explaining Support for Combatants during Wartime: A Survey Experiment in Afghanistan,” *American Political Science Review*, 107, no. 4, (November 2013): 681.

cause a movement of support away from the insurgent force.²³ In tandem, this research suggests that foreign counterinsurgents should be particularly careful about inflicting unintentional harm to civilians, but that if it occurs, culturally appropriate displays of contrition and restitution should be attempted.

Jeffrey Record points to a tendency of the U.S. military to risk inadvertent harm to civilians through an over-reliance upon its technological advantage and heavy fire power, especially as this keeps soldiers out of harms way and reduces casualties. “Needless to say, perhaps, a devotion to firepower, while highly desirable in itself, cannot help but encourage the U.S. armed forces to rely on it even when other modes of military behavior would be more suitable. In irregular conflicts in particular, heavy and sometimes seemingly indiscriminate, certainly disproportionate, resorting to firepower solutions readily becomes self-defeating.”²⁴ Ironically, the unavailability of troops may increase the tendency to use too much firepower. Insufficient troop levels produces limited options and the use of technological solutions, such as drone strikes, may be the only available course of action, thereby resulting in excessive casualties and undermining the goal of winning the population.

The research of Jason Lyle and Isaiah Wilson III also points to the negative repercussions of an over-reliance on mechanical warfare in counterinsurgency operations. Mechanized forces tend to draw the counterinsurgent away from the population and can therefore be detrimental to COIN operations. They argue that,

As the number of machines in a given military increase, the number of personnel devoted to their operation and maintenance must necessarily rise. Modern militaries therefore possess comparatively few infantrymen, reducing the rate of

²³ Lyall, Blair, and Kosuke, 693.

²⁴ Record, 105-106.

interaction simply because fewer soldiers are available for such tasks. The fact that mechanized forces are ill-suited for certain types of terrain and are tied to available roads only magnifies these problems. Rather than exercising control, mechanized forces are actually providing only 'presence' since their greatest asset, mobility, allows them to cover more ground without having to embed in a particular location. This asset is nonetheless a liability: with fewer soldiers, mechanized forces must sacrifice depth for breadth.²⁵

Though mechanization can provide an advantage to counterinsurgents if used sparingly and with specific purpose, it cannot replace infantry soldiers and police officers on the ground. Over-reliance on mechanization can lead to excessive force, loss of connection with the population, and a failure to collect vital intelligence. Consistent and pervasive foot patrols in populated areas are the only way to prevent such pitfalls.

Whenever possible, troops should be emplaced with the population. This ensures persistent, rather than intermittent, security. It also provides greater access to intelligence and a closer working relationship with the people. Patrolling through a village (or town or city, the example of a village will be used throughout for the sake of convenience), even if it is as frequent as once or twice a day, does not provide security to that village. As soon as the counterinsurgent forces leave, the insurgent forces return. Even worse, insurgents might carry out reprisals against those known to have cooperated with the counterinsurgents while they were there. This deters future cooperation and can severely undermine the counterinsurgent's ability to gain the people's trust. Kilcullen writes:

Effective counterinsurgency provides human security to the population, where they live, 24 hours a day. This, not destroying the enemy, is the central task. It demands the continuous presence of security forces that protect population centers; local alliances and partnerships with community leaders; creation of self-defending populations through community-based security measures such as local and neighborhood watch and guard forces; and operation of small-unit ground forces in tandem with local security forces, developing pervasive situational awareness, quick response times, and unpredictable operating patterns that keep

²⁵ Lyall and Wilson III, 77.

the enemy off balance.²⁶

Living with the people is key to the development of intelligence, which is vital for taking direct action against insurgents. Without reliable intelligence the insurgents cannot be identified or differentiated from the rest of the population. FM 3-24 recognizes this point. "Counterinsurgency," it says, "is an intelligence-driven endeavor."²⁷ In order to avoid reliance on indiscriminate firepower, intelligence must be available to more precisely target the application of lethal force. Identifying the insurgents from the people requires a robust and effective intelligence capability. As Kilcullen puts it, "In counterinsurgency, killing the enemy is easy. Finding him is often nearly impossible."²⁸

Information is initially most likely to come from those segments of the population that are natural allies of the government or the counterinsurgent force, "those who would have least to win and most to lose through the insurgent's victory."²⁹ These people must be identified early and recruited to assist in intelligence operations. As counterinsurgent forces spread into new areas, they will consistently need to identify these people and partner with them. The amount of intelligence coming into counterinsurgent forces is a useful measurement of population cooperation, and therefore of success. In fact, the level of acquired intelligence is most often a better measurement of success than body count in COIN operations.

Once insurgents have been initially defeated in a given area, it is crucial to prevent their future resurgence. If after a village has been secured troops are moved to another area and there has been no long-standing relationship and security apparatus

²⁶ Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, 266.

²⁷ United States Army and United States Marine Corps, 3-1.

²⁸ Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 31.

²⁹ Galula, 84.

developed, it is possible for the insurgents to move right back in, thereby undermining all previous progress. Either a small contingent of counterinsurgency forces or host-nation security personnel must remain, or the village must be capable of its own self-defense.

At the first sign of resurgence, the area should be inundated once again with counterinsurgent forces. The loss of a previously secured area will make it more difficult to recover that area since trust will have been lost. It may also serve to undermine the counterinsurgent forces with other localities as they will have reason to doubt their long-term commitment.

At the same time that insurgents themselves are being targeted and destroyed, their political arm, if they have one, must be undermined. Insurgent forces often develop a political wing that is meant to appear as separate from the insurgency yet which pursues the same goals in the legitimate political sphere. A good example of this was in Northern Ireland where Sinn Fein acted as the political wing of the IRA (Irish Republican Army) which engaged in violent insurrection. Direct military action against these political actors is likely to be counterproductive as it may demonstrate a lack of commitment to the political process. Rather, a more indirect effort should be undertaken to expose the political wing's association with the military wing of the insurgency and to delegitimize it through information operations. In addition, criminal prosecutions should be pursued where evidence of connection to insurgents is available. This will obviously require effective intelligence and law enforcement capabilities. Additionally, the financial resources of these political groups should be monitored in order to detect connections with insurgents or with foreign supporters. When detected, these finances should be frozen, arrests made, and the political party disbanded.

None of these efforts will have a long-term impact unless the capabilities of host nation forces are being simultaneously developed so that they can gradually take over counterinsurgent responsibilities. Foreign counterinsurgents will eventually have to return home and if host nation forces are not capable of maintaining order upon their departure insurgents may re-emerge. Avoiding this outcome requires the development of effective police and military forces. FM 3-24 notes that:

The long-term goal is to leave a government able to stand by itself. In the end, the host nation has to win on its own....HN governments have the final responsibility to solve their own problems. Eventually all foreign armies are seen as interlopers or occupiers; the sooner the main effort can transition to HN institutions, without unacceptable degradation, the better.³⁰

INDIRECT ACTION AGAINST THE INSURGENT

Taking indirect action against the insurgent entails activities that are generally considered non-military, but which the military has often had to do anyway. These activities involve building political legitimacy for the host government while denying it to the insurgents, undermining insurgent grievances, and developing a strong relationship between the host and supporting nations.

The most important first step in indirectly taking action against the insurgent is to build the political legitimacy of the host nation. An insurgency counts on the beleaguered government suffering from a lack of legitimacy and cannot long survive against a government that enjoys strong popular support. In order to display legitimacy the host government must demonstrate its ability to effectively govern the country. This is most visibly done, aside from providing security through direct action against the

³⁰ United States Army and United States Marine Corps, 1-147.

insurgents, by presiding over political, economic and social development. If the country is moving forward in these areas in a way that tangibly benefits a large proportion of the population, the legitimacy of the government will be enhanced. A brief discussion of what these three forms of development entail follows below.

Political development involves the creation of viable political processes and institutions that are seen as legitimate by the governed populace. Political institutions that are seen as representative, effective, largely uncorrupted, and competent are essential to long-term legitimacy. Regimes that are seen as unrepresentative of the population, perhaps due to foreign influence, will not be long regarded as legitimate political actors on their behalf. Similarly for regimes that are considered overly corrupt, ineffectual or incompetent. Such regimes will have difficulty maintaining the allegiance of the population in the face of insurgent counter-claims to power. Especially if the insurgents do seem to be representative, competent and uncorrupted.

Economic development is essential to counterinsurgency. Economic misery can lead ordinarily peaceful citizens to violence, especially young males. Even if they have no ideological grievances against the government, unemployed young men are vulnerable to economic incentives from insurgent groups and may engage in violence simply for pay. If such men are gainfully employed, on the other hand, they will often be less susceptible to manipulation by insurgent groups and more focused on providing for their families. They will be less likely to jeopardize their stable employment and will also likely feel less aggrieved and alienated from the government.

Social development is often the most difficult. It encompasses a wide range of issues such as education, women's rights, the development of civic groups,

secularization, and anything else of a social nature. Such development can often be highly controversial. Women's rights, for example, is a highly contentious issue in Afghanistan. Forcing these issues prematurely, or too strongly, may lead to a backlash against the government and aid the insurgency. Not dealing with them at all, however, may prevent long-term stability as social development is essential to establishment and maintenance of such stability. How social development is handled must be considered on a case-by-case basis and take into account cultural and historical factors.

Legitimacy is equally crucial for supporting nations as it is for the host nation itself. If not seen to be fighting for a legitimate cause, the populations of supporting nations may demand that their sons and daughters cease fighting for an unworthy cause and return home. Chaplain Charles F. Kriete is quoted as saying, "[War] requires for its successful pursuit the mobilization of a moral consensus of the legitimacy of both the objectives of violence and the means by which these objectives are pursued..."³¹

Without that legitimacy popular support will falter and the insurgency is likely to outlast their commitment to the fight. This will leave the host nation to battle the insurgency on its own, probably with much less likelihood of success.

Unfortunately, though vitally important, this is perhaps the hardest aspect for an assisting nation to impact. As T.X. Hammes puts it, "It is much more difficult for an outside power to force the host country to make the necessary political changes...an outside power cannot establish the legitimacy of the host government. The host nation may simply refuse to make changes the outside power sees as necessary for success."³²

³¹ Charles F. Kriete, quoted in Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Random House, 1982), 34.

³² T.X. Hammes, "The Future of Counterinsurgency," *Orbis* 56 (Fall 2012): 571.

Despite these difficulties, the assisting nation must attempt to advise and support the host government's efforts at winning and maintaining political legitimacy using whatever leverage or influence it has. Failure to do so may handicap the entire counterinsurgency effort.

The second aspect of indirect action against the insurgent involves undermining their grievances. If the insurgent's grievances are legitimate ones, ameliorating them, at least to some degree, will likely be necessary—and just. Rectifying the underlying causes of insurgent activity will pull the rug out from beneath them and leave the insurgents without a legitimate rallying cry. Dealing with such issues is also necessary for long-term stability since even if the current insurgency is defeated without doing so, remaining grievances may spawn further resistance in the future. Undermining legitimate grievances will both undercut the *raison d'être* of the current insurgency and prevent the development of any future ones.

As the Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency manual puts it, “Skillful counterinsurgents can deal a significant blow to an insurgency by appropriating its cause. Insurgents often exploit multiple causes, however, making counterinsurgents’ challenges more difficult. In the end, any successful COIN operation must address the legitimate grievances insurgents use to generate popular support. These may be different in each local area, in which case a complex set of solutions will be needed.”³³ Accomplishing this goal typically requires the political, economic and social development mentioned above.

³³ United States Army and United States Marine Corps, 1-51.

Rather than pushing legitimate grievances, however, insurgents may indeed have illegitimate, or contested, grievances. If so, they will likely have less success in bringing the population to their side. Even illegitimate grievances, however, may be powerful if they are expressed through potent propaganda or misinformation campaigns.

Additionally, grievances seen as illegitimate by the government and the majority of the population may still draw support from smaller, but powerful, constituencies. Rather than concede to illegitimate grievances, these should be undermined in the political arena through a counter-campaign of information operations. The illegitimacy of the insurgent's arguments, claims, and demands should be made apparent through messaging and other government efforts.

Care must be taken, however, in judging the legitimacy of an insurgency's grievances. The government itself is of course likely to be biased against accepting any grievance as legitimate. If grievances, both legitimate and illegitimate, are to be undermined or rectified, they must first be honestly and objectively identified.

Though highly significant, undermining grievances will not be easy. If it were, the grievances would have already been dealt with and the insurgency would never have developed in the first place. The grievances which the insurgents use as a rallying cry are likely to be longstanding and difficult to resolve. The grievances at issue may also, in some cases, go to the heart of the ruling regime's power and threaten that regime's very existence, something that they are not likely to accept. Galula warns that, "To deprive the insurgent of a good cause amounts to solving the country's basic problems. If this is possible, well and good, but we know...that a good cause for the insurgent is one that his

opponent cannot adopt without losing his power in the process. And there are problems that, although providing a good cause to an insurgent, are not susceptible of solution.”³⁴

If the insurgent’s grievances have any hope of resolution, they must be accurately identified and properly dealt with, taking into account the views of the population. One of the best ways in which to ensure representative political institutions that properly identify and deal with the legitimate grievances of the population is to allow the people to choose their own government through free and fair elections. Therefore, such elections should be held as soon as practical, at least for local leaders, if they are not part of the current system. Several conditions may stand in the way of doing so: the lack of effective electoral institutions (established and fair election laws, polling places, etc.), a population unfamiliar with electoral politics, insecurity at polling places, and the possibility of strong electoral gains by the insurgency’s political wing (if there is one). Overcoming these obstacles to elections should be a primary goal of the overall counterinsurgency strategy from the beginning. Fortunately, completely resolving legitimate grievances may not be necessary. Even a demonstrated interest in those grievances and concerted effort, as well as some progress towards resolving them, may be enough.

The final piece of indirect action against the insurgent is the maintenance of a strong relationship between the host and supporting nations. A major goal of the insurgency will likely be to create discord between the two, thereby dividing and weakening the counterinsurgency effort. Insurgents may attempt to do this in numerous ways, for example by presenting the host government as a puppet of the supporting

³⁴ Galula, 46.

nation, by infiltrating one or the other of the governments and initiating attacks from within thereby generating distrust (as is currently being done very successfully in Afghanistan), or by other means. A strong relationship between all of the nations involved in a counterinsurgency effort is vital for ultimate victory and attempts to sunder that unity must be overcome.

Strategic and tactical partnership between the host and supporting nations, as well as compromise over any issues of political discord, are necessary in order to prevent the fraying of the relationship over time. Shared sacrifice will also forge stronger bonds. Neither partner, therefore, should be allowed to carry a heavier burden than the other if it can be prevented. The host and supporting nations must be in the fight together.

INTERACTION WITH THE POPULATION

Not only must the host and supporting governments be in the fight together, but they must ultimately get the population on their side as well, or at least a sizeable and active proportion of it. It is worth quoting Galula at length on this issue:

What is the crux of the problem for the counterinsurgent? It is not how to clean an area. We have seen that he can always concentrate enough forces to do it, even if he has to take some risk in order to achieve the necessary concentration. The problem is, how to keep an area clean so that the counterinsurgent forces will be free to operate elsewhere. This can be achieved only with the support of the population. If it is relatively easy to disperse and to expel the insurgent forces from a given area by purely military action, if it is possible to destroy the insurgent political organizations by intensive police action, it is impossible to prevent the return of the guerrilla units and the rebuilding of the political cells unless the population cooperates. The population, therefore, becomes the objective for the counterinsurgent as it was for his enemy. Its tacit support, its submission to law and order, its consensus—taken for granted in normal times—have been undermined by the insurgent's activity. And the truth is that the insurgent, with his organization at the grass roots, is tactically the strongest of opponents where it counts, at the population level. This is where the fight has to

be conducted, in spite of the counterinsurgent's ideological handicap and in spite of the head start gained by the insurgent in organizing the population.³⁵

No successes against the insurgent forces will be permanent if the insurgency has the population's support and is able to continually regenerate. In order to win over the population the counterinsurgent must 1) develop a profound understanding of the culture and perspectives of the people, 2) show interest and progress towards addressing political, economic, and social grievances, 3) develop cooperative partnerships between the people and the counterinsurgents that benefits both, 4) deny counterinsurgents free access to the population, and 5) avoid brutal tactics.

FM 3-24 argues that, "Successful conduct of COIN operations depends on thoroughly understanding the society and culture within which they are being conducted."³⁶ Understanding the culture is indeed one of the most crucial steps in a counterinsurgency, but what exactly is culture? It is one of those intangible concepts that people claim to know when they see it, but often can't articulate. In fact, even experts in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and political science, often disagree about just what precisely culture is. While I won't attempt to provide a definitive solution to the problem here, it is necessary to provide a working definition that, though not completely exhaustive, gets us going in the right direction and is conclusive enough for our present requirements.

For the purposes of this dissertation, culture will refer to the shared patterns of beliefs and behaviors of a given people, along with the manifestations of those beliefs and behaviors. This can include language, religion, various rites and rituals, political

³⁵ Galula, 52.

³⁶ United States Army and United States Marine Corps, 1-124.

structures, economic activities, political hierarchies and lineages, gender relations, tribal interactions, the production of symbolic artifacts, and many other things. Culture is a vast area of study and is often extremely difficult for soldiers, especially foreign soldiers from supporting nations, to grasp. Cultural differences and insensitivities, however, can generate distrust and destroy the counterinsurgent's relationship with the population—a crucial mistake.

Without cultural understanding, underlying grievances will be more difficult to identify, understand, and ameliorate. It will also be more difficult to create lasting relationships of trust between the host and supporting governments as well as between those governments and the local population. Such trust is important in order to deny support, succor, and replenishment of troops to the insurgents, and to obtain intelligence against insurgent activities. It is also necessary for political, economic, and social development, as no such development can occur without an engaged populace.

The counterinsurgent must not only win the population over to its side, however, it must also prevent the insurgents from interacting with them. If the insurgents are free to mingle with the larger population they will be able to spread their messages and propaganda, obtain supplies and intelligence, and recruit new fighters. If insurgents are not able to win over the population with their cause they can use violence to intimidate them into cooperation, or at least acquiescence. It is therefore imperative that counterinsurgents protect the population by keeping the insurgency away from them. This will also prevent resupply, recruitment, the acquisition of intelligence, and the ability to spread propaganda. The insurgent must be denied access to the population if at all possible.

Even if all of this is done, the population can be quickly lost if the counterinsurgent force engages in tactics seen as brutal and illegitimate, especially if the civilian population becomes victim to such tactics, either inadvertently or otherwise. Much good will, built up over months or even years, can be lost by one atrocity or heavy-handed attack. A villager who loses an innocent son or daughter to an indiscriminate or brutal attack will not soon be won over to the counterinsurgent's side.

It has been the purpose of this section to outline a general strategy that lends the greatest probability of success to democratic counterinsurgents. The strategy involves three key pieces: direct action against the insurgent, indirect action against the insurgent, and interaction with the population. Under each of these three elements are several important factors. While it's possible to win a counterinsurgency without fulfilling every part of the strategy, the closer the counterinsurgent comes to doing so the more likely will victory become.

It must be cautioned, however, that this a general strategic outline rather than a step-by-step tactical guide. Each insurgency is different and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to them—only general strategic guidelines that can be identified as best practices. As counterinsurgency expert Harold Johnson put it,

One must keep in mind that while the modus operandi of most insurgencies is the same, the actual applications may be quite dissimilar. The variable is not simply geographical configuration and climate but is, more importantly, the people, their degree of development, their existing form of government, their religions, and—most important—their attitude toward their government. Just as the insurgent considers each of the conditions just mentioned, exploiting those that best suit him, the counterinsurgent must improve those that are satisfactory while combating the insurgents' efforts where conditions are being exploited. This is

rarely a combat operation, but is more often a battle for the hearts and minds of the people.³⁷

In COIN, the details matter. The counterinsurgent strategist must adjust to local conditions and apply tactics accordingly.

An examination of the theoretical literature has weakened the case that democracies cannot succeed in counterinsurgency warfare. We have seen that, at least conceptually, an alternative to brutality exists which offers democracies a plausible path to victory—the population-centric strategy. The next step is to examine the issue empirically using historical case studies. In the following three sections, I explore how closely the above strategy was followed in three separate conflicts: Malaysia, Vietnam and Iraq. I measure the strategy proposed above against the actual strategy carried out in those three conflicts. If the strategy is a promising one, we should predict that those conflicts in which the counterinsurgent forces most closely followed it will have achieved the most success. Additionally, within particular conflicts if strategies or tactics differed across time or space, those instances in which this strategy was most closely followed should also have brought greater levels of success.

³⁷ Harold K. Johnson, foreword to *The Long, Long War: Counterinsurgency in Malaya and Vietnam*, by Richard L. Clutterbuck (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), x.

CHAPTER 4

MALAYSIA

Malaysia has become synonymous with success in much of the counterinsurgency literature, and for good reason. It was a ground-breaking counterinsurgency campaign in which a democratic country used a new strategy and innovative tactics to defeat an insurgency in a foreign land. Though the exact replication of the particular tactics used in Malaysia is not to be recommended for other conflicts, since the facts on the ground are likely to be quite different, much of the strategy is similar to what I have outlined above and is applicable elsewhere. This chapter will demonstrate two things. First, that democracies can in fact win foreign counterinsurgency fights; second, that the strategy I have outlined in chapter three can be effective. Though not exactly the strategy used in Malaysia, much of it was followed. This chapter will first outline the history and characteristics of the Malayan Emergency, as it is frequently called, and then examine the conflict through the framework of the counterinsurgency strategy described in chapter three.

HISTORY

Britain's involvement in Malaysia stretches back to the 16th century, when it began extensive trading activities. Singapore, Penang and the coastal areas of Malacca became British colonies in the early 1800s and the British provided administrative assistance to Malaysia's ruling sultans. Though Britain did not technically rule them, decisions made by the sultans were done so in consultation and agreement with the

British.¹ Commercial interests, especially in the tin and rubber industries, were the primary benefit to the British. Chinese and Indian labor was imported to the country to help meet the needs of those two industries, thereby resulting in their coming to constitute large minority populations in the country.

These industries were completely disrupted during the Japanese occupation in World War II and animosities between the Malays and Chinese also developed during that period. The Chinese saw the Malays as traitors for tolerating the Japanese presence while the Malays were encouraged by the Japanese to view the Chinese as disruptive immigrants.² It was the Chinese segment of the Malaysian population that put up the most resistance to the Japanese occupation, led by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP).

The MCP was formed in 1930 and its largest constituency was derived from the Chinese minority, which made up 38% of the overall population.³ During the war, the MCP sided with the British since the British were allied with Russia and opposed to the invading Japanese army which was the most immediate threat. Before losing Singapore, the British managed to train 200 communist guerrillas, who went on to set up training camps and form a resistance force called the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA).⁴ This organization boasted 7000 men who were divided into eight regiments. This force also enlisted the support of the Chinese population in Malaysia more broadly. According to Richard Clutterbuck, who served in the conflict, the arrangement was beneficial to both parties, but each realized that after the immediate aim of defeating the

¹ Richard L. Clutterbuck, *The Long, Long War: Counterinsurgency in Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 20.

² Clutterbuck, 21.

³ Clutterbuck, 13.

⁴ Clutterbuck, 15.

Japanese was attained, their interests would diverge sharply. He writes, "the guerrillas had no more qualms about cooperating with the British than Mao Tse-tung had about working with the Kuomintang. The Malayan Communists made sure that they took more from the British than they gave."⁵ As for the British, they made the judgment that it was in their immediate interest to ally with whoever could assist them in defeating their main enemies, and to worry about the aftermath later. That aftermath would prove to be very difficult indeed.

The country was returned to British control in August 1945 after Japanese occupation during the war. The population of Malaysia at that time was about 5 million people. No ethnic group made up a majority but the Malays (indigenous people, to be distinguished from Malaysians, who can be from any ethnic group with Malaysian citizenship) were close with a 49 percent plurality. Ethnic Chinese were the next largest group, with 38%, and the third largest group were Indians, which made up about 12% of the population.⁶

Though the MCP wished for Malaysian autonomy rather than a return of British rule, they recognized that they were much better off under the British than they had been under the Japanese. They further recognized their own current inability to govern as well as their inability to directly challenge the British militarily. The MCP therefore agreed to disband their guerrilla forces and turn in weapons provided to them by the British during the conflict. They had also, however, managed to stockpile many other weapons that they had acquired during the war, especially in the immediate aftermath of Britain's initial defeat when they were forced to abandon weapons and supplies. The MCP kept

⁵ Clutterbuck, 16.

⁶ Clutterbuck, 19.

these supplies in hidden locations in the jungles for future use against the British if necessary. They also established organizations ostensibly formed to support former members of the MPAJA, but which in reality kept members of that force available for future call-up against the British.

Rather than openly defy the British through force of arms, the MCP first sought to undermine their power through economic sabotage and by undermining the British ability to rule. As Clutterbuck describes the strategy,

...the revolutionaries first attempt to disrupt the economy so that the daily life of the people goes from bad to worse. Confidence in the government deteriorates, and in the interests of national unity the government is persuaded to allow left-wing parties (including Communists, or Communists under another name) to join a coalition; the Communists soon have control of key departments. This is all quite legal and overt. At the same time, the Party is intensifying its undercover activities to infiltrate a network of selected and trained Communists into positions where they can influence people and events at every level.⁷

The MCP maintained this strategy of subversion and sabotage in 1948 when, under the leadership of its new Secretary-General Chen Ping, they came to the conclusion that it would not be sufficient to obtain their ends. They formed The Malayan Peoples' Anti-British Army (which later came to be called the Malayan Races Liberation Army) and initiated a violent insurgent resistance to the British governance of Malaysia.⁸ The MCP hoped that terrorism and instability might force the British out, leaving them as the only organized political party in the country as no other indigenously Malaysian parties had yet formed.⁹

Chen Ping's strategy included four stages:

⁷ Clutterbuck, 25.

⁸ Edgar O'Ballance, *Malaya: The Communist Insurgent War, 1948-60* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 14-15.

⁹ O'Ballance, 78.

- 1) Guerrilla attacks in the interior to force British landowners from their isolated estates and to chase law enforcement and other government officials from small towns and villages and into more urban centers
- 2) Develop insurgent bases in those areas left unprotected by the British in stage one and use these areas for expanding their own forces
- 3) Further territorial expansion into small towns and villages
- 4) Conventional massed attacks against British forces wherever they were concentrated¹⁰

The insurgency, and Britain's countervailing efforts, officially began with the murder of three European estate holders on June 16th, 1948. In response, police were given expanded search and detention powers and the military was brought in to support their efforts. The MCP was declared an unlawful society on July 23rd.¹¹ The ensuing low intensity warfare would not be officially ended until July 1960 with the total defeat of the MCP.

Clutterbuck usefully divides the conflict into three distinct phases: the defensive (1945-51), the offensive (1952-55), and victory (1955-60). In the first phase, the British were still coming to grips with the fact that an insurgency was indeed growing and were attempting to deal with it through relatively normal law enforcement measures. By the second, offensive, stage, they instituted the Briggs Plan and were aggressively attacking the insurgents both militarily and politically. During the final phase the British had seized the clear upper hand and were finishing off the last stragglers of the insurgent forces and were forming new political institutions for Malaysian independence.

The foundational element of the British strategy in Malaysia was the Briggs Plan. Lieutenant-General Sir Harold Briggs had been appointed to the position of Director of

¹⁰ O'Ballance, 78.

¹¹ O'Ballance, 82.

Operations in Malaya in 1950. He was responsible to the High Commissioner for the overall management of the conflict. He was also in charge of coordinating civilian, law enforcement and military personnel and forces.¹²

O'Ballance writes:

After seeing the situation for himself and weighing up the various 'pros' and 'cons,' he formulated what came to be known as the 'Briggs Plan.' Its object was to start a logical clearing of the country from south and north, to isolate the MRLA from the people who supported it and to force the insurgent fighters into the open. The main features of the plan were close civil administration, police and military co-ordination at all levels, and the resettlement of Chinese squatters. The army was to clear the areas initially and then hand them over to the police. There also to be some re-groupment of mine and rubber estate labour.¹³

The plan was instituted on June 1st, 1950 and established a Federal War Council, which operated at the national level, and several War Executive Committees which functioned at the state, district, and lower levels. These institutions were comprised of important governmental and military officials, as well as local people of prominence or special expertise, and were responsible for making policy recommendations and decisions. These committees brought close cooperation between police, military and civilian decision-makers and allowed for more coherent policy choices.¹⁴ Further details of the plan will be discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter.

The plan quickly bore fruit as the British reaction swung from defense (preventing a *coup d'etat* and attempting to maintain control over as many villages as possible) to an offensive initiative against the insurgents. "By the spring of 1952, the government campaign had swung over to the offensive, and the whole character of the war had

¹² O'Ballance, 106.

¹³ O'Ballance, 107.

¹⁴ O'Ballance, 107.

changed.”¹⁵ Relocated Chinese squatters could be more easily defended and more resources could be used to seek out insurgents. Clutterbuck estimates that in 1951 the guerrilla forces stood at about 8,000 fighters. Over the next six years they suffered approximately 9,000 casualties while only recruiting 3,000 replacements. By 1957 they had an estimated fighting strength of only 2,000.¹⁶ By 1960 the remaining guerrillas had either given up, surrendered or been killed or captured and the Emergency was officially ended.

The following sections will examine the conflict using the rubric of the strategic outline presented in the previous chapter.

DIRECT ACTION AGAINST THE INSURGENT

Direct action against the insurgent consists of seven elements, as outlined in the previous chapter: 1) secure the population from insurgent attacks; 2) ensure sufficient troop strength to protect targeted populations and destroy or expel insurgent forces; 3) emplace troops in population centers; 4) produce intelligence to identify insurgents and differentiate them from the larger population; 5) prevent insurgent groups from reforming following initial defeat; 6) undermine or destroy insurgent political organizations; 7) build up host military forces. This section will examine how each of these aspects was carried out (or not) in Malaysia.

One of the first steps in a successful counterinsurgency operation is to protect the populace from insurgent violence. Failure to do so both undermines faith in the government and may lead the population to support the insurgency out of fear.

¹⁵ Clutterbuck, 86.

¹⁶ Clutterbuck, 87.

Noel Barber describes the MCP's tactics of intimidation in his book *The War of the Running Dogs*:

The objective was simple - to brand innocent, frightened people with the trademark of terror. It did not matter whether the attacks were large or small - like wildfire the news sped along the Asian grapevine that if ordinary men and women wanted to stay alive they must do only one thing: obey. The alternative was death - and only if one were lucky would the killing be swift. That was why in the Johore village of Layang Layang, a silent crowd watched a Malay policeman fighting desperately for his life against three Chinese CTs. No one stirred to help. No one dared later to name the murderers.¹⁷

With this tactic the Communists were able, at least temporarily, to prevent the population from siding with the government. Assistance, especially in regards to intelligence and information, was not forthcoming. Since the population is the key to winning in insurgency warfare, allowing such a situation to continue would have been fatal to the British. They therefore took several steps to remediate it.

One of these steps was to develop a Special Constabulary. These men were armed and placed at guard posts. They received training over time as it became possible. Within the first three months of the war, 24,000 Malays had been recruited for these positions. Creating this indigenous force freed up military and police personnel to be used offensively against the insurgents rather than entirely being tied down with the defense of villages and urban centers.¹⁸

O'Ballance describes a division of labor that was set up among the various law enforcement and military forces.

The uniformed branch of the Federation Police was chiefly responsible for maintaining law and order in the towns, protecting the people, enforcing Emergency regulations and checking identities. The Special Constables were to

¹⁷ Noel Barber, *The War of the Running Dogs: How Malaya Defeated the Communist Guerrillas 1948-1960* (London: Cassell, 1971), 51.

¹⁸ O'Ballance, 83.

be employed on static duties whenever possible until the proposed Home Guard detachments were raised and trained. The police formed a number of jungle squads that went out into the jungle and forests to obtain information, and they also had to deal with groups of recalcitrant Chinese squatters. While the police dominated the populated areas, the army was to be the striking force against the MRLA. Army formation and unit headquarters were to be in the towns and large villages with the sub-units lying out in the jungle, ready to pounce whenever they received information of the whereabouts of MRLA detachments. The task of the army was to search out, to harass and to kill insurgent fighters.¹⁹

In addition to efficiently utilizing and assigning available manpower, the British also effectively organized defense through the development of "New Villages." This was perhaps the most noteworthy initiative of the Briggs Plan and of the entire counterinsurgency effort. Chinese squatters, who had set up households on untitled land, were frequent targets of insurgent intimidation and were utilized by the insurgents for food, supplies, and information. They further provided insurgents the opportunity to integrate into their communities where they usually remained indistinguishable to the authorities from non-combatants.

With this plan these settlers were removed from their dwellings and resettled in New Villages which were protected by barbed wire and Special Constables until they could form their own Home Guard units. They were also strategically located to provide the greatest level of defense.²⁰ When combined with the registration of all inhabitants and the provision of identity cards to them, these New Villages served to better protect the villagers from insurgent harassment and to prevent insurgents from gaining access to these communities. Karl Hack argues that it was this resettlement, and the consequent ability of the British to effectively control the population that was most important to

¹⁹ O'Ballance, 108.

²⁰ O'Ballance, 109.

eventual success.²¹

This initiative was resource and time-consuming but by 1952 more than 400,000 squatters and been moved to approximately 400 New Villages. The people were offered title to the lands that they were given in these villages (which was considered of great value to most of these previously landless people since they could pass it down through the family) as well as schools and medical clinics. Government officials were assigned to help with the relocations and the initial administration of the villages to allow the transitions to proceed more smoothly.²²

As these villages became settled more and more authority was turned over to the inhabitants themselves, including for security. According to Barber, "One of Templer's first thoughts was that the more the Chinese (some of whom tended to sit on the fence) were given responsibility, the more they would integrate into the community. What better way than to arm Chinese Home Guards in the struggle against Communism?"²³ This had the dual effect of giving members of the Home Guard a larger stake in their communities and in the success of the government while freeing up official forces to take the fight to the insurgents.

These New Villages not only offered protection to the villagers but also allowed for sufficient forces to seek and destroy the enemy. This was done very successfully. "The degree of success of the Security Forces against the insurgents was such that in September 1953, General Templer was able to declare his first 'White Area.' This meant an area in which all Emergency restrictions were lifted, and in which the inhabitants were

²¹ Karl Hack, "Iron Claws on Malaya: The Historiography of the Malayan Emergency," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 30, no. 1 (March 1999): 118.

²² O'Ballance, 110.

²³ Barber, 181.

free to go about their business normally, without curfew, food or other restrictions, such as police searches and checks.”²⁴

This was accomplished without massive numbers of troops. In 1948, at the beginning of the struggle, the government had 10 infantry battalions (2 British, 5 Gurkha, and 3 Malay, each battalion had 700 men) and 9,000 police officers.²⁵ This made the actual combat forces available to the government roughly equal to the number of guerrillas in the field.²⁶ The number of battalions had doubled to 20 by 1951, but guerrilla recruitment had also increased. By 1951 the police force was large enough and capable enough to handle static guard duty so that more military forces could be freed from this task to engage in offensive operations. The police also formed their own offensive jungle squads and a force of 3,000 police officers manned forts in deep parts of the jungle inhabited by aborigines.²⁷

Though not overwhelmingly superior in number, troop levels were sufficient to defeat the insurgents because there was an efficient division of labor and the most vulnerable populations were protected in the New Villages where they eventually developed their own Home Guard units and were able to protect themselves. Clutterbuck argues that by 1952 the government's effective fighting capacity was probably at a 2-to-1 ratio over the insurgents but never approached the larger ratios often deemed necessary by some counterinsurgent experts.²⁸ In addition to British forces there was a continual

²⁴ O'Ballance, 141.

²⁵ Clutterbuck, 42.

²⁶ Clutterbuck, 43.

²⁷ Clutterbuck, 43.

²⁸ Clutterbuck, 43.

effort to train up local Malaysian forces and to increasingly rely upon them for operations, thereby preparing them for eventual British withdrawal.

As the population felt more secure and as the insurgents were increasingly driven deeper into the jungle, intelligence became easier to obtain. In addition to the increased willingness of people to come forward with information because they felt safer doing it, two other reasons propelled the gathering of intelligence and the ability to separate the insurgents from the regular population—a rewards system and a national registration system. Rewards for information leading to the arrest of wanted insurgents were quite high, often enough for someone to set up a new business and begin a new life. Former communist insurgents were also eligible to collect these rewards, but at half the normal rate.²⁹ In combination with periodic amnesties, this incentive was enough to generate a substantial number of surrenders leading to valuable information.³⁰ Robert Thompson, an important military leader during the counterinsurgency effort in Malaysia, noted that “there is nothing like establishing prospects whereby an individual can go from terrorist to capitalist in two easy moves.”³¹ The effectiveness of these rewards in obtaining intelligence that led to the capture of important guerrilla fighters and leaders is widely recognized.³²

The national identity card was crucial in differentiating between insurgents and ordinary people. Barber calls the initiative a “masterstroke” as it served as a census and enabled the government to determine when someone was out of place. “It also meant that security forces were able time after time to separate the sheep from the goats. No CT

²⁹ Barber, 84.

³⁰ Clutterbuck, 104.

³¹ Sir Robert Thompson, quoted in Barber, 84.

³² O’Ballance, 174; Clutterbuck, 104; Barber, 319.

dared to come forward for a card; yet if a man was questioned and could not produce one, he was immediately suspect.”³³ As insurgents became more readily identifiable it not only made their capture easier, it also reduced the likelihood of false arrest or persecution of innocents, thereby helping to prevent injustices that may have served to separate members of the community from the government.

The registration cards had the biggest utility in the New Villages. The police would run checks in the early mornings and screen everyone present. Anyone who should not have been there was identified and questioned, anyone who should have been there but was missing was noted as suspicious and marked for future monitoring.³⁴ The identity cards were also useful outside of the villages, however, as police could use them for random checks and in cordons. People who were far outside their registered locality, or who did not have a card, could be identified as suspicious and questioned. Clutterbuck argues that “it was from shreds of evidence such as these that intelligence was built up and agents recruited to betray the Communists.”³⁵

The organization most responsible for the development of intelligence was the Special Branch. It resembled the British MI5 in its duties, which included squashing internal subversion, sabotage or revolution and counter-espionage. It was officially part of the police department but was in reality highly independent.³⁶ According to O’Ballance, “The Special Branch was functioning and by the end of 1951 had curtailed the activities of the Min Yuen. It’s biggest success was to bring the Min Yuen situation under control in Penang Island, which was an outstanding Communist hotbed. The

³³ Barber, 85.

³⁴ Clutterbuck, 37.

³⁵ Clutterbuck, 38.

³⁶ Barber, 191.

Special Branch was also well on the way to completing a record and dossier of all members of the MCP, the MRLA, and the Min Yuen."³⁷ The Min Yuen (translated as People's Organization) was an underground organization of people who supported the MCP and the MRLA but were not official members of either organization. It provided money, food, intelligence and other supplies and may have had between 30,000 and 40,000 members at its height.³⁸

The British also ensured that once on the defensive the guerrillas could not recover. They were pushed further and further into the jungle, away from the population which provided them supplies, intelligence and recruits. Once an area was declared White, it stayed so and the communist organizations in those areas never recovered.³⁹ As the communist's military capability was undermined, so was it's political arm. It's terrorist attacks were designed, at least in part, to demonstrate the impotence of the government. The government's efficiency in its battle against them, however, served to demonstrate the obvious. The communist's political appeal was also undermined by the British decision to work towards total independence and to take meaningful steps in that direction. This undermined the communist's argument about colonialism, their primary complaint against the government.

The British carried out all seven elements of the direct action against the insurgents element of the counterinsurgency strategy proposed in chapter three. They first secured the population from attack; they provided sufficient troop strength not only for that defense but also to take the offensive; they put troops in population centers,

³⁷ O'Ballance, 115.

³⁸ O'Ballance, 92.

³⁹ Clutterbuck, 112.

primarily through the New Villages initiative, which was also instrumental in providing intelligence that allowed them to identify and locate insurgents; they prevented insurgent forces from regrouping once defeated; they undermined the Communist Party by addressing its chief grievance (independence); and built up not only the host nation security forces (through the Home Guard and other units) but also the host nation political structure and institutions (discussed in further depth later in this chapter). For at least these elements of the COIN strategy which I have delineated, the British effort in Malaysia tracked very closely. The next section deals with their efforts in indirect actions against the insurgents.

INDIRECT ACTION AGAINST THE INSURGENT

In addition to direct action against the communist insurgency, the British took effective indirect action as well. Indirect action is undertaken primarily in the political realm and includes: undermining insurgent grievances through effective political action; building host-nation legitimacy through governmental competence; developing a close partnership between the host and supporting nation; and holding democratic elections as soon as feasible.

From the very beginning, British leadership recognized that the struggle in Malaysia was at heart a political rather than a military one. The first British High Commissioner in Malaysia, Sir Henry Gurney, later to be assassinated by communist guerrillas made the early decision that the control of the war should not fall under the armed forces. According to Barber, "This, he argued, was a war of political ideologies. He believed that what was needed was armed support for a political war, not political

support for an army war.”⁴⁰ He believed that military control would inevitably lead to military excess and subsequent diminution of the population’s support for the government and increased support for the insurgents. He was not opposed to the use of military force, and advocated its proper use, but only as needed to allow for political advancements. “More guns and troops were needed, of course, but only, Gurney insisted, as an adjunct to the civil power.”⁴¹

This set the stage for the subsequent unfolding of the war and the continual focus on its all-important political dimension. General Templer also kept this firmly in mind and he placed the emergence of a united Malaysian state that was accommodating to all ethnic and social groups as his primary goal. As O’Ballance puts it, “He stressed the needs for Malays, Chinese, Indians and Europeans to sink their differences and build up a truly ‘Malayan way of life.’”⁴² Similarly, counterinsurgency expert John Nagl argues that it was Templer’s ability to keep all aspects of the conflict, including the political, economic and social, in addition to the use of the military and law enforcement force, that was his greatest contribution to the struggle.⁴³ This produced the conditions “to move Malaya forward to a position in which it would be ready for independence, thus removing the primary claim of the MCP for public support.”⁴⁴

Templer began work on this immediately. Within one month of his arrival in Malaysia, municipal elections were held in Kuala Lumpur for city council. Those elected did not wield true power, but it was a step towards institutionalizing self-governance and

⁴⁰ Barber, 74.

⁴¹ Barber, 74.

⁴² O’Ballance, 119.

⁴³ John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 100.

⁴⁴ Nagl, 100.

of producing greater cooperation between the British and the Malaysians. The elections also brought together racial alliances and brought to prominence future leaders of an independent Malaysia, including Tunku Abdul Rahman who would be Malaysia's first national leader.⁴⁵

This came about in July 1955 with the country's first general election. An alliance, known as the Triple Alliance, was formed between three major political parties that cut across ethnic groups and Tunku Abdul Rahman became Chief Minister of the Malayan Federation.⁴⁶ The election was especially important because it drew eighty-five percent of the electorate to the polls and because the victory of the Triple Alliance represented the ability to compromise between the Chinese and Indian communities. It demonstrated that Malaysia could exist as a national unity.⁴⁷ The success of the elections completely undermined the Communist Party's chief grievance against the British, that of colonialism, and subverted their political message and their primary *raison d'etre*.

While working towards these elections, the British had struggled to uphold the legitimacy of the government and its ability to meet the needs of the people. A distrusted or impotent government would not have been able to hold successful elections or hand the reins of that legitimacy over to any government so created. It was imperative, therefore, to generate support for the government before national elections could be seen as credible. General Templer realized that good government must come prior to self-government and that immediate elections would lead to dysfunction. "He [Templer] realized that, for the people in the villages, self-government was less important than good

⁴⁵ Barber, 180.

⁴⁶ O'Ballance, 149-150.

⁴⁷ Barber, 268.

government. He was determined to bring self-government to Malaya, but not until the independent government could be strong enough to prevent racial violence (as had occurred in India) and the people were no longer in a state of insecurity and poverty."⁴⁸

To this end the government worked diligently to improve the everyday lives of Malaysia's people. This was done especially well in the New Villages. If people had been transported into the New Villages and had encountered poor administration and few services, they would likely have resented the government for being transplanted. But many came to appreciate their new surroundings. Barber describes the positive environment in these villages:

As the families settled in and the ring of hammers and grinding of saws showed that the first houses were being knocked together, troops were building the school and doctors were giving every villager a medical examination, treating - for the first time in their lives-any who were ill. In another hut a clerk was handing out money, for each family received a government subsidy for up to six months until it could reap the first harvest of its short-term crop.⁴⁹

Such progress and new services lent credibility and legitimacy to the government and undermined the communist's claims against the government.

Clutterbuck argues that the economic development of rural and remote areas is one of the keys to countering communist insurgencies. Such development must directly impact the people and be noticeable to everyone. If the people see their own and their neighbors' quality of life and prosperity improving they will be more likely to view the government as legitimate and the insurgent as a threat to their improving situation.

"Provided that the ordinary people's confidence in this progress is maintained, they will

⁴⁸ Clutterbuck, 81.

⁴⁹ Barber, 125.

not wish to upset the applecart, and Communist subversion will find nothing on which to take root.”⁵⁰

It was such progress that brought many Malaysians, both indigenous and Chinese, over to the side of the government and drew them away from the communists. The emphasis placed on governance, and their success at demonstrating effective governance, was, according to Barber, the most worrying aspect of the British counterinsurgency effort to communist insurgent leaders. They realized that an effective British government would undermine their grievances and weaken their appeal to the people while subsequently improving the government’s position.⁵¹ This was rightly seen as highly effective indirect action against them.

In the end though, it was independence that was most destructive of the communist cause. When Malaysia became an independent country on August 31, 1957 it removed the communist’s primary pillar of complaint against the government. As Sir Robert Thompson put it, “Well—there’s one thing that even Chin Peng can’t disguise. He started a war to kick out the British Imperialists—and now there aren’t any. We’ve not been kicked out—we’ve left, head high, and it’s the British who gave Independence to Malaya, not Chin Peng.”⁵² The insurgents were no longer freedom fighters struggling against an imperialist outsider but were now bandits battling the elected government of their own country. This altered the very nature of the war in favor of the government.⁵³

Following independence the government continued to focus on the provision of government services as a primary effort of the counterinsurgency strategy. Chief

⁵⁰ Clutterbuck, 155.

⁵¹ Barber, 229.

⁵² Thompson, quoted in Barber, 304

⁵³ Barber, 305.

Minister Tunku, having been involved in the effort for many years before his election, realized the importance of governmental legitimacy and the need to appear competent and responsive. This wise statement of Thompson's is illustrative of his understanding of the situation:

During the last three years of the war, more roads were built, more jungle cleared, bridges and water systems constructed, schools and hospitals started, than had been done in the last three generations. We were not fighting the Communist terrorists with arms alone. We went a long way to win the hearts and minds of our people. We gave people more than the Communists could ever hope to give.⁵⁴

Under the new government's leadership the Emergency was formally ended on July 31, 1960.

INTERACTION WITH THE POPULATION

The population is the key battlefield in counterinsurgency struggles. Whichever side most successfully brings the population over to its side is most likely to prevail. To prevail, counterinsurgents must: develop substantial and deep cultural awareness and understanding; address political, economic, developmental and social grievances of the population; develop cooperation between the population and counterinsurgent forces in order to improve intelligence; avoid brutal tactics that will alienate the population; and deny insurgent forces access to and support from the population.

When the conflict in Malaysia began, a substantial portion of the population was neutral. Malaysians were not communists, but they did not necessarily feel strongly about supporting the government. They simply wanted to live their lives in peace. This was even more true when it came to the Chinese population, which often felt neglected

⁵⁴ Tunku Abdul Rahman, quoted in Barber, 320.

by the government. The population, and again specifically the Chinese population, certainly didn't want to risk supporting the government if it was eventually going to lose. The prospect of retaliation by a successful communist insurgency was all too real. O'Ballance notes that, "The Government had considerable difficulty in persuading the Chinese community in Malaya to take any interest or give any help in combating the MRLA. In 1950, a great many were 'fence sitters.' They were not sure the Government was going to win, and that the MRLA would be defeated."⁵⁵

Nagl argues that, by a few years into the war, the insurgents actually had the advantage.

The guerrillas had reorganized themselves by early 1950 to the point that one observer believed their civil support was 'probably equal to that of the government in the matter of supplies and superior in the matter of intelligence.' As a result, guerrilla incidents, which had dropped from over two hundred monthly in the second half of 1948 to fewer than a hundred by the middle of 1949, increased to over four hundred a month by mid-1950. The military was hard pressed, unable to station sufficient forces to guarantee the safety of cleared areas.⁵⁶

As noted in previous sections, however, the British learned quickly and worked hard to protect the population from insurgent violence and to improve their standard of living. These efforts eventually paid off as the population began to side more and more with the government as the conflict wound on.

The British were able to demonstrate cultural awareness and understanding for two reasons. First, they had already been in the country for decades and so there were many functionaries and bureaucrats who already had a deep understanding of the country and its people. Secondly, by developing the Home Guard and other indigenous forces to

⁵⁵ O'Ballance, 111.

⁵⁶ Nagl, 72-73.

work most closely with the population they ensured even greater cultural affinity. The more the government forces had an indigenous face, the less cultural friction and misunderstanding was likely to arise.

The centerpiece of the British effort to win the population was the Briggs Plan. Nagl quotes a veteran of the conflict as saying: "In the early days, we didn't grasp how important the support of the local people was. It wasn't until Briggs that we understood that the CTs got all of their support - food, supplies, intelligence-from the local people. Only about 1950 was the political nature of the war really grasped."⁵⁷ Briggs recognized the centrality of the population: "The people matter - they are vital - but you can't expect any support from people you can't protect."⁵⁸ And he made protecting them and winning their support the center of his strategy.

In brief outline, the Briggs Plan constituted the following:

- (a) to dominate the populated areas and to build up a feeling of complete security which would eventually result in a steady and increasing flow of intelligence
- (b) to break up the Communist organization within the populated areas.
- (c) to isolate the insurgents from their food and information supplies.
- (d) to destroy the insurgents by forcing them to attack counterinsurgent forces on their own ground.⁵⁹

Barber describes the plan as "A master-stroke of power and simplicity." It ensured "that from now on security forces would protect the unpopulated areas, cut the enemy lines of communication between CTs and villagers, and force the CTs out to battle. Briggs planned to give the populated areas the confidence which only protection

⁵⁷ Nagl, 71.

⁵⁸ Gen. Harold Briggs, quoted in Barber, 115.

⁵⁹ Barber, 116.

could bring, to implement Gurney's squatter plans, and by resettling half a million people, isolate the CTs from their food supplies."⁶⁰ The plan also placed the weight of the government's efforts on the shoulders of the civilian government itself and the police force. The military played a supporting role, but was not in the lead.⁶¹

Though Briggs devised the plan, it was his successor, General Templer, who was most responsible for implementing it. He too recognized the key importance of earning the support of the population and it was he who first popularized the phrase about winning "the hearts and minds of the people." According to O'Ballance, this phrase "summed up the keynote of his whole policy," and was highly effective.⁶² One of the primary elements of Templer's implementation of the Briggs Plan was the establishment of the New Villages, briefly discussed earlier.

The New Villages project was massive in scope and involved moving over 400,000 squatters into consolidated and defensible locations. Though initially traumatic, the benefits that the people accrued in their new homes generally outweighed the negative feelings derived by their forced removal. The actual movement of the people was a crucial period in which extremely negative feelings could have been aroused against the British and the Malay government. After all, the military was forcibly taking people from their homes and resettling them in strange locations which they did not know. The potential for the development of long-lasting hatred was real. It was due to the professionalism with which the resettlement was carried out that such long-term hostility was avoided. As Barber put it, "The difficulties came with those who were just

⁶⁰ Barber, 116.

⁶¹ Barber, 117.

⁶² O'Ballance, 129.

terrified; and it was here that the British troops behaved so magnificently. It would have been easy for them to regard all squatters as possible CTs and bundle them by force into the waiting lorries, but they never did. Patiently, and with an abundance of good humour, they sweltered in the tropical heat, helping the people to sort out their problems and their belongings.”⁶³

Clutterbuck concurs that the manner in which these forced relocations occurred was crucial. Here’s how describes the process:

When the skeleton of a New Village was ready, a selected squatter area would be surrounded before dawn by a cordon of troops. Other troops, police, nurses, and welfare officers moved into the area. Each family was allowed to fill one truck with its possessions, food, and a limited amount of livestock. The families were repaid at market prices for any animals or crops that could not be taken along. In the long run, these early-morning roundups were among the most important moments of the war, for the way they were conducted colored the whole attitude of the people toward the government. The roundups could have been carried out with brutality, as Communist propaganda had led the squatters to expect. In fact, however, they were carried out with much kindness and sympathy....For the soldiers it was a hateful task, and there was nothing false about the compassion with which they helped these families gather up the chickens, carry the babies, and lift the old women into the trucks. This astonished the Chinese, and many have since placed on record that it was one of the biggest factors in winning their eventual support.⁶⁴

Once the New Villages began to operate, the people who moved there often appreciated their new way of life. Protection was ensured by both the military and later by the local Home Guard, a new house and the necessities of life were provided for, and many peasants were given their own land to farm. This last was especially important in the culture. “For hundreds of thousands of peasants all over the country who believed in the old Chinese proverb, ‘A land title is the hoop that holds the barrel together,’ this was

⁶³ Barber, 123.

⁶⁴ Clutterbuck, 62.

the fulfillment of a dream: to own a plot of land which a man could pass on to his sons when he died.”⁶⁵

Not only did the New Villages succeed in bringing the population close to the government by providing them with security and material welfare, but it also successfully divorced them from the insurgents. Combined with national registration cards, the New Villages made it prohibitively difficult for insurgents to interact with the population in order to obtain food, supplies, and intelligence.

The guerilla must live amongst people, who provide him with food, information and money; when the Briggs Plan, to remove whole sections of the population into defended New Villages, was put into effect, he was at once deprived of his main essentials. Most of his time was taken up trying to obtain food, and lack of information about the moves and intentions of the Security Forces caused many defeats and losses. Strict precautions were taken to prevent food being smuggled out to the insurgent fighters in the jungle.⁶⁶

These effects did more to undermine the insurgency than any individual battle or series of battles. Hack notes that, “Unable to dominate populated areas, lacking logistical links to other countries, and with the jungle offering only subsistence support to small groups, the MNLA had made itself reliant on its umbilical cord to the squatters.”⁶⁷ The New Villages cut that cord. By bringing the population closer to the government while simultaneously isolating it from the insurgents, the British struck at the heart of insurgent effort. It was this that was most responsible for a successful conclusion of the war.⁶⁸

Also of vital importance were efforts to make the government more inclusive of all of Malaysia’s people. Citizenship became much more readily available to Chinese, more than a million of whom took advantage of it; the Malayan Civil Service was opened

⁶⁵ Barber, 125.

⁶⁶ O’Ballance, 15.

⁶⁷ Hack, 104.

⁶⁸ O’Ballance, 108.

to non-Malays; and a program of Malayan primary education (rather than the individual programs of various ethnic groups) was instituted across the country. These initiatives gave people a stake in the success of the government and helped foster an important sense of nationalism by Malays of all racial categories.⁶⁹

Importantly, these strides towards winning over the population were not reversed by heavy-handedness in combat. Any gains made through providing security, material welfare, and other goods could be immediately undermined by the indiscriminate application of violence resulting in the death of innocents. The dangers of this were recognized by the British from the beginning. "In this kind of war, one stray bomb that killed one innocent child could make a thousand enemies."⁷⁰ Though "collateral damage," as it is called, is impossible to avoid completely in warfare, concerted efforts can reduce it. According to Professor Anthony Short, as quoted by Barber:

There were, almost inevitably, innocent victims. Some of these victims - like the twenty-five dead in Batang Kali in northern Selangor - were not surprisingly made martyrs by the MCP. But there was nothing like the indiscriminate killing of civilians in Vietnam. And although the figure can never be known, I would put it at less than a hundred from all causes - including misplaced shots and bombs dropped in error.⁷¹

This level of caution, and the resultant low numbers in inadvertent civilian casualties, was crucial to the effort of winning, and keeping, the population.

Furthermore, great efforts were made to ensure that policing and the overall treatment of the population remained within the bounds of the law. Torture was not used and brutality was generally avoided. According to Clutterbuck this was crucial in maintaining popular legitimacy, "...in fighting an insurgency of this kind, it is vital that

⁶⁹ Barber, 243.

⁷⁰ Barber, 75.

⁷¹ Barber, 97.

every action by government officials, policemen, and soldiers be strictly within the law. The law can be as tough as is needed, provided that it is properly enacted and that officials are manifestly subject to it themselves."⁷²

The political progress made towards both undermining the communist political apparatus and the move toward legitimate Malayan independence, was also vital. Promises of, and concrete movement toward, independence drew the population toward the government by legitimizing it while simultaneously removing the communist's chief grievance against the government.

These measures [towards independence], together with successes of the Security Forces in the field, gave the people of Malaya of all races confidence in British intentions, and confidence in themselves and their future. This confidence brought with it a slow but none the less marked tendency to get off the fence and to actively resist the insurgents. The battle to gain the minds and confidence of the people had been a tough one and these were the first real signs that it was being won by the Government.⁷³

By the time Gen. Templer relinquished power on May 30, 1954 to his successor, the war was on the way to being won. He had instituted the Briggs Plan, thereby bringing security to large segments of the population and severing the insurgents' primary link to supplies, intelligence, and recruits. More than 13 million people were living in White Areas⁷⁴ (areas deemed secure from insurgent violence), local governments were being elected and the groundwork for eventual independence and democratic governance in the future was laid.⁷⁵

In fact, independence was not far off and would be achieved in August 1957. During the three years between Templer's departure and Malaysian independence great

⁷² Clutterbuck, 37.

⁷³ O'Ballance, 154-155.

⁷⁴ Nagl, 102.

⁷⁵ O'Ballance, 141-142.

strides were made against the insurgency, both militarily, and even more importantly, politically. The Malaysian Communist Party's political platform, centered on anti-colonialism, was delegitimized by independence. Increasingly good security and military tactics, fueled by ever better intelligence provided by a cooperative populace, led to the depletion of insurgent forces. By 1957 the MRLA was down to a paltry 1,500 available combatants.⁷⁶

The insurgency lasted for another three years but was in continual decline during that time. The communist's connection with the people continued to fade and they were unable to recruit willing participants to replace those who were increasingly being killed, captured, or who were voluntarily surrendering in order to take advantage of bribes and amnesties.⁷⁷ Many formerly committed communists began to leave the party, and the insurgency, as their position became more dire. Many left because they were unwilling to die for a lost cause or because they came to recognize the party's various failures.⁷⁸ By the time the insurgency was officially declared over, in July of 1960, only 500 insurgents remained and these were isolated, ill-equipped, and almost completely ineffectual. Emergency restrictions were lifted in all areas except for certain locations along the border with Thailand and life in a free and safe Malaysia moved forward.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ O'Ballance, 143.

⁷⁷ Barber, 318-319.

⁷⁸ Lucian W. Pye, *Guerrilla Communism in Malaya: Its Social and Political Meaning*, (Princeton: Princeton, University Press, 1956), 334-336.

⁷⁹ O'Ballance, 164.

CONCLUSION

This case study has served a two-fold purpose. The first was to demonstrate that democracies can in fact win counterinsurgencies abroad. It is interesting to note that Malaysia receives no more than a passing mention in either Arreguin-Toft or Merom, the two scholars with the most trenchant arguments that democracies can't win democracies. To truly make their case, these authors would need to find a way to explain away Britain's success in Malaysia. That they did not attempt to do so indicates a weak point in their argument.

But the Malaysia case goes further than simply offering a counterpoint to Merom and Arreguin-Toft. It not only demonstrates that democracies can win counterinsurgencies, it also points to the success of a particular strategy, one much like the strategy outlined here. The British followed a strategy having the three key elements that I have outlined: direct action against the insurgents, indirect action against the insurgents, and interaction with the population. The British succeeded not only in devising a strategy along these lines but also in following it. They avoided the temptation to undermine that strategy by using heavy-handed firepower, made the protection of the population central to their actions, and worked for political independence for the Malay people.

Democracies can win counterinsurgencies, and following a strategy along the lines of that outlined here seems to be the surest way to do it.

CHAPTER 5

VIETNAM

The Vietnam War is an important case study in the examination of the ability of democracies to win counterinsurgencies. In this conflict, the greatest military power on the planet was defeated by a small, undeveloped country. Many lay this loss at the feet of counterinsurgency strategy. Probably the most famous is Harry G. Summer, Jr., who wrote the influential book, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. In it he writes that

Judged by the results of the war, the basic mistake...was that we saw their guerrilla operations as a strategy in itself. Because we saw it as a strategy, we attempted to understand it in terms of the 'people's war' theories of Mao Tse-tung, and devised elaborate theories of counterinsurgency. We attempted to counter it by using such models as the British model in Malaysia.¹

Blaming counterinsurgency strategy has been a popular means by which analysts have sought to remove blame from the Army itself. As this chapter will endeavor to show, nothing could be further from the truth. In actual fact, the U.S. Army pursued a largely conventional strategy for most of the war. For the crucial initial years of fighting, a strategy of attrition was pursued which relied almost exclusively on conventional search and destroy missions. Not until 1968, and a change of command, was an emphasis on counterinsurgency strategy put into place. By then, however, support for the war in the U.S. was dwindling and a draw-down of forces was underway. Despite that draw-down the new strategy quickly yielded dividends and demonstrated the efficacy of counterinsurgency when properly applied. It is important not to analyze the Vietnam

¹ Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Random House, 1982), 86.

War as one conflict that was either won or lost. Instead, it most analytically helpful to look at it in two periods, the conventional period and the counterinsurgency period. Doing so brings to light important lessons concerning the ability of democracies to win counterinsurgencies. But first, a brief history of the conflict is in order to provide a broad picture of what happened and to set the context.

HISTORY

The war in Vietnam lasted for nearly twenty years and was fought from roughly 1955 (depending upon when one places the beginning of the insurgency in the south) until 1975, though it's roots can be traced back to the beginnings of French colonialism in the 1850s. After a struggle, the Treaty of Hue was ratified in 1884 which formally established French rule of Vietnam. This colonization continued until World War II when it was interrupted by Germany's defeat of France and the subsequent institution of the Vichy regime, which sided with the Axis powers. Though the French continued to administer Vietnam during this period it was really under Japanese control.

During this period of primarily Japanese occupation the Vietnamese communist movement first began to develop. It was founded by Ho Chi Minh and was most successful in the northern part of the country, though there were some adherents in the south. In August 1945, after the Japanese surrender to the Allied powers, the Viet Minh, Communist Party fighters, initiated an uprising and took control of many Vietnamese cities, particularly in the north. It seemed that Vietnam may become an independent communist country but the French viewed the territory as its own and began retaking territory from the Viet Minh. This sparked a nearly decade long struggle between the

French and the Viet Minh which ended at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 when the French were stunningly and decisively routed by Viet Minh forces.²

The French defeat resulted in the Geneva Accords of 1954. In this agreement, Vietnam was temporarily split between North and South at the 17th parallel and nationwide elections were set to occur in 1956, with a view to reunifying the country. In the meantime a communist regime under the direction Ho Chi Minh developed in the north while the south was under the nominal leadership of Emperor Bao Dai but was really directed by his Prime Minister, Ngo Dinh Diem. A rigged election in 1955 made Diem president of the State of Vietnam (South Vietnam) and a similarly rigged election in the North solidified Ho Chi Minh's power. This hardened the independent status of the two halves of the country and Diem, realizing that he would likely lose a nationwide election to Ho, refused to allow such an election to be held in 1956 as directed under the Geneva Accords (which the south had not signed since it was an agreement between the French and the Viet Minh).

Many political operatives from the north had remained in the south after the signing of the accords, and when Diem refused to hold elections they began to mobilize. Though Diem used authoritarian tactics in an attempt to arrest these operatives, enough evaded those efforts to recruit more people into the fold and in 1957 to initiate a campaign of terrorism and subversion against the government, initially without northern

² Mark Moyer, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 3.

support. Their actions, along with missteps by the Diem government itself, began to erode the popularity of the South Vietnamese regime.³

Historian Spencer Tucker describes the unfolding of the insurgency:

The southern insurgency grew much more quickly than the DRV leadership anticipated. It was fed by the Diem government's weakness, its inattention to the needs of the peasants, and its unwillingness to acknowledge problems. In addition to promising reform, especially in returning land to the peasants (what the Americans called 'winning hearts and minds'), the NLF sought physically to control the villages. In 1957 perhaps some 80 percent of the southern population lived in 17,000 hamlets spread over 8,000 villages. Controlling these would be the key both to supporting existing guerrilla forces and later to expanding them. Towards this end the NLF stepped up its program of assassination of Diem-appointed local officials. During 1957-8 some 700 village-level officials were killed; 1,200 died in 1958-9, 2,500 during 1959-60, and 4,000 died from May 1960 to May 1961. School teachers, social workers, and medical personnel were also favored targets for kidnapping and assassination.⁴

This indigenous insurgency in the south was soon bolstered by support in the north. The Communist Party in North Vietnam held its Third Party Congress in September 1960 and officially proclaimed the goal of overthrowing the South Vietnamese government by means of violence. "Socialist revolution" in the north and "liberating the South" were the two preeminent goals laid out by the Party for the years ahead.⁵

Worried about the implications of South Vietnam falling to communist aggression, the United States initiated a policy of aiding the Diem regime. At first this aid was primarily monetary. From 1954-1963 the United States provided approximately \$1.7 billion in aid, most of it aimed towards the military.⁶ But this aid also began to take

³ Spencer C. Tucker, *Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 88-89.

⁴ Tucker, 92.

⁵ Tucker, 115-116.

⁶ Tucker, 87.

the form of actual U.S. military personnel, as advisors were sent to help improve the quality of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). In 1960, 875 U.S. troops were stationed in Vietnam. By the next year that number had reached 3,164 and by 1964 the number was up to 23,310. In 1962, the U.S. had established the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) to direct U.S. military operations there. Up to 1964, however, the direct involvement of U.S. personnel in combat was relatively limited and fewer than 300 soldiers had been killed there.⁷ This limited role began to change in early 1965 when, at the request of MACV commander General William Westmoreland, the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade was sent to Da Nang to protect assets there. By the end of that year there were nearly 200,000 U.S. military personnel in country with an expanded mission of assisting ARVN in any way deemed necessary, including direct involvement in combat.⁸

Westmoreland adhered to a classic conventional strategy of seeking out and destroying the enemy, paying little heed to the tasks of pacification (counterinsurgency) and the development of the ARVN. By the time of his replacement in 1968 by Gen. Creighton Abrams, the war appeared to be in a situation of stalemate and the American people were turning against it. Abrams changed the strategy to one focused on counterinsurgency principles. This led to what Lewis Sorely has called the "better war," in which much success was garnered in a short time.

Unfortunately these changes came too late. By 1969, the withdrawal of American troops was begun under the Nixon Administration's policy of "Vietnamization," a hand-over of the conflict to the Government of Vietnam (GVN) and the ARVN. In January

⁷ Tucker, 97-98.

⁸ Tucker, 115-116.

1973 the Paris Peace Accords were signed. This agreement temporarily halted the war and was an official end to U.S. participation in it. The Accords allowed, however, for the North Vietnamese to maintain their current positions in the South. This provided them a springboard for an offensive in 1975 which crushed the Saigon government and handed the North Vietnamese ultimate victory in the conflict. The tragedy of Vietnam was that by the time an appropriate strategy, that of counterinsurgency, was instituted the American public had lost all taste for the war and the U.S. had already begun a steady withdrawal of forces.

DIRECT ACTION AGAINST THE INSURGENT

This section will examine how closely the direct action against the insurgent element of the COIN strategy outlined in this dissertation was followed in the early years of Vietnam. The first part of such direct action is securing the population from insurgent attacks. Westmoreland believed that this was best accomplished through a conventional offensive strategy. He believed that by seeking out and destroying the enemy, conceived of as both North Vietnamese main forces and Viet Cong guerrillas, there would be no enemy left to threaten the villagers. In his memoirs, Westmoreland says:

As I saw the three phases of my strategy, American combat troops were to be used at first to protect developing logistical bases, although some might have to be committed from time to time as 'fire brigades' whenever the enemy's big units posed a threat, which was how I contemplated first using the airmobile division in the Highlands. In the second phase, we were to gain the initiative, penetrate and whenever possible eliminate the enemy's base camps and sanctuaries. So long as the Communists were free to emerge from those hideouts to terrorize the people, recruit or impress conscripts, glean food, levy taxes, and attack government troops and installations, then to retire with impunity back into their sanctuaries, there was little hope of our defeating the insurgency. Invading the sanctuaries also might bring the elusive enemy to battle, affording an opportunity to destroy his main forces. In the third and final phase, we were to move into sustained ground

combat and mop up the last of the main forces and guerrillas, or at least push them across the frontiers where we would try to contain them.

Two additional tasks were to be pursued throughout all three phases: pacification and strengthening the ARVN. By the time the war reached the final phase, I expected the bulk of the people to be under government control and protection and the ARVN to be so trained and equipped and in such numbers that the South Vietnamese alone could deal with any lingering opposition. In a later day that was to be called 'Vietnamization.'⁹

It should be noted that pacification and strengthening the ARVN are presented almost as an afterthought, certainly neither fit into the main effort of Westmoreland's strategy. In fact, it is argued by many analysts and historians that those goals were largely dismissed by Westmoreland throughout his tenure of command in Vietnam. Former CIA official and historian Lewis Sorely describes Westmoreland's strategy in the following terms:

His [Westmoreland's] approach to achieving that [defeating the enemy] was to wage a war of attrition, using search and destroy tactics, in which the measure of merit was body count. The premise was that, if he could inflict sufficient casualties on the enemy, they would cease their aggression against South Vietnam. In his single-minded pursuit of this objective, Westmoreland essentially ignored two other crucial aspects of the war, improvement of South Vietnam's armed forces and pacification.¹⁰

Westmoreland's focus on traditional methods of warfare, at least for U.S. troops, is further evidenced by a cable he issued during the conflict. He wrote:

There is no doubt whatsoever that the insurgency in South Vietnam must eventually be defeated among the people in the hamlets and towns; however, in order to defeat the insurgency among the people, they must be provided security of two kinds:

- (1) Security of the country as a whole from large well organized and equipped forces including those which may come from outside their country.
- (2) Security from the guerrilla, the assassin, the terrorist and the informer.

⁹ Gen. William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1976), 185.

¹⁰ Lewis Sorely, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011, Kindle Electronic Edition), 91.

MACV is convinced that U.S. troops can contribute heavily in the first category of security....Therefore, the MACV concept is basically to employ U.S. forces...against the hardcore DRV/VC forces in reaction and search and destroy operations and thus permit the concentration of Vietnamese troops in the heavily populated areas along the coast, around Saigon and the Delta.¹¹

Tucker argues that Westmoreland's conventional mindset was programmed by his experiences in World War II and Korea and that he was never able to break away from that paradigm. He points out that because of this, Westmoreland "expressly rejected suggestions that US units be broken down into smaller groups to concentrate on pacification."¹² Andrew Krepinevich agrees with this assessment. He writes,

The sheer weight of American materiel and resources seemed sufficient to the military leadership to wear down the North Vietnamese and their VC allies; thus, strategy was not necessary. All that was needed was efficient application of firepower. It had worked against the Japanese and the Germans in World War II and against the Chinese in Korea. It would be tried again in Vietnam.¹³

Sorely maintains that this over-emphasis on the strategy of large main force units (often battalion or multi-battalion in size) searching through the jungle for similarly large enemy main force units was "costly in terms of time, effort, and materiel, but often disappointing in terms of results. The reality was that the enemy could avoid combat when he chose; accept it when and where he found it advantageous to do so; and break contact at will as a means of controlling casualties."¹⁴ It also left the populated villages unprotected, at least by U.S. forces. As Scott Sigmund Gartner points out, "Search and destroy aimed to destroy the enemy, not control real estate. Hills and villages were

¹¹ Gen. William Westmoreland, quoted in Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 154-155.

¹² Tucker, 105.

¹³ Krepinevich, 165.

¹⁴ Lewis Sorely, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1999), 4.

frequently taken, abandoned, and retaken in order to kill enemy forces.”¹⁵ Villages were seen more as terrain in which fighting, with the goal of killing the enemy, was conducted rather than as populated areas that needed to be consistently protected.

In fact, the north frequently used large battles to draw U.S. forces away from populated areas, thereby leaving them exposed. Stanley Karnow writes in his Pulitzer Prize winning history of the conflict that, “The battles at Khesanh and elsewhere in the hinterlands before and during the Tet offensive were intended to draw the Americans away from South Vietnam’s population centers, thereby leaving them naked to assault.”¹⁶ These areas were left protected only by the ineffective ARVN. As Krepinevich put it: “The ARVN was to be consigned to the unglamorous duty of population security, a role in which they had demonstrated considerable ineptitude in the past. Thus the Army left counterinsurgency to the RVNAF, while U.S. commanders went out in search of the big battles.”¹⁷ This left the most critical part of the conflict, protecting the population, to the corrupt and poorly trained and equipped ARVN.

Even worse, the U.S. Army’s own tactics were counterproductive in that they relied upon heavy firepower and bombing, thereby often alienating the people.

The use of armored formations went against many principles of classical counterinsurgency doctrine. Armored units rarely operated at night, when the guerrillas were most active; they allowed for easy evasion of U.S. forces by the guerrillas; they encouraged the infantry to operate ‘buttoned up’ inside their vehicles instead of out on patrol; they were ‘maintenance-intensive’ pieces of equipment, requiring large numbers of support troops, who did not actively participate in operations; and finally, compared with the infantry, they were grossly indiscriminate in the application of firepower. In short, they were a blunt instrument for combating insurgency—save in its most advanced stages—but

¹⁵ Scott Sigmund Gartner, *Strategic Assessments in War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 130.

¹⁶ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 554-555.

¹⁷ Krepinevich, 168.

quite appropriate to the Army's notion of how wars should be fought. A further addition to the Army's arsenal of firepower was the air support provided by tactical fighters and helicopters. The rationale for the lavish application of such firepower (and, in the case of the helicopter, additional mobility) was not for counterinsurgency operations but to support the Army's strategy of attrition. All this firepower and mobility, claimed General Wheeler, made traditional concerns relating to counterinsurgency inoperative.¹⁸

The philosophy of using an overwhelming application of force to quell the insurgency was perhaps best encapsulated by a response that Gen. Westmoreland gave to a question during a press conference about how to end the insurgency in Vietnam. His one word answer was: "Firepower."¹⁹ This reliance on a conventional application of force made body-count the primary metric of success, thereby incentivizing the Army to kill as many as possible but disincentivizing maintaining control over a particular area. "Thus, while the Army killed many VC, it never denied the enemy his source of strength—access to the people. The result was a seemingly perpetual rejuvenation of the insurgent forces."²⁰

Over-reliance on firepower in populated areas is demonstrated by the fact that 70 percent of all rounds fired by the U.S. in the war (with the exception of the Tet Offensive) were used in light or inactive combat situations.²¹ Similarly, the amount of aerial bombing was immense. Almost eight tons of bombs were dropped by the American side during the war, most of which was in Laos and South Vietnam. This was more than two times as much as was dropped by the Allies during all of the Second World War.²²

¹⁸ Krepinevich, 170.

¹⁹ Westmoreland, quoted in Krepinevich, 192.

²⁰ Krepivenich, 197.

²¹ Krepivenich, 201.

²² Tucker, 118.

General Khuyen, of the ARVN, argued that

Hatred was our enemy's major instrument to turn the people against us... Communist guerrillas usually drew retaliatory fire from our gunships and artillery by sniping at our aircraft, convoys or outposts. More often than not, it was the local people who were exposed to our fire because by the time it came, the guerrillas had fled or taken shelter underground.²³

In the same vein, a pacification official observed that, "With increasing frequency VC and NVA forces enter a hamlet, raise their flag and announce that they are staying. In order to get them out, we often have to destroy the hamlet."²⁴ These observations were confirmed by an analysis conducted by the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) which found that "our unobserved fire alienates the local peasants in most cases, thus harming our efforts to break down their loyalty to and support for the Viet Cong."²⁵ The extent to which this firepower, used in furtherance of the seek and destroy strategy, undermined building positive relationships with the people is further discussed in a later section.

To counter the accusation that the U.S. conventional approach was a major cause of failure in Vietnam, the Strategic Hamlets program is often brought-up. This was a population settlement and security program modeled on the resettlement program in Malaysia. Strategic Hamlets turned out to be a disaster and this is often pointed to as evidence that traditional counterinsurgency strategy was no more successful than was the conventional approach and may have even been worse. This ignores several key facts about the program, however.

²³ Gen. Khuyen, quoted in Krepivenich, 199.

²⁴ Pacification official, quoted in Krepivenich, 199.

²⁵ Office of the Secretary of Defense, quoted in Krepivenich, 201.

Initiated by the Diem regime in 1962 (before the introduction of U.S. combat troops) as an outgrowth of his failed 1959 agrovillage program and based on the New Villages concept in Malaysia, the Strategic Hamlets program was incompetently run by corrupt officials from the very beginning. Run by President Diem's brother Nhu, the program involved the forced relocation of peasants into armed compounds and also promised to provide access to superior health and educational services. The plan called for the establishment of 14,000 Strategic Hamlets comprised of the relocated residents of 16,000 unprotected rural hamlets. This was to have been completed by 1963.²⁶

After a month the GVN (Government of Vietnam) claimed that 1,300 Strategic Hamlets had already been created. They put the total at 2,500 in August and 3,225 in September 1962. Before two years had gone by, 8,000 of these fortified hamlets had been established. But these were little more than Potemkin villages.²⁷ Many of them were unfortified and few offered the services advertised. Additionally, the sites were often poorly located and ineffectively administered. The problems were exacerbated even further by the actions of the ARVN soldiers who were tasked with protecting these hamlets but instead often stole food and committed other abuses against the populace.²⁸ This was occurring to people who had been forced off of their own lands and into the Strategic Hamlets, ostensibly for their own good. As Tucker succinctly puts it, "Riddled with corruption, the program turned out to be a vast and expensive failure and alienated much of the peasantry. Probably most of the peasants simply wanted to be left alone and

²⁶ Tucker, 96.

²⁷ Krepinevich, 68.

²⁸ Tucker, 96-97.

certainly found the RVN as much an enemy as the VC. The government moved them off their lands, taxed them unfairly and did not deliver on promises.”²⁹

Tucker’s assessment is affirmed by an interview with Hai Chua, a communist defector, conducted by U.S. advisor Stuart Herrington. Hai Chua made the following statement regarding his own experiences with Strategic Hamlets:

First, the government forced many of the people to move to central locations called ‘Strategic Hamlets.’ We were told that this was for our protection from the Vietcong, but at this time, the people of Hiep Hoa [his hamlet] did not yet feel the need for such protection. The program caused many hardships as whole households were uprooted and moved to settlements near the main road. The Communists capitalized on this unpopular policy by pointing out that the government was trying to sever the people’s ties to their ancestral lands.³⁰

Clutterbuck places some of the blame on the inflated urgency of getting large numbers of hamlets established, whether they were functional or not. This meant that the newly populated hamlets were set up so hastily, and with merely the intention of being a statistic, that they could not provide need services, work opportunities, or even security, the *raison d’etre* of the entire program. Additionally, inhabitants were often not registered, which left them open to infiltration.³¹

This intense push for numbers was often at the behest of President Diem’s brother Nhu. According to Karnow, Nhu and Diem saw the program essentially as a way to enhance their influence rather than as a true strategy for winning the population to their side.³² Yuen Foong Khong agrees. He argues that, “Diem focused on controlling the peasants instead of winning their hearts and minds because it seemed a surer way of

²⁹ Tucker, 96-97.

³⁰ Hai Chua, quoted in Stuart A. Herrington, *Silence Was a Weapon: The Vietnam War in the Villages* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), 30.

³¹ Clutterbuck, 67.

³² Karnow, 273.

maintaining his tenuous grip on power.”³³ This led Robert Thompson, one of the counterinsurgency experts in Malaysia who had been responsible for the establishment of New Villages, to proclaim that, “No attention was paid to their purpose. Their creation became the purpose in itself.”³⁴ Another factor in the ineffectiveness of the program probably lays at the feet of Nhu’s chief military officer in charge of it, Col. Pham Ngoc Thao. Karnow divulges that his sources told him that Thao was actually a communist operative and that he deliberately undermined the program to render it ineffective and to turn the people away from the GVN.³⁵

Strategic Hamlets, though a failure, cannot be considered a failure of a legitimate attempt at true counterinsurgency strategy. It was devised and implemented by a corrupt and incapable government and military. It was run by a politician seeking only to benefit from the perception of success by racking up numbers. And was undermined by an enemy spy who likely worked diligently to undermine it’s success. The Strategic Hamlets program may in fact have led to some success if it had been supported by competent American troops, had progressed at a realistic pace, and actually delivered the services and security that it was intended to.

Though Westmoreland’s strategy was overwhelmingly focused on seek and destroy (for example, in June 1967 a full 86% of operations carried out by U.S. battalions did so with this mission in mind³⁶) he did make some tepid attempts at counterinsurgency proper. One such effort was Operation Hop Tac, initiated in 1964. It was experimental

³³ Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 94.

³⁴ Thompson, quoted in Karnow, 273.

³⁵ Karnow, 274.

³⁶ Krepinevich, 190.

in nature and only instituted in six provinces in the vicinity of Saigon. The idea of the operation was to clear areas of VC (Viet Cong) activity, maintain security through aggressive patrolling, provide important government services, and then handing the areas over to local militias and police forces once they were capable of providing security.³⁷

Yet this program also faltered due to Westmoreland's hands off approach. He insisted that all combat forces be ARVN and that U.S. troops would offer only advice and supplies. An ARVN unit was moved into the area from a distant province, which led to a high rate of desertion. Furthermore,

Political instability in Saigon was another negative factor. Khanh became so involved in political concerns that he was little interested in Hop Tac. Rather than have them participate in the project, he held marine and airborne brigades in their barracks close to the capital to prevent a possible coup. The RVN police failed to do their job, and the government did not deliver the American supplies that were to be the economic leverage.³⁸

Due to its failures, the program was ended in 1965.

Though Westmoreland involved the Army in few pacification efforts, other U.S. entities did make such attempts, and they were often the most successful elements of the American mission during Westmoreland's command. One such initiative was run by the CIA and called the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG). It was begun in 1961 and its primary purpose was to organize and arm villagers. They were also given medical supplies and agricultural assistance. These functions were carried out by contingents of U.S. Army Special Forces. By the end of 1962 the program had secured an entire province and approximately 38,000 villagers were taking part.³⁹

³⁷ Tucker, 106-107.

³⁸ Tucker, 106-107.

³⁹ Nagl, 128.

Unfortunately, once the program came to the notice of the Army, it's purpose was redirected. Nagl writes that, "Under MACV's leadership, the CIDG soldiers were integrated into the ARVN and used as mobile strike forces while U.S. Special Forces were withdrawn from the program to be placed in offensive roles; they were replaced by far less capable Vietnamese Special Forces."⁴⁰ Leading him to the assessment that, "The most flexible of all U.S. government organizations [the CIA] was unable to alter U.S. Army counterinsurgency policy with a program that achieved demonstrable results in a comparatively short time and with relatively few resources expended; the organizational culture of the army was too formidable a barrier to permit learning from the CIA's success."⁴¹

Another organization that attempted to implement a counterinsurgency strategy was the U.S. Marine Corps. Major General Lew Walt, who was commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) in northern South Vietnam pushed a pacification strategy for his troops that was at odds with Westmoreland's search and destroy conventional strategy. He directed the formation of CAPs (Combined Action Platoons) which integrated a 14-man Marine rifle squad, along with one Navy corpsman, into Vietnamese Regional Forces platoons. The CAPs lived in Vietnamese villages to stay close to the people and provide protection. They also performed civic action activities, attacked the VC infrastructure, organized intelligence, and conducted propaganda.⁴² All elements of the counterinsurgency strategy advocated in this dissertation. There were

⁴⁰ Nagl, 129.

⁴¹ Nagl, 129.

⁴² Tucker, 126-127.

also coordinating councils developed which brought together regional heads of civilian agencies, ARVN and U.S. military commanders, and a representative from GVN.⁴³

The program was carried out from 1965 to 1971 and involved 114 Marine CAPs throughout I Corps. According to many assessments, the CAP units performed admirably. Thompson said, "Of all the United States forces the Marine Corps alone made a serious attempt to achieve permanent and lasting results in their tactical area of responsibility by seeking to protect the rural population."⁴⁴ This was borne out by a DOD study conducted in 1967. It found that when scored by the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES), villages with a CAP element scored 2.95 out of 5 while the average score in I Corps villages was only 1.6. The length of time that a CAP remained in a village also correlated positively with increased security.⁴⁵

Moyar argues that CAPs effectively "inhibited guerrilla and shadow government activity in the hamlets" and "improved the fighting capabilities of the territorial forces."⁴⁶ He also added that because they lived among the population they were more frequently able to engage the enemy than were units following a search and destroy mission rubric.

Despite its successes, however, CAPs was destined to remain a small and relatively limited element of the overall effort in South Vietnam. As Major General John Grinalds put it, "There was too little CAP, too late."⁴⁷ This was largely due to Westmoreland's negative view of the program and his failure to support it. Westmoreland was largely dismissive of the program, saying, "I believed the Marines

⁴³ Nagl, 157.

⁴⁴ Thompson, quoted in Krepinevich, 172.

⁴⁵ Krepinevich, 174.

⁴⁶ Moyar, 44.

⁴⁷ Gen. John Grinalds, quoted in Nagl, 158.

should have been trying to find the enemy's main forces and bring them to battle, thereby putting them on the run and reducing the threat they posed to the population."⁴⁸ He therefore did not provide the requisite support to allow the program to be expanded.

Westmoreland was not the only Army leader to disparage the CAPs effort, however. It was widespread in the Army. According to Krepinevich,

The Army's reaction to the CAP program was ill-disguised disappointment, if not outright disapproval, from the top down. Gen. Harry Kinnard was 'absolutely disgusted' with the Marines. "I did everything I could to drag them out," he said, 'and get them to fight... They just wouldn't play. They just would not play. They don't know how to fight on land, particularly against guerrillas.' Major General Deputy observed sarcastically that 'the Marines came in and just sat down and didn't do anything. They were involved in counterinsurgency of the deliberate, mild sort.'⁴⁹

The program ultimately had little overall impact. Due to lack of support from both Westmoreland and the GVN, CAPs was limited in scope.

Another counterinsurgency institution developed in Vietnam was CORDS. This stood for the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Study and was initiated at the behest of President Johnson in 1967. It was essentially a program to integrate civilian and military pacification programs under a single institutional entity. It increased funding and manpower to counterinsurgency but was primarily a means of organization.⁵⁰ The program was never very large in scope, however. In the year of its initial development, 1967, it had 4,000 military and 800 civilian personnel. It reached its

⁴⁸ Nagl, 157.

⁴⁹ Krepinevich, 175.

⁵⁰ Henry Nuzum, *Shades of Cords in the Kush: The False Hope of 'Unity of Effort' in American Counterinsurgency*, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), ix.

height of manpower in 1969 with 6,400 military and 1,000 civilians. After that point, manpower was steadily reduced until the program became defunct in 1972.⁵¹

The primary function of CORDS was to provide advice, training, planning and funding for pacification programs run by GVN. Most of the personnel involved in the program were advisers to GVN organizations and institutions. This became more and more the case as time went on and as Vietnamization gained momentum.⁵² Though small in scope, most analysts judge the program to have been useful. Moyar contends that “CORDS greatly improved the coordination of civilian and military programs and allowed the United States to keep a better account of GVN personnel involved in pacification.”⁵³ Similarly, Henry Nuzum points out that “the organization effectively integrated, within its parameters, the security, political, and economic portions of the COIN campaign from the district to national levels and contributed to the defeat of the Viet Cong insurgency.”⁵⁴

CORDS, CAP, and CIDG were all successful but subsidiary programs that demonstrated results in the counterinsurgency effort. They are today often lauded as the most successful initiatives of the war during Westmoreland’s stewardship, yet they were all programs that were outside of his primary purview and contrary to the thrust of his strategy. If such programs had a more central role, it is likely that their successes would have been even greater and would have had an even larger impact. As it was, they had effect primarily around the margins and did not make a substantial enough impact to change the outcome of the war.

⁵¹ Moyar, 49.

⁵² Moyar, 50.

⁵³ Moyar, 49.

⁵⁴ Nuzum, viii-ix.

One of the keys to a successful counterinsurgency effort is the development of intelligence in order to identify the enemy. This goal was impeded by Westmoreland's search and destroy strategy, in that the best intelligence is usually derived through close contact with the population. Since the strategy focused on large conventional units housed on military bases, the opportunity to gain intelligence from the population was substantially dampened. Even worse, however, was that the Army seemed largely uninterested in this type of intelligence. It's main intelligence goals revolved around large concentrations of enemy forces rather than insurgent groups in villages and hamlets. Krepivenich writes that,

As for the Army's main-force units, their intelligence effort focused on the enemy's big units. Lieutenant General Yarborough observed that the weight of the intelligence effort was aimed at discovering how many divisions they had, not how many were placed at the village level or the hamlet level. Robert Komer claimed that this was 'to the total neglect of the guerrillas and the so-called Viet Cong infrastructure, the political-military apparatus that was really running the war... The shortcomings of Army Intelligence officers in waging the 'other' were further compounded by the one-year-tour-of-duty policy established by the Army. Brief tour lengths contributed to the attitude prevalent among many intelligence officers that familiarity with the culture, language and society of Vietnam was not essential in the performance of their duty. In failing to appreciate the necessity of destroying the insurgent's political infrastructure as a precondition for victory, the Army failed to render counterinsurgency intelligence operations the priority they deserved. While the efforts of CORDS floundered on the relatively low priority given these operations by MACV and the national police, the Army's intelligence personnel suffered from the service's preoccupation with its traditional approach to war.'⁵⁵

One organization that did focus on intelligence targeting insurgents, and most especially communist leadership, was the CIA. They developed the Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation program in 1967 which later became known as Phoenix in 1968. This program coordinated intelligence from all relevant organizations and set up

⁵⁵ Krepivenich, 229.

local intelligence centers at the district and provincial levels.⁵⁶ This information was most frequently provided to Vietnamese Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs) and National Police Field Forces who would attempt to kill or capture the targeted individuals.⁵⁷ Leaders were the primary targets, the idea being that decapitating the leadership would undermine the entire guerrilla infrastructure. The majority of this program's activities occurred after Westmoreland's tenure.

Another key to taking direct action against the insurgent force during a counterinsurgency conflict is the development of the host nation military capability. This was also largely ignored under Westmoreland's tenure. He considered defeating communist main forces to be the primary objective of U.S. forces. He assigned pacification to ARVN which received little training and limited supplies. According to Gen. Maxwell Taylor, "We never really paid attention to the ARVN Army. We didn't give a damn about them."⁵⁸

This judgment was widely shared. Ambassador to South Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker said, "It seemed to me we started late in training the Vietnamese, and that we had a lot to make up. In the beginning, I think we had misjudged the war and thought that it would be a short-term proposition that we could finish ourselves."⁵⁹ This neglect applied not only to training but to equipment. According to Brigadier General James Lawton Collins, Jr., "By 1966 U.S. forces had been given first priority for men, money, and material, and the basic mission of strengthening the Vietnamese armed forces became a second priority. This change immediately lowered the quality of advisory personnel and

⁵⁶ Moyar, 52.

⁵⁷ Moyar, 53.

⁵⁸ Gen. Maxwell Taylor, quoted in Krepivenich, 196.

⁵⁹ Ellsworth Bunker, quoted in Sorely, *Westmoreland*, 78.

the availability of the more modern equipment for the Vietnamese Army.’⁶⁰ The neglect of ARVN would have long term consequences for South Vietnam as it would leave them ultimately unprepared to deal with North Vietnamese conventional forces once the U.S. had left the country to its own defenses.

Westmoreland’s strategy of seek and destroy, focused on the enemy main forces, had several negative repercussions when it came to direct engagement with the insurgents. According to Sorely, these included “neglect of the advisory task and of the need to improve South Vietnam’s armed forces, and equally neglect of the crucial pacification program, thereby leaving largely undisturbed the enemy’s shadow government, its infrastructure within the villages and hamlets of rural South Vietnam.”⁶¹ This strategy would ultimately prove unsuccessful and progress would not be made towards these goals until Gen. Creighton Abrams was to redirect strategy in April 1968.

Abrams immediately recognized the need for a radical shift in strategy. He directed his staff to devise a new war plan, often referred to as the ‘one war’ plan due to the fact that pacification would no longer be considered a separate effort. It changed the primary measure of effectiveness from body count to population security and a focus on developing civil authority.^{62 63} This was most clearly seen in how forces were used. As Sorely puts it,

Instead of thrashing about in the deep jungle, seeking to bring the enemy to battle at times and in places of his own choosing—the typical maneuver of the earlier era—allied forces now set up positions sited to protect populated areas from invading forces. This put friendly forces in more advantageous situations and

⁶⁰ Gen. James Lawton Collins, Jr., quoted in Sorely, *Westmoreland*, 78.

⁶¹ Sorely, *The Better War*, 4-5.

⁶² Krepivenich, 253

⁶³ Sorely, *A Better War*, 22.

forced the enemy to come through them to gain access to the population, the real objective of both sides in the war.⁶⁴

This was further evidenced by the implementation of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC) on November 1, 1968, a day which Sorely indicates “marked a new departure in the war.” This initiative involved securing as many contested hamlets as possible, beginning with a goal of 1,000, by moving troops into the countryside. The program showed immediate results and the goal was raised to 1,330 and by the beginning of the following year (January 1969) forces had been moved into 1,320 hamlets.⁶⁵ A system known as the Hamlet Evaluation System was eventually developed to measure the security gains in protected hamlets.

Sorely describes how the system functioned:

The system placed hamlets in one of six categories: A, B, C, D, E or VC. The A, B, and C categories indicated degrees of being relatively secure, while D and E meant contested. Those designated VC were considered to be under enemy control. The ratings were calculated by using the advisors’ answers to a comprehensive set of questions on both security and development. Among the specifics were such things as whether the hamlet had an assigned Popular Forces platoon, an elected government, a People’s Self-Defense Force unit, and an ongoing self-help project.⁶⁶

This system demonstrated the immediate results obtained by the APC. Moyar points to several key statistics to demonstrate this (although he questions their accuracy, he argues that they do reveal an important trend and a significant improvement in security). First is the number of people living in areas deemed secure. This number increased by 8.2 million people from 1967 to 1972. This meant that the total population of the country living in secured areas almost doubled, from 42% to 80%. Furthermore,

⁶⁴ Sorely, *A Better War*, 20.

⁶⁵ Sorely, *A Better War*, 65-66.

⁶⁶ Sorely, *A Better War*, 71.

from December 1969 to December 1971 the percentage of people living in areas in which the VCI (Viet Cong Infrastructure) could not move freely had increased from 56% to 80%.⁶⁷ Success also began to be measured by counterinsurgency specific metrics such as reduction in tax revenue collected by the VC shadow government, less successful recruiting for new insurgent volunteers in the villages, and fewer supplies and food acquired by the insurgency from villagers.⁶⁸

David Fitzgerald, who is a critic of the “better war” thesis, argues that there was little new conceptually about the APC, rather its biggest point of departure from previous efforts was that U.S. troops were much more heavily involved in its execution. This was itself, however, a major change. Pacification was no longer being dumped solely at the feet of ARVN. It was also highly significant that population security was designated as the top priority of the APC. Due to its success, the APC became the model for future operations by both the GVN and Abrams’ 1969 Combined Campaign Plan.⁶⁹

Abrams fueled these successes partly by a reorientation of intelligence. “The intelligence is the most important part of this whole damn thing. And if that’s good, we can handle anything,” he once said.⁷⁰ He described intelligence as being the “lifeblood” of the effort.⁷¹ In addition to his recognition that intelligence was key, he also recognized that a broader variety of intelligence, beyond just the enemy’s order of battle and the position of their large forces, was needed. He ordered that the Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update begin to include information on “pacification, expansion of territorial

⁶⁷ Moyar, 259.

⁶⁸ Sorely, *A Better War*, 223.

⁶⁹ David Fitzgerald, *Learning to Forget: US Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford Security Studies, 2013), 24.

⁷⁰ Gen. Creighton Abrams, quoted in Sorely, *A Better War*, 36.

⁷¹ Sorely, *A Better War*, 131.

forces, manpower issues, economic reform, elections, and refugee assistance.”⁷² Sorely is quick to point out, however, that this did not come at the expense of conventional military intelligence. “Abrams was not neglecting the military campaign, but using the broadened perspective to facilitate use of forces to better advantage, to wage a smarter and more availing war.” He also notes, that “soon attendance by Ambassador Bunker became frequent, whereas earlier the embassy had seldom been represented at these critical weekly planning sessions.”⁷³

Abrams also focused heavy attention on the development of Vietnamese forces in various incarnations. Gen. Richard Stilwell identified this as a major departure from the Westmoreland era. “I think,” he said, “one of the significant differences between the Westmoreland tenure and that of Abrams is that, under the former, overriding priority was given to the buildup and sustainment of US forces. And the training, equipment, mothering, helping the ARVN forces took a relative back seat - until Abrams got there.”⁷⁴ A greater focus on Improvement and Modernization (I&M) for the ARVN was in accordance with Nixon’s push for ‘Vietnamization’ of the war, which was the idea that South Vietnam needed to take progressively greater responsibility for the war as the U.S. began to withdraw.⁷⁵

By 1972 considerable progress had been made in this regard. The military was up to 11 infantry divisions comprised of 120 battalions. There were also 58 artillery battalions, 19 various armored divisions, and other supporting battalions. There was a reserve comprised of 21 Ranger battalions as well an Airborne Division and a Marine

⁷² Sorely, *A Better War*, 33.

⁷³ Sorely, *A Better War*, 33.

⁷⁴ Sorely, *Westmoreland*, 141-142.

⁷⁵ Sorely, *A Better War*, 164.

Division. The Navy had 1,680 vessels and the Air Force had grown to more than 1,000 aircraft. The military was also supplemented by a National Police force of 116,000 men.⁷⁶

In addition to the increased size of the Vietnamese armed forces was a greater munificence in terms of equipment. According to Frances Fitzgerald, “the United States began to arm the Vietnamese with a generosity unknown in the days of General Westmoreland. For the first time it issued the infantry with the powerful M-16 automatic rifles, the grenade launchers, and machine guns that the Americans used.”⁷⁷ This was not only a great boon to the potential effectiveness of the South Vietnamese military, but also served as a symbolic recognition of equality between American and South Vietnamese forces.

Not only was the size and functionality of South Vietnamese main forces greatly increased by there was also an added focus on the development of Regional Forces and Popular Forces. These were local people recruited to defend their home districts and provinces and were key to the pacification effort. “Abrams had made their expansion and improvement his special concern, achieving particular success by sending out small military advisory teams to work with the RF companies and PF platoons.”⁷⁸ These forces would eventually come to comprise half of all South Vietnamese armed forces. In some areas, such as the populous Delta, they reached up to 80% of available manpower. “In every area of the country they were an important part of the security environment. Patrolling, conducting night ambushes, on bridge security, the RF and PF inflicted a

⁷⁶ Sorely, *A Better War*, 306.

⁷⁷ Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1972), 406.

⁷⁸ Sorely, *A Better War*, 72.

substantial amount of damage on enemy forces—and in turn suffered serious losses—while denying them easy access to the population.”⁷⁹

The newly improved military forces of South Vietnam, in conjunction with the new focus on pacification, began to show important results. The success of the South Vietnamese conventional forces was demonstrated during the 1972 Easter Offensive, the first major invasion of North Vietnamese conventional forces into South Vietnam since the 1968 Tet Offensive. Although the North Vietnamese garnered initial victories and captured territory, the South Vietnamese counterattacked and retook that territory. The eventual casualty figures were heavily unbalanced in favor of South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese lost more than 8,000 dead and 24,000 wounded but the North Vietnamese suffered 100,000 casualties out of 200,000 soldiers, approximately 40,000 of whom were killed. The invading army also lost half of its tanks and heavy artillery.⁸⁰ This was accomplished by the ARVN with much more limited support than was available during the Tet Offensive, essentially receiving only advice, logistical support, and air power.

The devastation suffered by the North Vietnamese during this battle is made clear by Karnow in his recounting of a March 1973 meeting of communist leaders in Hanoi.

They concurred that their present problems in the south were serious. The South Vietnamese force, now more than a million men armed with American aircraft, artillery and tanks, was retaking key sectors, while the Communists had not recovered from the casualties they had suffered during their massive spring offensive of 1972. ‘Our troops were exhausted and their units in disarray,’ wrote [Gen. Tran Van] Tra. ‘We had not been able to make up our losses. We were short of manpower as well as food and ammunition, and coping with the enemy was difficult.’ Vietcong cadres in some places were confused, numbers of them actually behaving passively toward the Saigon government in the belief that they had to observe the cease-fire. At this rate, disaster loomed for the Communists. Their spies inside the Saigon regime informed them that Thieu had developed a

⁷⁹ Sorely, *A Better War*, 73.

⁸⁰ Sorely, *A Better War*, 339.

plan for the next two years to keep grabbing territory until he felt secure enough to authorize an election—the results of which would of course, confirm him as South Vietnam's sole authority.⁸¹

Even more successful than the effort against North Vietnamese conventional forces was the progress made in pacification. William Colby, director of the CIA, noted that,

By 1972 the pacification program had essentially eliminated the guerrilla problem in most of the country.... This whole aspect of the war, the unorganized part of the war, was not given a great deal of attention during the early part of the war. Only after 1967 was it given a major part of the attention of the military command as well as of the rest of us... we put a great deal of effort and energy into it. Essentially... I think we won that part of the war, because in 1972 there weren't any guerrillas in the attacks by the North Vietnamese, and in 1975 there weren't any guerrillas in the attack by the North Vietnamese. The guerrillas were all on the South Vietnamese side.⁸²

Unfortunately, just as these successes were being achieved the U.S. was withdrawing its support from South Vietnam. Manpower was being steadily reduced and even support in terms of supplies and air power would eventually be withdrawn. The South Vietnamese had proven their ability to repel a northern invasion during the Easter Offensive as long as they were supported by air power and with new supplies. When the NVA invaded again in 1975, with the support of the Chinese and the Soviet Union, the South Vietnamese, now left to fend for themselves, were tragically unable to do so again.

INDIRECT ACTION AGAINST THE INSURGENT

Unsuccessful as was Westmoreland's direct action against the insurgents, indirect action—by both the U.S. and GVN—was even worse. Indirect action includes building up the host nation and the government's legitimacy while simultaneously undermining

⁸¹ Karnow, 673.

⁸² William Colby, quoted in Sorely, *A Better War*, 305.

the insurgent's grievances through effective political, economic and social action. "True to its Concept [search and destroy], the Army focused on the technological and logistical dimensions of strategy while ignoring the political and social dimensions that formed the foundation of counterinsurgency warfare. The result was a high-cost, low-payoff strategy."⁸³ The Army under Westmoreland's leadership looked at the struggle in Vietnam as military in nature and paid little attention to its political aspects. "Politics would take a back seat while the Army inflicted sufficient damage on the insurgents to force them to the peace table."⁸⁴

Not all of the failure in this regard can be placed on the U.S. Army, however. Much of it had to do with the incompetence and faulty decision-making of the South Vietnamese government. These problems started with President Ngo Dinh Diem who lead Vietnam from 1955 until his overthrow and murder during a 1963 *coup d'etat*. Karnow describes Diem as suspicious of anyone outside of his family, which prevented him from delegating authority efficiently and led to an administration rife with nepotism. Much like his American allies he saw the insurgency in narrow military terms and failed to understand the political nature of the conflict and the appeal of the communist ideology to many rural peasants, limiting his strong supporters to fellow Catholics and a few other small constituencies.⁸⁵

He made matters worse by failing to initiate reforms, such as land redistribution, that would have been popular with the people. Instead he responded with oppression. As Tucker put it, "For Saigon reform took a back seat to fighting the insurgency, with the

⁸³ Krepivenich, 233.

⁸⁴ Krepivenich, 131.

⁸⁵ Karnow, 229.

result that it continued to grow.”⁸⁶ One example of the repressive means used by the Diem regime was Law 10-59, passed in May 1959, which allowed for the trial and execution of suspected terrorists by roving tribunals.⁸⁷ There were many more such onerous laws passed, some of which will be discussed in the following section.

It was due to Diem’s incompetence as a leader that the U.S. tacitly backed a plotted coup to overthrow him. This turned out to be a mistake as it led to years of political instability and abrupt changes in leadership. Diem had been deposed by Duong Van Minh, who was himself forcibly removed from power by Nguyen Khanh in less than a year. During the ten months following Diem’s murder there were nine changes in power!⁸⁸ Moyar describes the chaos that ensued:

Diem’s successors showed that they could not fight the insurgents as well as he had. As premiers came and went from the end of 1963 through the first half of 1965, they replaced most of their predecessors’ province chiefs and many other key officers with their own cronies. The discontinuity of leadership gravely weakened all of the GVN’s war efforts.⁸⁹

The situation would not stabilize until June 1965 when General Nguyen Van Thieu finally seized power. Upon the adoption of a constitution he was elected president and remained so until the end of the war.

The incompetence and instability of the South Vietnamese government left a power vacuum that the communists were quick to exploit. Moyar notes that,

As the GVN lost its ability to govern, the VC’s ability to make use of the village resources grew. One of the VCI’s first tasks in gaining control over a population was the recruitment of villagers into mass political organizations, such as the Liberation Farmer Association, Liberation Youth Association, or People’s Liberation Committee, or into the guerrillas. The Liberation Farmer Association

⁸⁶ Tucker, 93.

⁸⁷ Tucker, 93.

⁸⁸ Sorely, *Westmoreland*, 70.

⁸⁹ Moyar, 39.

was the most important association, for the Party distributed land through it once the GVN lost its power in the village.⁹⁰

The insurgents took advantage of the GVN's diminished legitimacy by forming their own shadow government, often referred to as the VC infrastructure. Moyar goes so far as to say that, "Of all the factors at work in the village war, the actions of the shadow government's cadres played by far the largest role in propelling the Viet Cong to victory."⁹¹ These cadres acted as the political and military leadership of the VC and guided recruitment, logistics (such as moving food and combat arms to and from needed locations), combat and other efforts at the behest of the North Vietnamese government. Moyar says that the shadow government grew from 1960 - 1965 then shrank during the 1965 - 1967 time period. Despite those reductions, however, the political cadre probably numbered between 80,000 and 150,000 people in 1967 according to a CIA estimate.⁹²

The Southern Communist Party, which was the formal organization of the shadow government, was organized into national, regional, provincial, district and village levels.⁹³ It took its orders from Hanoi and allowed North Vietnam to maintain control over both the guerilla fighters and the political efforts to erode GVN legitimacy.⁹⁴ In addition to the administrative, political, and logistical duties mentioned above, the cadre also acquired income for the insurgency through taxation of the rural populace. This income, either in the form of cash or seized agricultural products, often fed and supplied the guerrillas and was instrumental in the survival of the insurgency.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Moyar, 14.

⁹¹ Moyar, 9.

⁹² Moyar, 11.

⁹³ Moyar, 11.

⁹⁴ Moyar, 12.

⁹⁵ Moyar, 15.

The leadership of South Vietnam and the incompetence of the GVN severely eroded the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese government. This made it easier for the insurgent forces to gain support in the villages which allowed them to garner recruits, acquire income, move troops and supplies, and enhance their own legitimacy in terms of the ability to govern through their established shadow government. If an insurgency revolves around winning the people to one's side, the inability of South Vietnam and its U.S. ally to take indirect action against the insurgent was a major flaw in their strategy. Without addressing the political and social issues of importance to the people of South Vietnam, they left a void that was filled by the VC and which made it easier for them to challenge the government both politically and militarily. This was worsened by the allies' inability to interact appropriately with the population.

Like the overall strategic approach to the war, this also began to change under the leadership of Gen. Abrams and President Thieu. Abrams' recognition of the importance of indirect action, through the development of legitimate government, is apparent from this comment,

Now I know the fighting's important. I know they've got to, if the 324 Bravo comes charging down [Route] 547 into Hue, you've got to get out there and really lick them. But all of these things in the pacification, where the machinery of government and the philosophy that President Thieu is - building the village and the hamlet, and really building a base there and so on. I really think that, of all the things, that's the most important. That's where the battle ultimately is won.⁹⁶

Abrams recognized not only the importance of a functioning South Vietnamese government, but also the need to destroy the burgeoning VCI shadow government. His change in strategy worked to undermine it in two ways. The first was that the refocus on general pacification put American troops closer to the villages and focused their efforts

⁹⁶ Abrams, quoted in Sorely, *A Better War*, 169.

more squarely on insurgent forces rather than large main forces. As the cadre intermingled with other insurgent forces they were killed and captured in larger numbers as a consequence, even without direct targeting. But they were also more directly targeted, which is the second reason that they were more successfully undermined under Abrams than Westmoreland. He ordered "an intensive drive against the VC infrastructure and political apparatus aimed at eliminating it just as rapidly as possible; not suppress, but eliminate."⁹⁷

Moyar argues that these efforts had a considerable impact on the Viet Cong shadow government:

In many cases, the danger of Allied operations did not force the shadow government to stop functioning altogether but did inhibit its activities. The illegal cadres, almost all of whom did not live in the hamlets by the late 1960s, often curtailed their visits to decrease the likelihood of encountering Allied forces. Because of the cadres' reduced access to the population and their use of fewer assistants, they could not obtain personnel, taxes, or intelligence from the hamlets as effectively as they had previously nor could they give as much assistance to Communist soldiers.⁹⁸

He concludes that "As a result of the shadow government's decline, the nature of the war in South Vietnam underwent a dramatic transformation."⁹⁹ The dismantling of the VCI was going hand in hand with improved government under the leadership of President Thieu. Ambassador Bunker described him as having "considerable intellectual capacity" and praised him for his adherence to constitutional governance and greater concern for making the government work in the interests of the people. Bunker said of Thieu that, "He has been acting more and more like a politician, getting out into the

⁹⁷ Abrams, quoted in Sorely, *A Better War*, 148-149.

⁹⁸ Moyar, 256.

⁹⁹ Moyar, 271.

country, following up on the pacification, talking to people, seeing what they want.”¹⁰⁰

Thieu’s efforts will be further discussed in the following section.

INTERACTION WITH THE POPULATION

Interacting with the population was a key area in which the U.S. effort failed during Westmoreland’s leadership. Nagl laments that in Vietnam, “The concept that success in counterinsurgency consisted of separating the insurgents from popular support never took root.”¹⁰¹ The Army never recognized a need for any deep understanding of Vietnamese culture, history, language or people and did not train its advisers in these areas. The brevity of their tours of duty also prevented many advisers from acquiring this knowledge during their deployments in sufficient time to employ it in their decision making. According to Krepinevich, “This cultural hubris on the Army’s part conflicted with a basic tenet of counterinsurgency that holds that in order to be successful, you must be as familiar as possible with the people and the area that you are trying to win over and control.”¹⁰² He notes that only a few dozen soldiers a year were trained to speak Vietnamese at a proficient level and that this impeded their success as advisers.¹⁰³

This lack of understanding was not limited to the soldiers in the field, but also reached up to the highest levels. In one of his memoirs, Robert McNamara, who was the secretary of defense under President Johnson, noted that “Our misjudgments of friend and foe alike reflected our profound ignorance of the history, culture, and politics of the

¹⁰⁰ Bunker, quoted in Sorely, *A Better War*, 185.

¹⁰¹ Nagl, 115.

¹⁰² Krepinevich, 23.

¹⁰³ Krepinevich, 53.

people in the area, and the personalities and habits of their leaders.”¹⁰⁴ He also notes that, “We failed as well to adapt our military tactics to the task of winning the hearts and minds of people from a totally different culture.”¹⁰⁵

Though it should have been expected that the Americans would experience difficulty connecting with the people, that the South Vietnamese government should have been able to make such a connection is something that might have been taken for granted. The ineptitude of the government under Diem and his immediate successors, however, prevented this. Though discussed briefly in the previous section, this problem is worth revisiting here in greater detail.

One of the greatest divides in Vietnamese society was that between wealthy families with large holdings of land and the common peasants who worked that land or had very small plots of their own. Diem sought the support of the wealthy elite at the expense of the commoner. He refused to implement meaningful land reform that would have more fairly distributed farm land and given the peasantry a more secure stake in South Vietnamese society. Karnow points out that Diem “permitted landlords to retain large holdings, so that little acreage was available for distribution...Even worse, Diem antagonized peasants by requiring them to pay for land that they had been given free by the Vietminh during the war against the French, and the Communists capitalized on his

¹⁰⁴ Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 322.

¹⁰⁵ McNamara with VanDeMark, 322.

crude policy.”¹⁰⁶ Additionally, he abolished local village-level elections, which was also unpopular.¹⁰⁷

According to Tucker the inequity of land-ownership was so severe that in 1961, 15% of the population owned 75% of all available land. Diem did initiate some land transfer to the peasantry, but to an insufficient degree to create satisfactory change. Tucker further points out that not even 2% of aid monies provided by the United States was utilized for agrarian reform.¹⁰⁸ The failure to rectify the land issue, by Diem and the United States, not only alienated people from the GVN, but also provided the insurgency with an issue to capitalize on. In many areas the communist shadow governments would institute their own land reform policies which benefitted the local peasants and won them to their side.

It was in this area that President Thieu was later to make such great strides. He recognized the importance of the land issue and took concrete steps to resolve it more favorably for the peasantry. In 1969 alone the government redistributed more land than in all of the seven years prior. President Thieu then introduced a program called ‘Land to Tiller’ in 1970. This program affected a third of all cultivated land and made land-owners out of approximately 500,000 families who had been renting their land at the cost of half of their crops.¹⁰⁹ This made a major contribution towards returning legitimacy to the government and drawing the common people back to its side.

¹⁰⁶ Karnow, 246.

¹⁰⁷ Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 1979), 64.

¹⁰⁸ Tucker, 87.

¹⁰⁹ Sorely, *A Better War*, 194.

Another major constituency which the Diem government had alienated was the Buddhist community, which comprised between 70 and 90 percent of the population at the time. Being Catholic himself, Diem had little sympathy for Buddhists and enacted policies that pushed them away from the government. He also favored Catholics and gave them key positions of power and influence. One policy which particularly roused the ire of the Buddhist community was a prohibition on flying the flag of the World Fellowship of Buddhists. In response, thousands of Buddhists took to the streets in demonstration on May 8, 1963, the Buddha's birthday. The military's response to this demonstration resulted in the death of eight demonstrators, some of whom were children. This in turn resulted in even larger demonstrations and the first case of self-immolation by a Buddhist monk on June 11, 1963. By the end of the year, six other monks had similarly committed suicide in protest of Diem's repressive actions against Buddhists. The wife of Diem's brother, known as Madame Nhu, only worsened the situation by referring to these events as "barbecues."¹¹⁰

That unfortunate comment was not the only way in which her influence alienated the population. Since Diem himself was unmarried, Madame Nhu acted as first lady and had considerable influence over certain areas of legislation. This power led her to institute a "bizarre puritanical campaign that outlawed divorce, dancing, beauty contests, gambling, fortune telling, prostitution, adultery and even certain music and hair-dos. Harsh punishments for violations of these new rules antagonized many."¹¹¹ This further eroded support for the government, especially in urban areas where these strictures were most likely to be applied and enforced.

¹¹⁰ Tucker, 99.

¹¹¹ Tucker, 99.

The combination of insufficient land reforms, the repression of Buddhism in favor of Catholicism, and the unpopular laws pushed by Madame Nhu did severe damage to the government's ability to maintain support from the population during Diem's reign. The tactics utilized by U.S. forces also contributed considerably to that erosion. In a counterinsurgency strategy that involves winning the population, the use of brutal military tactics must be severely constrained or, ideally, eliminated. Such was most definitely not the case during the Westmoreland years of the war. The use of heavy weaponry to further the strategy of Westmoreland's seek and destroy mission would serve to undermine the relationship between the U.S. and South Vietnamese government with the people.

U.S. reliance upon massive firepower and bombing, as well as weapons such as cluster bombs and napalm was often counterproductive. Krepivenich makes the point strongly,

Massive firepower was the primary means utilized by the Army to achieve the desired end of the attrition strategy—a body count. During the years of intervention the Army's preoccupation with reaching the crossover point made the body count the enemy of traditional counterinsurgency doctrine, which dictates that protection of the people must come before destruction of the enemy. By giving top priority to the body count, the Army gave its officers the incentive to bend the ROE in favor of killing 'potential' insurgents, although in many instances they might have been innocent civilians. The availability of firepower and technology (in the form of sensors, radar, and so on) made it easier to 'send a bullet' instead of a soldier, who could have made the distinction between friend and foe.¹¹²

As an example of the excessive use of firepower, Krepivenich points to an operation called PERSHING, executed in February 1967. During this operation a total of 1,757 enemy were tallied as killed. In order to reach that objective however, over

¹¹² Krepivenich, 202.

136,000 rounds of artillery were expended in addition to 5,000 rounds from naval support. More than 150 bombing sorties were flown and 500,000 pounds of napalm were dropped. "All this in an area that the Army had characterized as 'densely populated.'"¹¹³ The use of napalm was especially egregious. The Army seems to have been well aware of that fact. When asked a question about the possible ramifications of using napalm in terms of its political impacts, Gen. Paul Harkins (Westmoreland's predecessor in Vietnam) replied that "It really puts the fear of God into the Viet Cong. And that is what counts."¹¹⁴

Another feared weapon was the cluster bomb. These bombs would expel hundreds of pellets that would devastate anything within range. According to Karnow, "the cluster bombs were frequently dropped by American aircraft on populated regions in both North and South Vietnam, killing or maiming thousands of civilians." He quotes Gen. Harold K. Johnson, army chief of staff, as saying about the indiscriminate nature of their use, "We have not enough information... We act with ruthlessness, like a steamroller."¹¹⁵

The cluster bomb was only one aspect of a massive air campaign. Though the bombing of North Vietnam often receives the most attention in the scholarly literature, it has been estimated that 62% of the tonnage of all bombing from 1965 to 1971 was in South Vietnam.¹¹⁶ 2.2 million tons of bombs were dropped by American aircraft on

¹¹³ Krepivenich, 224.

¹¹⁴ Gen. Paul Harkins, quoted in Nagl, 132.

¹¹⁵ Karnow, 452.

¹¹⁶ Matthew Adam Kocher, Thomas B. Pepinsky, and Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Aerial Bombing and Counterinsurgency in the Vietnam War," *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 2 (April 2011): 205.

South Vietnam and 643,000 tons on North Vietnam between 1965 and 1968 alone.¹¹⁷

Kocher, et. al., further argue that “The available evidence strongly confirms that bombing in Vietnam was indiscriminate; it could not target individual VC supporters while sparing government supporters or the uncommitted, even when intelligence was good.”¹¹⁸ Their research demonstrates that this bombing was often worse than doing nothing as it likely drove the population away from the government and towards the insurgency. Having conducted a well-controlled statistical investigation they find that “The overall pattern is consistent with bombing having decreased the RVN’s ability to control hamlets” and “bombed hamlets that were previously under government control were more likely to move toward insurgent control than were unbombed hamlets while...bombed hamlets that were previously under insurgent control were more likely than unbombed hamlets to remain under insurgent control six months later.”¹¹⁹

Another irritant to the population was the use of defoliants. Conducted in an attempt to eliminate food sources for insurgents and to degrade their ability to hide in thick jungles, defoliants were used extensively. Krepivenich reports that, “Defoliant operations by the U.S. Air Force under the code name RANCH HAND increased dramatically, from 5,861 acres destroyed in 1962 to 1,570,114 acres destroyed in 1967. Destroyed acreage dipped by about 15 percent in 1968-69, to about 1,360,000 and then dropped sharply in 1970 to approximately 300,000 acres.”¹²⁰ He also points out that this tactic greatly damaged relations with the people.

¹¹⁷ Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 129.

¹¹⁸ Kocher, et. al., 205.

¹¹⁹ Kocker, et. al., 211.

¹²⁰ Krepivenich, 210.

The use of defoliants soured relations between the Americans and the Vietnamese even in supposedly secure areas. When the II Field Force began deploying to South Vietnam in the summer of 1965, for example, defoliants were used to clear the Long Binh area, which would serve as its headquarters. Unfortunately, the defoliants sprayed on the brushlands resulting in heavy damage to the rich crops. It happened overnight. Fruit fell from trees, and the rubber trees on nearby plantations turned brown and lost their leaves. Once the people discovered the cause of this calamity, they became worried that the spraying was dangerous to animal and human life. In successive years, the birth of a defective baby was invariably blamed on the Americans and their defoliants.¹²¹

Westmoreland's strategy of search and destroy, primarily through the use of heavy firepower and massive weaponry, was ill-conceived for a counterinsurgency conflict in which attracting the people's support was of paramount importance. Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, one of the most important leaders in the North Vietnamese military noted the weakness of Westmoreland's strategy:

Westmoreland was wrong to count on his superior firepower to grind us down. Our Soviet and Chinese comrades also failed to grasp our approach when they asked how many divisions we had in relation to the Americans, how we would cope with their technology, their artillery, their air attacks. We were waging a people's war, *a la vietnamienne*-a total war in which every man, every woman, every unit, big or small, is sustained by a mobilized population. So America's sophisticated weapons, electronic devices and the rest were to no avail. Despite its military power, America misgauged the limits of its power. In war there are two factors-human beings and weapons. Ultimately, though, human beings are the decisive factors. Human beings! Human beings!¹²²

Gen. Abrams agreed with Giap's assessment. "It's the people in the end. That's the critical thing of the whole business," he once said.¹²³ One of Abrams' first efforts, therefore, was to reduce the use of excessive force. He restricted the use of heavy weapons in cities, allowing it only with his own direct approval. He also reduced the

¹²¹ Krepivenich, 211.

¹²² Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, quoted in Karnow, 20-21.

¹²³ Abrams, quoted in Sorely, *A Better War*, 148.

resort to unobserved artillery fire.¹²⁴ In a speech to the National Defense College of Vietnam, Abrams declared:

I can assure you that no matter how frustrating, no matter what our past experience, restraint will and must govern virtually all of our activities....we cannot apply the full firepower of our military force throughout the countryside at will, for to do so would further endanger the lives and property and the governmental relationship with the very people we are all fighting to protect: your own citizens of Vietnam.¹²⁵

Moyar points to several statistics to demonstrate that this was not only a sentiment but something that resulted in real change.

From January 1969 to January 1971, the percentage of air sorties against targets within one kilometer of inhabited hamlets fell from 15.2 percent to 4.1 percent, and within two kilometers from 25.4 percent to 10.8 percent. At the same time, the total number of all Allied sorties in South Vietnam declined dramatically, from 188,308 in 1969 to 46,909 in 1971. The percentage of villagers who said that no artillery or air strikes had landed in their hamlets or the vicinity during the past month rose from 69.8 percent in December 1969 to 89.0 percent in December 1971.¹²⁶

This is not to indicate, however, that Abrams was opposed to the use of force, and sometimes with a heavy hand. David Fitzgerald points to Abrams' acclamation of Operation Speedy Express which was carried out in 1969 by the 9th Infantry Division. The operation relied on the use of heavy firepower and by one estimation resulted in the deaths of 5,000 civilians. The 9th ID claimed the number of enemy dead to have been 10,899.¹²⁷ So it shouldn't be mistakenly believed that Abrams totally eliminated the use of heavy firepower. But he did restrict its usage, and despite exceptions such as Operation Speedy Express, it was significantly reduced.

¹²⁴ Sorely, *A Better War*, 219.

¹²⁵ Abrams, quoted in Sorely, *A Better War*, 28-29

¹²⁶ Moyar, 295.

¹²⁷ David Fitzgerald, 27.

In conjunction with each other, Gen. Abrams and President Thieu made strides towards winning the population over to the side of the government. Thieu by taking their concerns seriously, especially land distribution, and making reforms to address them and Gen. Abrams by reducing the use of heavy fire-power, excessive force generally, and defoliants. These steps undoubtedly contributed to the defeat of the insurgent element within South Vietnam that was achieved in the early 1970s, thereby forcing the North Vietnamese to ultimately rely on a conventional assault against the south to win the war.

CONCLUSION

In 1975 the North Vietnamese launched a final offensive against South Vietnam using conventional forces. On April 30th of that year they captured Saigon and the war was over. The North Vietnamese had won and the country was reunited under communist domination. This followed a years long withdrawal of U.S. troops and the signing of a Peace Accord between the U.S., North Vietnam and South Vietnam on January 27, 1973. Not only had the U.S. removed it's combat forces, including air power, but it also abandoned South Vietnam financially. Though \$1 billion had initially been authorized for aid to South Vietnam in 1975, by the time it got through the appropriations process and the costs of administration were deducted the total amount actually provided was a mere \$654 million.¹²⁸ At the same time, North Vietnam continued to receive substantial support from the Chinese and the Soviet Union.

As a result of the drastic reduction in financial support, the South Vietnamese armed forces were greatly reduced and their ability to fight extremely hampered. The Air

¹²⁸ Sorely, *A Better War*, 367.

Force made 200 aircraft inactive and reduced support, reconnaissance and airlift support by half. 600 naval vessels were inactivated, which cut river patrols by 72%. Even essentials such as ammunition and spare parts became increasingly sparse.¹²⁹ Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker described this betrayal in stark terms:

I gave Thieu personally three letters from President Nixon committing us, in case of a violation of the Paris agreements by the other side, to come to their assistance. Well, the other side violated the agreements almost from the day they signed them...but we never came to their assistance, because Congress refused to appropriate the money. The result was, and as each day went by, the South Vietnamese had fewer guns, fewer planes, fewer tanks, diminishing ammunition with which to fight, while the North was being fully supplied by the Soviets and the Chinese. The result was inevitable.¹³⁰

Those who point to counterinsurgency strategy as the reason for the inevitable result are mistaken in doing so. The U.S. did not, in fact, follow a counterinsurgency strategy until late in the war when Gen. Abrams took over. Even then it was only partially a counterinsurgency effort. By the time a counterinsurgency strategy was initiated, the U.S. public had already soured on the war and a withdrawal had begun. Even so, the insurgency was still essentially defeated and major military and political objectives were achieved during the Abrams years. Krepivenich argues that

The lack of progress in defeating the insurgents during the period of 1965-68 can be attributed, in part, to an Army strategy reflecting traditional methods of operation in a conflict that was dramatically different from its wars over the previous half-century. Deeply embedded in the service's psyche, conventional operations held sway over the Army even as its civilian superiors lost faith in their effectiveness for counterinsurgency operations.¹³¹

And further that,

If the Army had followed a counterinsurgency strategy, both the human and financial costs of the war would have been significantly lower. This, in turn,

¹²⁹ Sorely, *A Better War*, 367-368.

¹³⁰ Bunker, quoted in Sorely, *A Better War*, 373.

¹³¹ Krepivenich, 164.

would have assisted to some extent in maintaining popular support in the United States for the U.S. participation in the war. It would have placed the Army in a position to sustain its efforts in a conflict environment certain to produce a protracted war.¹³²

It was the failure to institute a counterinsurgency strategy early enough that led to defeat, not its adoption from the beginning.

The efforts made towards an counterinsurgency strategy instituted during Westmoreland's tenure, such as CAP and CORDS, turned out to be very effective but inadequately supported. When Abrams instituted counterinsurgency more seriously, the results were enormous. In fact, Sorely argues that "There came a time when the war was won."¹³³ He points out that by the time U.S. forces withdrew pacification had been largely successful and the insurgency defeated. Furthermore, the failure of the North Vietnamese invasion in 1972, known as the Easter Offensive, demonstrated that South Vietnamese conventional forces were capable of repelling such attacks if given air support and financial backing—two things which were not made available in 1975.

The Vietnam War did not have to be lost. An effective counterinsurgency strategy instituted at the beginning, before the American public revoked its support for the war, would likely have succeeded. This is demonstrated by the fact that periphery counterinsurgency efforts during Westmoreland's tenure were successful, as was the counterinsurgency strategy instituted by Abrams. Robert Komer was surely correct when he said, "The greatest problem with pacification was that it wasn't tried seriously until too late, or if not too late certainly very late in the day."¹³⁴

¹³² Krepivenich, 233.

¹³³ Sorely, *A Better War*, 271.

¹³⁴ Robert Komer, quoted in Nagl, 166.

CHAPTER 6

IRAQ

Like the war in Vietnam, the Iraq War is often interpreted as an ominous indicator in terms of a democracy's ability to defeat an insurgency, especially in a foreign land. If viewed through the wrong lens, it may appear to strengthen the (incorrect) lesson of Vietnam that such efforts are futile. Once again, the most powerful state in the world was prevented from reaching its war aims by a militarily weaker insurgent force in a developing country. At first glance, the ambivalent outcome of the war in Iraq is further proof that democracies can't win counterinsurgencies and shouldn't try. As with Vietnam, however, this is the wrong lesson to draw.

Unfortunately, the mistakes of Vietnam were re-made in Iraq. A conventional strategy was stubbornly clung to in the face of an irregular conflict. It took years for the proper adjustments to take place, years that placed Iraq, the U.S. and coalition partners on the path of defeat. Once those adjustments were made, the course of the war changed. The implementation of a proper counterinsurgency strategy prevented absolute defeat. Though it is hard to claim that success was achieved, it is readily apparent that major improvements in the situation were made. The pre and post counterinsurgency eras in Iraq were vastly different in terms of outcomes, once again demonstrating the absolute imperative of getting the strategy right. In order for a democracy to win a counterinsurgency fight, it must implement a population-centric counterinsurgency strategy.

HISTORY

The Iraq War began on March 20, 2003 when the United States and its coalition partners invaded the country in order to overthrow Saddam Hussein and dismantle the regime's supposed arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. It did not end until December 2011 when the U.S. withdrew its last remaining combat troops. In the meantime nearly 5,000 members of the coalition forces were killed and at least 100,000 Iraqi civilians similarly lost their lives. The majority of these casualties came after the initial invasion quickly and successfully overthrew Saddam Hussein's government and destroyed his conventional military capability.

The successful invasion force was small. It consisted of only three U.S. Army divisions, a U.S. Marine division and one British division. Including the British contingent, the total number of troops involved in the invasion totaled around 145,000.¹ By April 9 coalition forces had seized Baghdad and Hussein was on the run, his government fully collapsed. On May 1, 2003 President Bush announced from the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln that major combat operations had come to a conclusive end. In the beginning, this proclamation, along with the prediction that the coalition would be greeted as liberators, seemed to be born out. There was some resistance to the occupation by former Ba'athists and foreign extremists, but violence remained low during the summer of 2003.²

That resistance continued to grow, however, and key events, such as the revelation of severe prisoner abuse at the U.S.-run Abu Ghraib prison in early 2004, as

¹ Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 117.

² Bruce R. Pirnie and Edward O'Connell, *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2006)* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), 9.

well as the bombing by Sunni radicals of the al-Askari Mosque (one of the most holy sites in the world to Shia Muslims) further inflamed the violence. By 2006 the violence was intense. Insurgents attacked coalition forces with indirect fires, small arms, and, most successfully, with improvised explosive devices (IEDs). At the same time, sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shi'ites had reached a level bordering on civil war and involved ethnic cleansing in certain cities.

The primary motivations of the insurgency against the coalition were to eliminate their presence in the country and to dismantle the democratically-oriented political system that the coalition was putting in place.³ The sectarian conflict was fueled by mutual suspicion. The Sunnis feared their newly subservient position, believing that the empowered Shi'ites may visit revenge upon them for atrocities committed while Hussein was in power. The Shi'ites feared Sunni attempts to maintain their dominance and also wished to exact revenge against their former tormenters.

Because initial assessments were highly optimistic, little planning went into preparing for post-invasion security. The primary mission was to establish a viable Iraqi government and military so that authority could be transferred to them and the coalition could withdraw quickly. An insurgency was not expected and dealing with one was not part of the initial campaign plan. Securing the Iraqi population was not a primary mission of coalition forces in the early years of the war. As Gordon and Trainor put it, the view of the administration was that, "An oppressive, authoritarian regime would be

³ Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 121.

removed, the liberated masses would breathe a sigh of relief, and new officials would grab hold of the levers of power and administer the new state.”⁴

By the end of 2006, however, President Bush had come to realize that the war was on the verge of being lost and that a change of strategy was needed if events were to be turned around. He replaced Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld with Robert Gates and began looking for new military leadership to take the reins in Iraq. He settled upon Gen. David Petraeus whose most recent command had been at the Army War College in Leavenworth, Kansas, where he oversaw the production of a new field manual outlining Army doctrine for counter-insurgency warfare. The new strategy to be implemented by Petraeus was labeled “The New Way Forward” and would focus on population security and adopt counterinsurgency priorities and tactics.⁵ It also involved a surge of additional troops in an attempt to quell the violence, especially in the capital city of Baghdad.

Though this new strategy and influx of troops initially resulted in higher casualties, within a few months those casualties had been dramatically reduced and violence was down to 2004 levels. The strategy was largely successful in providing protection to the population.⁶ Sunni tribesmen had ended their opposition and in fact joined the coalition in large numbers in opposition to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and as a result sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shi’ites was reduced. Political problems, especially of a sectarian nature, still existed, but were being dealt with significantly less

⁴ Michael R. Gordon and Gen. Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), 10.

⁵ Victor Davis Hanson, *The Savior Generals: How Five Great Commanders Saved Wars That Were Lost - From Ancient Greece to Iraq* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 216-217.

⁶ Lydia Walker, “Forging a Key, Turning a Lock: Counterinsurgency Theory in Iraq 2006-2008,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32, no. 10, (2009): 915.

violently. The worst part of the insurgency was over and the Iraqi government held together, providing an opportunity for political and economic development.

Unfortunately the U.S. public, as well as the populations of the other coalition members, were by this time largely opposed to the war. As in Vietnam, by the time an appropriate counterinsurgency strategy had been settled upon, and the right leader to implement it placed in command, support at home was already too severely eroded to make the effort sustainable, despite demonstrable improvements in the situation. The surge was only a temporary introduction of increased troop levels and those troops were soon being withdrawn. Coalition partners began to abandon the effort and U.S. force levels continued to dwindle. By 2011 all forces would be out of the country and Iraq would be a sovereign country left to its own defense. Although the government under Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has survived, there has been a resurgence of violence against the population. Car bombs and other attacks have become more and more frequent and the future of the country remains uncertain.

DIRECT ACTION AGAINST THE INSURGENT

Caught off guard by the growing inferno of the insurgency, the coalition forces in Iraq suffered from having too few troops from the very beginning. In planning the invasion, the defense department, primarily under the influence of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, decided on a "light footprint" approach. This approach was challenged by many senior military leaders, who believed that more troops, especially in the aftermath of the initial invasion, would be necessary. In testimony before Congress, Gen. Eric Shinseki, then the Army Chief of Staff, said:

I would say that what's been mobilized to this point, something on the order of several hundred thousand soldiers, are probably, you know, a figure that would be required....it takes significant ground force presence to maintain a safe and secure environment to ensure that people are fed, that water is distributed, all the normal responsibilities that go along with administering a situation like this.⁷

The Administration's response to this estimate was immediate. Two days after Shinseki gave his testimony, Wolfowitz was himself before the House Budget Committee. He directly contradicted Gen. Shinseki's prediction.

There has been a good deal of comment—some of it quite outlandish—about what our postwar requirements might be in Iraq. Some of the higher end predictions that we have been hearing recently, such as the notion that it will take several hundred thousand U.S. troops to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq, are wildly off the mark....it is hard to conceive that it would take more forces to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq than it would take to conduct the war itself and to secure the surrender of Saddam's security forces and his army—hard to imagine.⁸

Wolfowitz and others in the administration believed that troop requirements could be much lower. According to Tom Ricks, Wolfowitz was telling senior Army leadership that he expected the troop level to be down to only 34,000 within a few months of a successful invasion.⁹ This emphasis on a small troop posture would have extremely negative effects. Before the surge in 2007, the peak number of troops was 184,500, of which 160,000 were from the U.S.¹⁰ This number was insufficient to provide security to the population. Analyst Anthony Cordesman argues that, "...the United States wasted critical days, weeks, and months when it failed to engage in a security effort before opposition movements could regroup and reengage. U.S. actions caused a power

⁷ Gen. Eric Shinseki, quoted in Ricks, *Fiasco*, 97.

⁸ Paul Wolfowitz, quoted in Ricks, *Fiasco*, 97-98.

⁹ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 97.

¹⁰ Pirnie and O'Connell, 37-38.

vacuum because the United States was not prepared for nation building and the escalation of resistance after enemy conventional forces were defeated.”¹¹

This deficiency was compounded when CPA administrator L. Paul Bremer made the fateful decision to disband the Iraqi Army. This not only reduced the number of personnel available to provide security, but it positively endangered security by cutting off trained, armed men from their only source of employment which led to disgruntlement and to many of these former soldiers joining the Sunni insurgency.

The first sign of the insufficient troop levels was the onset of massive looting that went on just after the successful invasion. About this looting Ricks writes,

As U.S. forces triumphed, Iraqis rose up and expressed their hatred for Saddam Hussein’s regime in an extraordinary wave of vandalism. Mobs attacked government buildings across the country, carting off not just valuables but everything that could be pried off walls and floors. During this period it wasn’t uncommon to see a pickup truck carrying doors, window frames, and piping from government offices.¹²

When questioned about this looting at a press conference, Secretary Rumsfeld described it as a manifestation of newfound freedom and did not seem concerned to take additional steps to quell it. This would prove to be one of the worst mistakes of the war. Not only did it render many functions of the government inoperable, impede the generation of electricity, and lead to an equation of democracy with chaos, but it also painted the American forces as impotent and vulnerable. According to RAND analysts Pirnie and O’Connell, “For many law-abiding Iraqis who were in awe of U.S. capabilities

¹¹ Anthony H. Cordesman, *The War After the War: Strategic Lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: The CSIS Press, 2004), 41.

¹² Ricks, *Fiasco*, 135.

during the invasion, this remains a watershed event in terms of disappointment, loss of trust, and the spiral downward.”¹³

In addition to insufficient force levels, part of the problem was failure to plan. Lt. Gen. Kellogg was a senior member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s planning staff. Ricks quotes him as saying: “I was there for all the planning, all the execution, I saw it all. There was no real plan. The thought was, you didn’t need it. The assumption was that everything would be fine after the war, that they’d be happy they got rid of Saddam.”¹⁴

Even when those initial assumptions were proven to be incorrect by the rising violence, few steps were taken to remediate the looming problem. Larry Diamond, a key governance adviser in the CPA, wrote that,

...the failure to address the security deficit persisted. Even when we faced a growing insurgency without enough troops to combat it and maintain order; even when Iraqi confidence in the CPA plummeted with each car bombing and attack; even when foreign fighters, arms and money were pouring across the country’s unsecured borders, Secretary Rumsfeld and other senior administration figures blithely insisted that we had a sufficient military presence. The inadequacy of force and of resources meant that we could not secure the roads, we could not protect the courageous Iraqis who were coming forward to work for us, and ultimately we could not protect our own people.¹⁵

One of the chief planners of the invasion force, Col. Kevin Benson argued that if a sufficient number of troops had been available at the beginning, the insurgency may have been altogether avoided. “You know...there was a moment where some of my Arab friends told me that if we’d have kept the lid on, we probably wouldn’t have these problems. OK, conjecture. How do we keep the lid on? Well, we continue the force

¹³ Pirnie and O’Connell, 69.

¹⁴ Gen. Kellogg, quoted in Ricks, *Fiasco*, 109-110.

¹⁵ Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2005), 288.

flow. We don't stop. We leave everyone in place."¹⁶ Unfortunately, decision makers remained convinced that the occupation could be accomplished with the small contingent of forces already deployed.

The uncontrolled looting soon morphed into violent attacks, not only against Iraqi and coalition forces but also against the Iraqi people by July 2004. This problem was largely ignored by coalition forces, who focused more on their own force protection, and by the remaining Iraqi Army and police forces, which were poorly trained and equipped. "The lack of focus and commitment toward developing an antidote to this powerful mechanism for undermining Iraqi tolerance for U.S. troops proved to be one of the major strategy oversights on the part of coalition forces in the entire Iraq war."¹⁷

The lack of focus on population security was not limited to U.S. forces, British forces (who were primarily based in the south) were also more focused on protecting their own troops. According to Frank Ledwidge, "The British forces existed not to protect the Iraqi population of the city [Basra]: it existed largely, indeed almost exclusively, to protect itself."¹⁸ This lack of focus on population security quickly led to Basra becoming a "law-free zone" that including kidnappings, car-jackings, robbery, and, worst of all, reprisal killings and sectarian ethnic-cleansing.¹⁹

The most frequent targets of attack of Sunni extremists were large Shi'ite gatherings. Shi'ites were attacked, often by vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs), whenever they grouped together. They were targeted at "pilgrimages, weddings, funerals, open-air

¹⁶ Col. Kevin Benson, quoted in Ricks, *Fiasco*, 122.

¹⁷ Pirnie and O'Connell, 33.

¹⁸ Frank Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 28.

¹⁹ Ledwidge, 29.

markets, restaurants, and even mosques.”²⁰ These attacks led the Shia to form their own militias to provide security and to counterattack their Sunni persecutors. The two most prominent of these were the Badr Organization, and more importantly, Moqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army.²¹ The reprisals executed by the Shi’ite militias resulted in further retaliation by Sunni insurgents and terrorists, thereby resulting in a vicious cycle of sectarian violence, often of a particularly brutal nature. “Death squads abduct people, torture them with electric drills, murder them, and leave their mutilated bodies in public places.”²² In July 2006, the Baghdad morgue accepted 1,815 bodies, 90% of which had died violent deaths.²³

Even despite this growing violence, Gen. George Casey (then the top military commander in Iraq) and Gen. John Abizaid (head of USCENTCOM) continued to argue against increased troop levels. Believing that an increased presence would only provoke further attacks, they insisted that U.S. forces should continue to withdraw while Iraqi forces were trained and took on more of the burden. According to Victor David Hanson, their position was that,

At each scheduled reduction in American forces, the Iraqis would be required to step up to replace them. The pace of transformation would not always be contingent on actual events on the ground, but rather become a catalyst for them. After all, violence was always endemic to Iraq, and American soldiers would be seen as the problem rather than the solution.²⁴

Yet Iraqi forces were nowhere near capable of replacing their American

²⁰ Pirnie and O’Connell, 29.

²¹ Pirnie and O’Connell, 31.

²² Pirnie and O’Connell, 29.

²³ Pirnie and O’Connell, 63.

²⁴ Hanson, 210.

counterparts. This was especially troublesome given that one of the primary missions of the coalition was Iraqization, the training of a new Iraqi military and police force.

Ahmed Hashim explains that,

A considerable amount of focus was beginning to be put on 'Iraqization' of the security situation by training and equipping Iraqis to take on the task of fighting insurgency and terrorism. The United States unfortunately fell into the trap of measuring success in this endeavor by means of a single key and obvious indicator: the number of personnel it can claim to have been trained....In mid-2004 the United States was ambivalent about the state of the Iraqi security forces. The disintegration of many units during the worst of the insurgency crisis in April 2004 had shocked many. Looking back, many US officers and officials realized that the forces were clearly inadequate.²⁵

The Iraqi military was poorly motivated and did not patrol as frequently or proactively as American forces.²⁶ For example, at the end of January 2005, Iraqi security forces conducted only an average of around 1,200 patrols per week. In contrast, coalition forces conducted 12,000 patrols in the same period of time.²⁷ The American focus on numbers meant that by the end of 2006 the Iraqi Army had approximately 138,000 soldiers. In terms of quality, however, the Iraqi Army left much to be desired. Pirnie and O'Connell notes that,

It was equipped almost entirely as light-infantry battalions supported by motor-transportation regiments. It included only one mechanized brigade, part of which was equipped with tanks and infantry fighting vehicles donated by Eastern European countries. As a result, there is a wide disparity between the lightly equipped Iraqi Army forces and the heavily equipped U.S. forces trying to accomplish similar missions. In addition, the Iraqi Army mirrors the sectarian and ethnic divisions that plague the country. Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shi'ite Arabs usually serve in battalions that consist largely or exclusively of their own groups. There is no judicial system within the Iraqi Army to assure discipline, and soldiers can refuse orders with impunity.²⁸

²⁵ Hashim, 310.

²⁶ Hashim, 311.

²⁷ Hashim, 313.

²⁸ Pirnie and O'Connell, 52.

The Iraqi police were even further behind, as developing the Army was considered more important.²⁹

In many cases, Iraqi security forces were worse than incompetent—they were part of the problem. Both the Army and the National Police force were heavily Shi'ite and by 2006 had been infiltrated by various Shi'ite militias who were intent on ethnically cleansing Shi'ite areas of all Sunni presence. Ricks notes that,

These forces didn't have to carry out the cleansing themselves. All they had to do was go into a Sunni neighborhood and demand in the name of pacification that all heavy weapons be relinquished. After that was accomplished, they could tip off the Shiite militias, who might arrive that night or the next morning, ready to take on the newly defenseless population.³⁰

Efforts at ethnic cleansing, both by Shi'ites and Sunnis, had resulted in an estimated 2 million refugees having fled the country by 2006. Another 2 million were thought to have been displaced within the country.³¹

In addition to lack of security due to insufficient troops and the poor quality of Iraqi security institutions, poor intelligence also prevented a more effective response to the insurgency. This lack of intelligence resulted from four key reasons. The first was that Americans were based in giant super-FOBs (Forward Operating Bases) remote from the population. Interactions were reduced to occasional patrols in which it could be dangerous for the people to approach the soldiers.

The second reason was that failure to secure the population left them vulnerable to reprisals if they were discovered to have provided information to the coalition.

According to Lt. Col. Michael Silverman, "It was fairly easy for leaders of the group

²⁹ Pirnie and O'Connell, 50.

³⁰ Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009), 46.

³¹ Ricks, *The Gamble*, 47.

[AQI] to track what city-dwellers did. They only needed a spy or two on a block to know if someone pointed out an IED to Americans or spent too much time talking when American patrols visited. The punishment was a swift and public death.”³²

Third, the dissolution of the Iraqi military and police force simultaneously eliminated the most effective capability of acquiring intelligence since coalition forces often lacked the connection with the population and the language skills to acquire intelligence.³³ Finally, U.S. intelligence was often distracted by multiple tasks. It tended to focus on threats to coalition forces rather than to the public. It also focused on issues extraneous to the insurgency. Ambassador Bremer, for example, complained that intelligence was too focused on discovering weapons of mass destruction.³⁴

By 2006 the failures in intelligence, providing security to the population, and in building an effective Iraqi military and police force, as well as the problems of governance discussed in the next section, had led to an intolerable situation of violence and chaos in the country. Sectarian differences had led to near civil war, violence against both the population and coalition forces had escalated, and development was at a standstill. During the summer of 2006, violence in Baghdad increased by 43% and by December of that year, approximately 3,000 Iraqi civilians were being killed each month in sectarian violence.³⁵ Gen. David Petraeus described the situation as he found it when he returned to Iraq in early 2007:

³² Lt. Col. Michael Silverman, *Awakening Victory: How Iraqi Tribes and American Troops Reclaimed al Anbar Province and Defeated al Qaeda in Iraq* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2011), 28.

³³ Pirnie and O’Connell, 71.

³⁴ Gordon and Trainor, 31-32.

³⁵ Peter R. Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 32.

I found the conditions there to be even worse than I had expected....The violence—which had escalated dramatically in 2006 in the wake of the bombing of the Shi'a al-Askari shrine in the Sunni city of Samarra—was totally out of control. With well over fifty attacks and three car bombs per day on average in Baghdad alone, the plan to hand off security tasks to Iraqi forces clearly was not working. Meanwhile, the sectarian battles on the streets were mirrored by infighting in the Iraqi government and Council of Representatives, and those disputes produced a dysfunctional Iraqi political environment as well. And with many of the oil pipelines damaged or destroyed, electrical towers toppled, roads in disrepair, local markets shuttered, and government workers and citizens fearing for their lives, generation of government revenue was down and the provision of basic services was wholly inadequate. Life in many areas of the capital and the country was about little more than survival.³⁶

It was Petraeus' mission to turn this situation around through the implementation of a new counterinsurgency strategy utilizing increased forces available through the surge. The new strategy called for changing the primary mission to protecting the population and ensuring security. It was hoped that this would provide space for political development and for improvements in military and police forces. As Ricks put it, "In sum, the short war approach that the United States had followed for years had been abandoned. The U.S. military had arrived in Baghdad in April 2003 with the expectation of largely leaving by that September. For three years after that, commanders had planned variations on that swift exit. Now the long war was about to begin."³⁷

The surge would include the introduction of five new brigades into the battle space, with an additional helicopter brigade and support troops. The total number of added forces was around 30,000 soldiers. President Bush said these additional forces were there "to help Iraqis clear and secure neighborhoods, to help them protect the local population, and to help ensure that the Iraqi forces left behind are capable of providing

³⁶ Gen. David Petraeus, Foreword in *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War*, by Peter R. Mansoor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), ix.

³⁷ Ricks, *The Gamble*, 124.

the security that Baghdad needs.”³⁸ This additional force strength was maintained for 18 months and began to be withdrawn in summer 2008.

One of the biggest changes of the surge was not just the additional troops, but how they were used. Instead of being based in huge FOBs, these troops were moved into smaller camps within populated areas. This allowed them to better protect the population.³⁹ This of course also exposed American troops to greater levels of violence and the number of casualties grew in the first few months of the surge. Through April of June 2007 more than 100 Americans were killed each month. This was the first time in the war that casualties reached that level for three consecutive months.⁴⁰

Fortunately, however, this spike in violence was only temporary. By July, the number of casualties fell below 100, never to reach that level again. There were only 55 American deaths in August and the number was down to 14 in December.⁴¹ Even more important, the number of civilian Iraqis killed began to drop, eventually falling to levels seen only prior to the onset of severe sectarian strife in 2006.⁴² Violence was reduced during the summer of 2007 by nearly all measures. Ricks reports that,

Between June and December [2007], the number of bomb, rifle, mortar, and grenade attacks in Iraq would decrease by some 60 percent, from an all-time high of 1,600 a week in June to below 600 a week by year’s end. Some 44 car bombs were detonated in Baghdad in February, killing 253 and wounding another 654, while there would be only 5 in December, killing 12 and wounding 40.⁴³

³⁸ Ricks, *The Gamble*, 122.

³⁹ Ricks, *The Gamble*, 132-133.

⁴⁰ Hanson, 218.

⁴¹ Ricks, *The Gamble*, 240.

⁴² Hanson, 218.

⁴³ Ricks, *The Gamble*, 249.

Reduced violence continued into 2008. In July of that year only 13 Americans were killed.⁴⁴ Other goals were being met as well. Intelligence gathering, for example, improved as U.S. troops were in more constant contact with the people and as they became more confident in the ability of U.S. forces to protect them.⁴⁵ Furthermore, “Baghdad turned mostly quiet-just thirteen months after the deployment of more American troops. Media accounts conceded that most political and economic benchmarks promised by Petraeus-under dispute throughout 2007-were being met and passed by late 2008.”⁴⁶

With an appropriate number of soldiers and the proper counterinsurgency strategy, the coalition was able to turn around a dire situation which was teetering on the edge of defeat. Though Iraq was still far from safe, violence was greatly reduced and the population was more secure. Unfortunately, however, the surge lasted only a short time and withdrawal of forces began immediately after. Just as in Vietnam, when the appropriate strategy was applied success followed but by the time it was applied the public was already weary of the war and was demanding a pull-back. It’s impossible to know a counter-factual, but the success of the surge indicates that if the appropriate force level and strategy had been applied at the beginning of the conflict, an insurgency may never have arisen at all and if it did, may well have been quickly defeated.

⁴⁴ Hanson, 219.

⁴⁵ Ricks, *The Gamble*, 191.

⁴⁶ Hanson, 220.

INDIRECT ACTION AGAINST THE INSURGENT

Direct action against the insurgency is not the only area in which the coalition made serious errors during the Iraq War. Indirect action—in the form of reconstruction, economic development, and political legitimacy—was also deeply flawed. A primary reason for this, at least at the beginning, was failure to plan. As noted previously, the Bush administration was confident that the invading force would be greeted as liberators by a population grateful for the removal of Saddam Hussein. They further believed that the Iraqi government and economy would be able to reform on its own with little help from the coalition. Oil revenues were assumed to be sufficient to pay for reconstruction, and Iraqi exiles, such as Ahmed Chalabi, would be able to direct the government until nationwide elections were held.

Immediately following the successful invasion, the Bush administration put retired General Jay Garner in charge of the Office for Rehabilitation and Humanitarian Aid (ORHA), thereby making him the top civilian governing authority in the country. Unfortunately, Garner took a rather hands-off approach and was ineffective in establishing order. Hashim judges the ORHA harshly, saying that it

...can be blamed for failing to restore basic services to the Iraqi people or distribute humanitarian aid effectively. The country had less electricity than before the war and during the decade of sanctions. This was not an optimal situation to have in spring as the heat of the Iraqi summer loomed. As the regime collapsed hospitals were extensively looted of medicines and supplies, and were also in worse shape than before the war. The effective rationing system collapsed after the war but humanitarian assistance could not reach the people in a sustained manner because planners in the Pentagon did not work with NGOs. Moreover, NGOs that were keen to go into postwar Iraq were loath to send their workers because of the absence of law and order. Unsurprisingly, the political, economic and social situation in Iraq under the auspices of Garner and ORHA in spring

2003 could be said to approximate-with a little hyperbole-Thomas Hobbes's state of nature.⁴⁷

It is perhaps unfair, however, to blame Garner exclusively, as he was reflecting the overall attitude of the administration. Little planning had gone into the postwar reconstruction phase and it was considered of little consequence. As an example of the nonchalant attitude taken by the administration towards issues of governance, Larry Diamond recounts this meeting between Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and Ambassador Barbara Bodine just prior to the invasion in mid-March 2003:

...she explained the urgent need to figure out a way to make sure Iraqi civil servants got paid in the aftermath of the war, so that government services could continue and opposition could be preempted. The operating assumption had been that the Iraqi civil servants would be in their offices after the war, ready to work, and that the occupation would have a fully functioning Iraqi government within a matter of days. Rumsfeld insisted that it didn't matter whether Iraqi civil servants got paid. 'They can wait two weeks or two months,' he said. What mattered, he said, was that the American taxpayer wouldn't stand for the United States paying Iraqi civil servants. When someone suggested that there would be riots in the streets if the civil servants didn't get paid, Rumsfeld replied that this could be used as leverage to get the Europeans in to pick up the burden.⁴⁸

As a result of this carelessness towards the Iraqi bureaucracy, governing institutions collapsed immediately after the invasion. Pirnie and O'Connell note that "In defeat, the Ba'athist regime collapsed quickly and completely. Suddenly no longer a centrally controlled, one-party dictatorship, Iraq became ungoverned space, lacking basic services and security for its citizens."⁴⁹ The coalition had removed the governing structure of Iraq and failed to replace it with another structure strong enough to provide key and essential services.

⁴⁷ Hashim, 293.

⁴⁸ Diamond, 31.

⁴⁹ Pirnie and O'Connell, 9.

Garner and ORHA were soon replaced by Ambassador L. Paul “Jerry” Bremer who became head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). He did little better, and in fact made certain decisions that likely worsened the situation. The most damaging of these decision was de-Ba’athification of the Iraqi bureaucracy, which emptied the government of competent technocrats, and the dissolution of the Iraqi Army and National Police. Approximately 120,000 government employees of all types—including non-political positions such as teachers and doctors—were suddenly without jobs and unavailable to assist in the country’s reconstruction.⁵⁰

These decisions left the country with dysfunctional governing institutions and no security forces outside of coalition troops. The CPA proved incompetent in the task of performing those governing responsibilities once carried out by the dismissed Iraqi bureaucracy. Lack of planning, incompetence, and incorrect assumptions led to the unraveling of Iraqi society and a total lack of legitimacy for the CPA. Ricks argues that,

When assumptions are wrong, everything built on them is undermined. Because the Pentagon assumed that U.S. troops would be greeted as liberators and that an Iraqi government would be stood up quickly, it didn’t plan seriously for less rosy scenarios. Because it so underestimated the task at hand, it didn’t send a well-trained, coherent team of professionals, but rather an odd collection of youthful Republican campaign workers and other novices. Nor did it send enough people. In part because of the poor quality and sheer lack of CPA personnel, the U.S. occupation authorities would prove unable to adjust their stance quickly when assumptions proved wrong. Because of that incompetence, the CPA would be unable to provide basic services such as electricity, clean water, and security to the Iraqi population, and so in the fall of 2003 it would begin to lose the lukewarm support it had enjoyed.⁵¹

Hashim agrees and argues that these deficiencies fueled the growing insurgency.

He writes:

⁵⁰ David L. Phillips, *Losing Iraq: Inside the Postwar Reconstruction Fiasco* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 145.

⁵¹ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 111.

The CPA would have succeeded in degrading the impact of ill will and of the insurgency had it restored law and order, had it not implemented certain policies that either humiliated Iraqis or added to the level of unemployment, and had it begun an effective reconstruction of the country. The lack of basic services and the patent inability of the occupiers to rebuild infrastructure fueled much of the emerging discontent.⁵²

The failure to begin reconstruction and development efforts immediately and competently had at least three immediate consequences. One was that there was a large pool of disaffected young men, including dismissed soldiers, without sufficient opportunity for employment. These men resented the CPA and the occupation generally and provided the insurgency with a substantial population of potential recruits.⁵³ The second consequence was that the CPA lost whatever legitimacy it may have had. It was bad enough that the CPA was a foreign occupying entity, but when combined with incompetence and seeming indifference to the plight of ordinary Iraqis it held little appeal as a governing authority. This in turn led to the third consequence, a power vacuum in governance created a power struggle by militia forces to fill it.

Pirnie and O'Connell assessed that, "The government is so ineffective that the conflict more nearly resembles a many-sided struggle for power amid the ruins of the Ba'athist state."⁵⁴ This was a sectarian struggle primarily between the Shi'ites and Sunni but also included the Kurds, who sought a large degree of autonomy. These groups formed their own armed militias in order to protect their own constituents and to attack their sectarian enemies. They also worked on social projects, however, filling the gap left by the non-functioning government. One of the most prominent of the Shi'ite militias, The Mahdi Army, which was led by cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, was heavily involved in the

⁵² Hashim, 295.

⁵³ Pirnie and O'Connell, 28.

⁵⁴ Pirnie and O'Connell, xiv.

provision of social services and has been compared with Hezbollah with its combination of military and social services.⁵⁵

In recognition of the CPA's limited legitimacy, Bremer initiated an effort to hand power, or at least a certain degree of influence, over to an Iraqi led governing entity. In July of 2003 the Iraqi Governing Council was formed. It was comprised of 25 members, all of whom were chosen by the coalition. This would lead to further problems of legitimacy as many, including the very influential Shi'a religious leader Ali al-Sistani, claimed that the council could not be reflective of the will of the Iraqi people since it was unelected and chosen by the occupying forces. The first president of the council was Ibrahim al-Jaafari, who was a leader in the Shi'ite Da'wa Party. It also included other prominent Shi'ite leaders and Kurds such as Jalal Talabani. It contained no Sunni Arabs, however.⁵⁶

The decision not to include any Sunnis further alienated them from the government and exacerbated their feelings of disenfranchisement. It also threatened the Sunnis by making it seem as if the coalition were siding exclusively with the Shi'a, who they feared would seek reprisals for past wrongs against them. The council failed to provide the Sunnis with an appropriate political outlet to express discontent, leaving them only with violence as an alternative. Further, it enabled Sunni extremist propagandists the ability to claim that attacks against the government were attacks against an illegitimate foreign occupier and its Shi'a collaborators rather than a legitimate Iraqi government that was designed to meet the needs of all Iraqis.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Pirnie and O'Connell, 31.

⁵⁶ Pirnie and O'Connell, 10.

⁵⁷ Hashim, 288 and Pirnie and O'Connell, 25.

Free and fair elections, however, take time to prepare for and execute. The first national elections would be held in January 2005. Unfortunately, the Sunnis chose to boycott the election and won only 17 seats, leaving them practically voiceless. The Shi'a dominated United Iraqi Alliance party won 140 seats and the Kurdistan Alliance took 75. The Iraqi List (primarily composed of secular Shi'ites) won 40 seats. Ibrahim al-Jaafari was made prime minister.⁵⁸

One of the primary tasks of this newly elected body was to draft a new constitution for Iraq. It did so and that draft was accepted by the Iraqi people in a referendum in October 2005. The adoption of the new constitution required a new election and one was held in December 2005. The Sunnis participated this time, thereby lending greater legitimacy to the outcome. The results still fell largely along sectarian lines, however. The United Iraqi Alliance won 128 seats, the Kurdistan Alliance 53, and Iraqi Concord Front (a Sunni party) won 44 seats. The Iraqi List was reduced to 25 seats. Ibrahim al-Jaafari was initially offered the retention of the prime minister position, but objections from the Kurds and Sunnis led to his eventual rejection. Instead Nouri al-Maliki, of the Da'wa Party took the position in February 2006. He remains in that position to this day.⁵⁹

These elections were a major step in the direction of enhanced government legitimacy. The problems of sectarianism, corruption and incompetence still remained, however. When Gen. Petraeus took command of American forces in Iraq he recognized the importance of improving civil governance along with security.

⁵⁸ Pirnie and O'Connell, 14.

⁵⁹ Pirnie and O'Connell, 14.

As security improved, the tasks in the civilian arena took on greater importance. It was critical, for example, that we work with our coalition and Iraqi civilian partners to help repair damaged infrastructure, restore basic services, rebuild local markets, reopen schools and health facilities, and support the reestablishment of the corrections and judicial systems and other governmental institutions. While not determinative by themselves, such improvements gave Iraqi citizens tangible reasons to support the new Iraq and reject the extremists, insurgents, and militia members who had caused such hardship for them. To facilitate and coordinate such efforts, each brigade and division headquarters was provided an embedded provincial reconstruction team of approximately a dozen civilian and military experts.⁶⁰

Efforts were made along these lines; Petraeus cited improvements in election laws, reform of de-Ba'athification, and amnesty legislation.⁶¹ But this was the area in which the least progress was probably made. By the time elections were held, legal reforms began to be instituted, and the government started to more competently provide basic services, sectarian violence and endemic political corruption and waste had already poisoned Iraqi politics and political institutions. Once a government is seen by a large percentage of its citizens as illegitimate, regaining loyalty from that population becomes extremely difficult, especially when there are forces actively working to prevent such loyalty from developing. Petraeus himself admitted that "...it was in this area that the most additional progress was-and still is-needed."⁶² That hasn't changed since, and at the time of this writing sectarian antagonism, especially between Shi'ites and Sunnis remains the greatest challenge to Iraqi nationhood and stability.

⁶⁰ Petraeus, xvi-xvii.

⁶¹ Petraeus, xix.

⁶² Petraeus, xix.

INTERACTION WITH THE POPULATION

The U.S. also made substantial mistakes at the beginning of the Iraq War in terms of its interaction with the Iraqi people. In addition to its failure to protect them, discussed in the section on direct action, the U.S. failed to understand them, and in some cases was an active threat to them by means of collateral damage and poorly calibrated use of force. According to Hashim, "Interactions between US forces and Iraqis were characterized from the early days by profound psychological and cultural gaps. The vicious cycle is exacerbated when Iraqis and Americans begin to view each other as merciless and brutal savages, and then to act upon these perceptions, inflicting atrocities that further widen the gap."⁶³

Journalists Chris Hedges and Laila al-Arian concur with Hashim's assessment. They point to a lack of cultural, historical and linguistic understanding as being severe handicaps to fruitful interaction with the people. This ignorance can easily morph into stereotypes and racism. This becomes especially pronounced as violence increases and soldiers witness their friends being killed by these people whom they have little understanding of. When this happens, "The occupation troops, frustrated and enraged by the growing power and deadliness of the insurgency, usually jettison quaint notions about winning over a populace that, most soon decide, is hostile to the occupation."⁶⁴

This lack of understanding was made worse by the strategy of basing soldiers on large protected bases rather than among the population. This was done under the leadership of Gen. Ricardo Sanchez but increased even more under the direction of Gen.

⁶³ Hashim, 326.

⁶⁴ Chris Hedges and Laila al-Arian, *Collateral Damage: America's War against Iraqi Civilians* (New York: Nation Books, 2008), 88.

George Casey. Ricks argues that, “Casey...undermined his own efforts, because his basic approach remained at odds with counterinsurgency theory. He was pulling his troops farther away from the population, closing dozens of bases in 2005 as he consolidated his force on big, isolated bases that the military termed ‘Super FOBs.’”⁶⁵ This cut American troops off from the population and prevented the types of close connections that may have fostered understanding and positive relationships.

Interestingly, in 2004 Casey had ordered his planners to prepare a comprehensive review of lessons-learned from previous counterinsurgencies. He writes in his memoir that “COIN was something that we, in the U.S. military, had not been involved with for some time. My perception, from observing and talking to subordinates, was that we understood the doctrine well enough, but that we all had a lot to learn about how to apply that doctrine, particularly in Iraq.”⁶⁶ The review came back with several key conclusions, the top two being that an emphasis on intelligence was key and that there should be a focus on meeting the needs of the population, particularly in terms of security. Yet the two primary takeaways from the report for Gen. Casey had to do with the length of average counterinsurgencies (9 years) and the fact that a capable indigenous partner was important.⁶⁷

Due to the lack of connection and empathy with the people that came from basing troops apart from them, hostility was sometimes visible in the tactics used by coalition forces and in their treatment of Iraqis. In terms of tactics, for example, the methodology used by coalition forces to search homes was often counterproductive. Pirnie and

⁶⁵ Ricks, *The Gamble*, pp. 12-13.

⁶⁶ Gen. George W. Casey, Jr., *Strategic Reflections: Operation Iraqi Freedom July 2004—February 2007* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2012), 44.

⁶⁷ Casey, 46.

O'Connell noted that, "When insurgency first became apparent, the United States responded with kick-down-the-door-sweep operations that often netted few insurgents but made Sunni Arabs increasingly disaffected and created a mass of fodder overnight for a new wave of insurgent propaganda videos."⁶⁸ Sgt. John Bruhns, who was involved in such searches and spoke with Hedges and al-Arian, gives a detailed explanation of how these raids unfolded:

You go up the stairs. You grab the man of the house. You rip him out of bed in front of his wife. You put him up against the wall. You have junior-level troops, PFCs (privates first class), specialists will run into the other rooms and grab the family, and you'll group them all together. Then you go into a room and you tear the room to shreds and you make sure there's no weapons or anything that they can use to attack us. You get the interpreter and you get the man of the home, and you have him at gunpoint, and you'll ask the interpreter to ask him: 'Do you have any weapons? Do you have any anti-U.S. propaganda, anything at all-anything-anything in here that would lead us to believe that you are somehow involved in insurgent activity or anti-coalition activity?' Normally they'll say no, because that's normally the truth. So what you'll do is, you'll take his sofa cushions and you'll dump them. If he has a couch, you'll turn the couch upside down. You'll go into the fridge, and you'll throw everything on the floor, and you'll take his drawers and you'll dump them... You'll open up his closet and you'll throw all the clothes on the floor and basically leave his house looking like a hurricane just hit it. And if you find something, then you'll detain him. If not, you'll say, 'Sorry to disturb you. Have a nice evening.' So you've just humiliated this man in front of his entire family and terrorized the entire family and you've destroyed his home. And then you go right next door and you do the same thing in a hundred homes.⁶⁹

It's not surprising that such tactics did not endear coalition forces to the people. Even those people initially in support of the occupation could be quickly swayed to the other side upon experiencing such trauma. Another soldier, Sgt. Westphal, said about this, "Most of the people were terrified. You could see it in their eyes. We knew that this

⁶⁸ Pirnie and O'Connell, 70.

⁶⁹ Sgt. John Bruhns, quoted in Hedges and al-Arian, 53-54.

[night raids] was not the way to win hearts and minds. You don't come in the middle of the night and harass people and then expect them to give you flowers the next day."⁷⁰

The most egregious example of mistreatment of Iraqis by U.S. forces was likely the treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib. In early 2004 it was uncovered that prison guards in that prison had been physically, psychologically and sexually mistreating many prisoners in their custody. Explicit photographs of these guards humiliating their captives outraged not only Iraqis, but people around the world, especially other Arabs. This incident was extremely damaging and was a major recruiting tool for extremists. Pirnie and O'Connell explain why the incident was so harmful to the American effort:

For Arab audiences, the photographs taken at Abu Ghraib, endlessly copied and disseminated through the media and the Internet, confirm their worst apprehensions about Americans. The photographs depict acts of sexual sadism inflicted by American women on Arab men, acts that are especially humiliating in a culture that emphasizes masculinity and personal honor. Weak leadership, inadequate resources, confusing guidance, and tangled command relationships all contributed to the chaotic conditions at Abu Ghraib, where these abuses occurred.⁷¹

These perceptions were on top of the negative perceptions created by the inability of coalition forces to protect the Iraqi people from violence, the prevalence of accidental killings (at checkpoints, for example), collateral damage (numerous examples of this sort are described by Hedges and al-Arian) and the failure to provide services. Insufficient access to basic necessities such as power and clean water persisted and further alienated the population from the government and the coalition. During the summer of 2006, electricity was available during only half of the day. Likewise, water-treatment facilities in Baghdad were only capable of meeting little more than half of the city's needs.

⁷⁰ Sgt. Westfall, quoted in Hedges and al-Arian, 70.

⁷¹ Pirnie and O'Connell, 48.

Sewage and garbage collection were also major problems in Baghdad and mostly non-existent outside of the capital, and especially in rural areas.⁷²

As in the other areas of the war, interaction with the population began to improve under the leadership of Gen. Petraeus. He was very aware of the importance of the population in counterinsurgency efforts. “The biggest of the ‘big ideas’ that guided the strategy during the surge,” he said, “was explicit recognition that the most important terrain in the campaign in Iraq was the human terrain—the people.”⁷³ One way in which he did this was by encouraging the expansion of a new program (begun in 2007, first in Afghanistan and then Iraq) called the Human Terrain System (HTS) throughout American bases in Iraq. According to the organization’s website, it’s mission is as follows: “The Human Terrain System develops, trains, and integrates a social science based research and analysis capability to support operationally relevant decision-making, to develop a knowledge base, and to enable sociocultural understanding across the operational environment.”⁷⁴

In other words, the program fielded civilian social scientists to study and analyze the culture of the populations living within the battle space in order to provide relevant information to decision-making commanders. Petraeus has said that, “Counterinsurgency operations depend on a keen understanding of the political, historical, cultural, economic, and military situation in each area... Truly understanding the human terrain was vital to

⁷² Pirnie and O’Connell, 57-58.

⁷³ Petraeus, x.

⁷⁴ Human Terrain System.

our ability to improve its security.”⁷⁵ HTS was the Army’s primary attempt to meet that recognized need.

Although HTS teams met with variable success, most commanders who were asked said that they were useful. Lamb, et. al., analyzed several assessments of HTS functionality and found that, “When all commander assessments from multiple studies are considered, it is clear that those who thought their HTTs [Human Terrain Teams] were useful constituted the large majority.”⁷⁶ These commanders specifically cited HTTs as providing greater situational awareness, knowledge of basic customs, and methodologies for obtaining accurate information pertaining to the human terrain. They were also positively cited for providing cultural awareness and human terrain training to the troops.⁷⁷

Much more important than efforts such as HTS, however, was the Sunni Awakening. This was a widespread defection of the Sunni Arabs from their allegiance to al-Qaeda and the insurgency and their re-alignment with coalition forces and the Iraqi government. This movement began in Ramadi, a part of Al Anbar province which was one of the most violent in the country. Lt. Col. Silverman, who was operating in the area at the time, credits the Sunni’s defection from al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to the brutal intimidation campaign that the organization was using against the population.⁷⁸ Silverman points to the initial willingness of one sheik, Abu Ali Jassim, to stand up to

⁷⁵ Petraeus, xviii-xix.

⁷⁶ Christopher J. Lamb, James Douglas Orton, Michael C. Davies and Theodore T. Pikulsky, *Human Terrain Teams: An Organizational Innovation for Sociocultural Knowledge in Irregular Warfare* (Washington, DC: IWP Press, 2013), 2.

⁷⁷ Lamb, et. al., 179.

⁷⁸ Silverman, 72.

AQI, and his subsequent kidnapping and murder by AQI, as the catalyst for the entire movement.

The Abu Ali Jassim sheik and the members of his tribe, although they were rabid nationalists, hated AQI. They aligned with a handful of other tribes to form the Anbar Salvation Counsel (ASC) and to encourage their young men to fight AQI. The ASC was a very small group of sub-tribe sheiks from four tribes in Jazeera, north of Ramadi...who were taking direct action against AQI. They began recruiting tribal militias to violently remove al Qaeda from their areas, and that is what caused al Qaeda to overplay its hand. On August 21, 2006, AQI made what turned out to be a fatal error. Members kidnapped and killed the sheik of the Abu Ali Jassim tribe in North Ramadi, and they committed the unforgiveable offense of hiding the body so that the sheik could not be properly buried.⁷⁹

This atrocity led to a general Sunni uprising against AQI. Fortunately, U.S. leaders were wise enough to recognize that this was happening and worked to capitalize on it. Gen. Petraeus notes that, "...the spread of the Awakening beyond Ramadi was not serendipity; rather, it was the result of a conscious decision and a deliberate effort....Given my recognition of the importance of reconciliation, I was determined that we would support the nascent Awakening and then, over time, gain our Iraqi partners' support, as well."⁸⁰ One way in which he did this was to put these Sunni (and to a lesser extent, Shi'ite) fighters, known as Sons of Iraq, on the payroll of the occupation. Petraeus notes that 18 months into the surge there were 100,000 such fighters being paid to protect their neighborhoods from Sunni insurgents and Shi'a militias.⁸¹ This was a major force multiplier that greatly supplemented the new troops introduced by the surge.

This initiative met with major success. Hanson notes that in Anbar Province seven thousand weapons caches were confiscated and thousands of al-Qaeda fighters

⁷⁹ Silverman, 73.

⁸⁰ Petraeus, xii-xiii.

⁸¹ Petraeus, xiv.

killed towards the end of 2007.⁸² Ricks reports that, "Some experts, such as retired Gen. Abizaid and Stephen Biddle, a sometime adviser to Petraeus, argue that the change in the loyalties of Sunni fighters was the single most important cause of the improvement in security in 2007."⁸³ Silverman also credits the movement with making democratic elections possible. He notes that many of the sheiks involved in the Awakening worked together with Shi'ites to develop political parties representing all major sectarian groups. "If not for the Awakening movement," he says, "I don't think that could have happened."⁸⁴

As in the two other areas of counterinsurgency, direct and indirect action against the insurgents, coalition forces initially made major mistakes in terms of interacting with the population. They were largely ignorant of cultural, political, religious, economic and historical factors related to the population and how they viewed the coalition and its efforts. They relied too heavily on invasive tactics, such as violent and humiliating raids in the middle of the night, and the attitude of disrespect towards Iraqis that festered among the troops allowed the Abu Ghraib incident to occur.

Efforts undertaken later in the war, primarily under the leadership of Gen. Petraeus, brought about substantial improvement. Petraeus made the population the center of gravity of the conflict. He de-emphasized counterproductive night raids, tightened rules of engagement, and focused on obtaining greater cultural awareness through efforts such as the Human Terrain System. He also grasped the opportunity presented by the Sunni Awakening and worked hard to foster relationships with

⁸² Hanson, 218.

⁸³ Ricks, *The Gamble*, 202-203.

⁸⁴ Silverman, 304.

influential sheiks to make the most of that phenomenon. Aside from the surge and the overall change of strategy initiated by Petraeus, the Awakening was one of the most important factors that resulted in reductions in violence in 2007 and after. Biddle, Friedman and Shapiro that “both the surge and the Awakening mattered” and that it was the synergy between them that led to the drastic reduction in violence.⁸⁵ Unfortunately these efforts came several years into the war, when many animosities had already been developed and nurtured. If the surge had been adopted initially, there is no telling how much more quickly the insurgency could have been brought to heel.

CONCLUSION

The Iraq War began with a highly successful invasion, morphed into a vicious insurgency, and ended with an American withdrawal from a country with improved security but persistent sectarian political strife that has continued to result in violence. In their RAND report, Pirnie and O’Connell give a good summation of how things got so out of control following the initial success of the invasion. They write:

The Bush Administration did not anticipate widespread, virulent resistance to U.S. occupation and to a new Iraqi government led by Shi’ite Arabs and Kurds. As a result, it was initially unprepared to conduct COIN and promoted slow-paced creation of the government, ceding time to the insurgents. Ethnic and sectarian parties dominated the new government and failed to produce a foundation for national unity....Moreover, the government was so weak that even Shi’ite Arabs turned to militias for the protection that coalition forces failed to provide. In the absence of effective government, extremists in both sects committed outrages that made the division still harder to bridge.⁸⁶

The coalition’s failure to protect the population, provide essential services to the

⁸⁵ Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?” *International Security* 37, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 11.

⁸⁶ Pirnie and O’Connell, 61.

population, and identify a proper military strategy had disastrous consequences. “The combined facts that the U.S. military has followed a flawed COIN approach and the Iraqi government has been ineffective in exerting its writ of control over the country constituted the early engines of failure.”⁸⁷

Despite its initial unpreparedness, a swift change of strategy from conventional warfare to counterinsurgency operations would likely have met with far greater success. Unfortunately, the flawed conventional strategy was adhered to for nearly four years. Time enough to allow the insurgency to metastasize and for the American public’s support for the conflict to sour. As in Vietnam, the American effort in 2007 and after was too late to affect a complete turnaround of events.

It is astounding, however, how much the trends of the conflict were reversed. In 2006 the country seemed on the verge of total collapse into a brutal civil war. Ricks sums up the progress:

As the surge ended in mid-2008, with the last of the five additional combat brigades heading home, Baghdad felt distinctly better. Kebab stands and coffee shops had reopened across the city, and many ordinary Iraqis felt safe enough to venture out of their homes at night, in part because stores were remaining open to evening shoppers. Some women discarded the head scarves that Islamic extremists had insisted they wear, with violators being attacked. Even as Iraq’s factions remained murderously divided, violence was at its lowest level of the entire war, with only a dozen American soldiers dying in July 2008.⁸⁸

Petraeus himself wrote that,

The comprehensive civil-military endeavor pursued during the surge made it possible over time to transfer tasks from U.S. and other coalition forces to Iraqi soldiers and police, and ultimately, for the United States to withdraw its final combat elements at the end of 2011 without a precipitate descent back into the violence and civil conflict that made the surge necessary in the first place.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Pirnie and O’Connell, 2.

⁸⁸ Ricks, *The Gamble*, 294.

⁸⁹ Petraeus, xxi.

That certainly represents the achievement of a very limited goal—the prevention of a descent into absolute chaos—but given the situation in 2006, it was indeed an achievement. That achievement can be attributed to stationing enough troops in the country to secure the population and instituting a proper COIN strategy that took the population into account and which was able to capitalize on such events as the Sunni Awakening.

We can only surmise what would have happened if those troops and that strategy had been in place from the beginning rather than only after disaster had taken place. It is reasonable to conclude, however, that violence would never have reached the horrific levels that it did in 2006, that the insurgency and the uprising of Shi'a militias would not have developed to such a large scale, that sectarian violence would not have escalated so astronomically, and that the Iraqi political system would have had a greater chance of developing a set of competent and effective institutions. What is certain, however, is that the lack of success in Iraq during the first part of the war—that before the surge and the settlement on a COIN strategy by Gen. Petraeus—cannot be blamed on counterinsurgency strategy.

The coalition's failure to meet its military objectives was not a result of COIN. We know this because COIN was not seriously and consistently tried in the early years. Rather, that failure should be placed at the feet of a more conventional strategy that involved force protection and emphasis on seeking and destroying terrorist groups and individuals. Iraq stands not as a case study against the effectiveness of COIN but on the contrary as a repudiation of the implementation of a conventional strategy in an insurgency fight. More than that, it stands as a partial vindication of COIN against its

critics as it was only after a proper COIN strategy was implemented that the situation turned around and success became a possibility. The proper conclusion to draw from the case of Iraq is that a conventional strategy is likely to fail when faced with an insurgency and that a COIN strategy has a much greater likelihood of success.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

In January 2012 President Obama announced a sizeable reduction in the troop levels maintained by both the Army and Marine Corps. Instead, more emphasis would be placed on Special Forces units and on technological military solutions, such as drones.¹ The Army in particular is slated to shed 80,000 troops over a five year period, bringing the total number of brigade combat teams from 45 down to 33.² This is in accordance with the administration's decision to downgrade the country's readiness to conduct large scale counterinsurgency operations. The administration's 2012 defense strategy states:

In the aftermath of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States will emphasize non-military means and military-to-military cooperation to address instability and reduce the demand for significant U.S. force commitments to stability operations. U.S. forces will nevertheless be ready to conduct limited counterinsurgency and other stability operations if required, operating alongside coalition forces wherever possible. Accordingly, U.S. forces will retain and continue to refine the lessons learned, expertise, and specialized capabilities that have been developed over the past ten years of counterinsurgency and stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. *However, U.S. forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations.*³

This decision is likely the outcome of a determination that such operations are too costly and unlikely to succeed to be worth carrying out. Yet this could quite possibly

¹ Craig Whitlock and Greg Jaffe, "Obama Announces New, Leaner Military Approach," *Washington Post*, January 5, 2012, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-01-05/national/35439746_1_defense-budget-military-force-pentagon (accessed December 3, 2013).

² Erin Banco, "Army to Cut its Forces by 80,000 in Five Years," *New York Times*, June 25, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/26/us/army-to-cut-its-forces-by-80000-in-5-years.html?_r=0 (accessed December 3, 2013).

³ United States Department of Defense, "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," http://www.defense.gov/news/defense_strategic_guidance.pdf (accessed December 3, 2013).

turn out to be a very short-sighted decision. One of the primary lessons of Iraq (and also of Afghanistan) is that without sufficient levels of troops to protect the population, counterinsurgency operations are likely to fail. And it is not always up to the United States to choose whether or not it wants to become involved in such operations. During the 2000 election cycle George W. Bush repeatedly enunciated a disdain for nation-building efforts throughout his campaign and during debates. Yet his efforts to do just that in Afghanistan and Iraq turned out to be among the most consequential events of his entire two-term presidency. While it may be argued that Iraq was a chosen war that could easily have been avoided, it is not so clear that Afghanistan was a war of choice. In any event, it is rare that the U.S. *wants* to become involved in counterinsurgency operations, but the possibility of becoming so involved cannot be ignored. In fact, it seems far more likely that the U.S. will face such challenges in the near future than that it will face large-scale conventional warfare with another great power.

The Obama administration's decision is consistent with the views of such scholar-practitioners as Col. Gian Gentile who writes that "the idea that counterinsurgency works is wrong—and history supports this assertion."⁴ It has been the purpose of this dissertation to demonstrate that history does not in fact support the assertion that counterinsurgency doesn't work. Rather it shows that in Malaysia it did work and that in Vietnam and Iraq it wasn't tried until too late in day. The theoretical literature which argues that democracies are uniquely incapable of successfully conducting counterinsurgency has also been shown to be unpersuasive. This concluding chapter will

⁴ Col. Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York: The New Press, 2013, Kindle Electronic Edition), 2.

recapitulate the evidence mustered throughout this dissertation, demonstrating that democracies can in fact win counterinsurgencies if they utilize the appropriate strategy.

There are two main arguments in the theoretical literature against the ability of democracies to effectively counter insurgencies. The first is that democracies have limited will power, the second is that they cannot be brutal enough. Both of these have much to do with the fact that the international media brings these conflicts directly into people's homes. In the first case, this media inundation makes casualties highly salient and can erode public support for conflicts that are seen as having too high a cost in this regard. In the second case, media coverage restricts a democracy's ability to impose a sufficiently brutal strategy necessary to bring the insurgents to heel. Such a strategy results in a moral outcry when exposed by the media thereby undermining the regime's ability to execute it consistently.

The first of these problems is likely the most worrisome for democratic regimes. But it is not fatal. Democratic regimes have demonstrated the ability to stay with a fight for years. The British ultimately prevailed in Malaysia after a decade, the U.S. had substantial levels of combat troops in Vietnam for eight years, and U.S. troops fought in Iraq for a similar length of time. Aversion to casualties mounts over time, but most analyses (as discussed in chapter two) show no one-to-one relationship between casualties and public support. Other factors, such as the probability of success and the importance of the mission, are mediating variables. Casualties are just one factor in a cost-benefit analysis conducted by the public. RAND analyst Eric V. Larson argues that:

Majorities of the public have historically considered the potential and actual casualties in U.S. wars and military operations to be an important factor in their support, and there is nothing new in this. But the current attention to the public's unwillingness to tolerate casualties misses the larger context in which the issue

has become salient: The simplest explanation consistent with the data is that support for U.S. military operations and the willingness to tolerate casualties are based upon a sensible weighing of benefits and costs that is influenced heavily by consensus (or its absence) among political leaders.⁵

So, although casualty aversion is a serious issue for democratic regimes fighting insurgencies, it is but one factor among many. Its impact is blunted when the cause is considered good, when there is a strong likelihood of success, and when political leadership is in consensus. Still, Mueller's analysis of public opinion in Vietnam (and Korea) concluded that "support for the wars followed to a remarkable degree the same trend pattern and was a function of the logarithm of the number of American casualties."⁶ Popular opposition, especially in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, was certainly one reason that the U.S. began to waiver in its commitment to South Vietnam and withdraw troops from that country. In spite of declining public support for the war, however, combat troops were not fully disengaged until 1972. The war was a lengthy one, and probably long enough for victory—if the proper strategy had been carried out from the beginning.

This gets us to the second difficulty said to impede success for democracies attempting to withstand insurgencies, which is that they cannot impose a strategy of brutality. Posed most forcefully by Gil Merom, the premise of this argument is that democracies are held too accountable by their publics to engage in the sort of nasty, brutal combat that it is necessary to defeat insurgencies. Indiscriminate and brutal attacks, torture for the acquisition of intelligence, and other such tactics cannot long be

⁵ Eric V. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1996), xv.

⁶ John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973), 266.

carried out by a democratic regime constantly under scrutiny by the media and its informed citizenry. Merom does indeed provide evidence that a strategy of brutality can be effective when carried out by an autarkic regime that is unworried by public backlash. At the same time, democratic regimes that attempt to follow such a strategy, as did the French in Algeria, are likely to fail due to public outcry.

This does not demonstrate, however, that democracies can't win counterinsurgencies. It only demonstrates that they can't do so through the use of brutality. Nor should they. Moral outrage against brutal tactics are justified. Instead democracies must follow another strategy—a population centered one. That is the type of strategy outlined by luminaries such as David Galula and recently made into doctrine by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps under the guidance of Gen. Petraeus. A strategy that follows along those same guidelines was used as a rubric to analyze the conflicts explored as case studies in this dissertation. An outline of that strategy is as follows:

1. Direct Action against the Insurgent.
 - A. Secure the population from insurgent attacks.
 - B. Ensure sufficient troop strength to protect targeted populations and destroy or expel insurgent forces.
 - C. Emplace troops in population centers.
 - D. Produce intelligence to identify insurgents and differentiate them from the larger population.
 - E. Prevent insurgent groups from reforming following initial defeat.
 - F. Undermine or destroy insurgent political organizations.
 - G. Develop host nation military capability.
2. Indirect Action against the Insurgent
 - A. Build host-nation legitimacy by demonstrating political, economic, social and developmental competence.
 - B. Undermine insurgent grievances through effective political action.
 - C. Hold elections and develop functional and independent political institutions as soon as practical.
 - D. Develop close partnership between host and assisting nations.
3. Interaction with Population
 - A. Develop substantial and deep cultural awareness and understanding.
 - B. Address political, economic, developmental and social grievances of

- the population.
- C. Develop cooperation between the population and counterinsurgent forces in order to improve intelligence.
 - D. Avoid brutal tactics that will alienate the population.
 - E. Deny insurgent forces access to and support from the population.

In the first case study examined in this dissertation, that of the British in Malaysia, it was demonstrated that this strategy was followed quite closely. The British instituted and followed the Briggs Plan which focused first on providing security for the population, secondly on breaking up the communist organizations and institutions among the population, then on isolating the insurgents from the information and supplies that they needed from the population, and finally on destroying the insurgents as they were forced to directly confront government forces. The concept and proper implementation of the New Villages initiative helped achieve all of these goals.

Though success in Malaysia took many years and was never easy, it was achieved. The British destroyed the communist insurgency and left Malaysia a sovereign and independent country that selected its leadership through a democratic process. Malaysia was a victory for the British by any of the measures outlined by Mandel. The case of Malaysia not only demonstrates that democracies can win counterinsurgencies, it also shows how they should go about doing it.

Critics of counterinsurgency are not impressed by this example. It is an anomaly, they claim, in a time before extensive media coverage of conflicts was available. Instead, they would point to the failures of the United States—the most powerful nation in the world—in two of its counterinsurgency efforts, Vietnam and Iraq. Since these are often considered to be strong cases against the efficacy of counterinsurgency strategy it is important that they be confronted head-on, which I have done in case studies of each of

them. Those studies revealed is that neither casts serious doubt on the value of the type of counterinsurgency strategy described here and advocated by many of the best counterinsurgency experts over the past fifty years. Rather, they demonstrate the futility of relying upon conventional methods in an attempt to defeat unconventional threats. They also demonstrate just how effective counterinsurgency strategy can be once properly and consistently applied.

In the case of Vietnam, the United States started the conflict with a highly conventional strategy under the leadership of Gen. William Westmoreland. The strategy revolved around seeking out the enemy and destroying them—through conventional military means and large units. This strategy proved largely ineffective. Although it kept North Vietnamese conventional forces from overtaking the South, it did little to defeat the insurgency or to build up ARVN forces. As the U.S. effort in Vietnam floundered, and as the American public began to doubt the eventual outcome, support for the war dwindled and resources began to be withdrawn.

In 1968 Westmoreland was replaced by Gen. Creighton Abrams who was more flexible in his thinking and recognized the need for a counterinsurgency strategy, which he quickly began to implement. Despite the fact that he suffered constant reduction in forces and other resources, Abrams' new strategy saw almost immediate results. By the time U.S. forces were fully withdrawn, the insurgency was prostrate and ineffective and the ARVN had demonstrated the ability to repel North Vietnamese conventional aggression if it was supported financially and backed up by U.S. airpower. It took two years after U.S. withdrawal for North Vietnam to muster the forces necessary to finally overthrow the government of South Vietnam and unify the country under communist

control. This was not achieved by the insurgency, for it had been defeated by Abrams' strategy. The final invasion of 1975 would likely not have succeeded at all if the U.S. had continued to provide air power and financial support to ARVN.

Rather than proving that counterinsurgency strategy is ineffective, the case of Vietnam demonstrates that it is vital. The U.S. mission in Vietnam failed because it waited too long to institute a proper counterinsurgency strategy and stubbornly clung to the conventional strategy adopted by Gen. Westmoreland. By the time Abrams corrected the strategic direction of the war, U.S. public opinion had already grown sour and resources were being withdrawn. If the U.S. had started with a counterinsurgency strategy, however, it is likely—or at least plausible—that the success achieved by Gen. Abrams late in the war would have occurred earlier, thereby providing the time necessary to fully safeguard South Vietnam's independence. It is the tragedy of Vietnam that the correct strategy was adopted too late in the war to ultimately make a difference in the final outcome despite the successes that began to arise in short-order after its initiation.

The story in Iraq was largely the same, and therefore even more tragic since the example of Vietnam already existed and could have been learned from. Under the leadership of Gen. Ricardo Sanchez and then Gen. George Casey, a largely conventional strategy was applied to the situation in Iraq. Nearly all initial planning went into the invasion itself, with little heed being paid to its aftermath. This short-sightedness, and failure to take into account a broader understanding of what winning a war means, led to chaos in post-invasion Iraq. Looters were allowed to plunder with impunity, public services were breaking down, and sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shi'ites

metastasized into a low-level civil war by 2006. A successful invasion was being turned into an embarrassing defeat at the hands of insurgents and terrorists.

It took several years for the Bush administration to recognize that there was in fact an insurgency, that the current strategy was not working, and that a true counterinsurgency strategy needed to be implemented. By that time the country was on the verge of collapse into utter chaos. It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that Gen. David Petraeus was able to so successfully turn the situation around in only 18 months. Though the country was far from being violence-free, the levels of violence had dropped to 2004 levels, which was a major accomplishment. This situation is attributable to both Gen. Petraeus' introduction of a new population-centric counterinsurgency strategy and to his pursuit of alliances with key tribal leaders, as occurred in the Sunni Awakening.

The situation became settled enough that the Iraqi government was able to claim its own complete sovereignty and request the withdrawal of all U.S. troops by December 2011. Unfortunately, however, violence has continued since that time and the insurgency has never been completely defeated. Nevertheless, the present condition of the country would likely be much worse if the new counterinsurgency strategy had not been implemented in 2007. We can only wonder how much better things would be if it had been initiated in 2003.

Can democracies win counterinsurgencies? The answer is yes. An analysis of both the theoretical literature and the study of the important historical cases of Malaysia, Vietnam and Iraq make that clear. What is also clear, however, is that a proper population-centric strategy must be employed and well-resourced from the beginning. To

spend several years trying a conventional strategy before switching to a more appropriate counterinsurgency strategy will likely fail, as it did in Vietnam and Iraq.

Other important lessons are that enough troops must be present to secure the population from insurgent violence and to prevent widespread lawlessness. Cultural, historical and social knowledge of the country being operated in are essential. Over-reliance on firepower and heavy weaponry are often counterproductive. Intelligence, particularly human intelligence, is of paramount importance. This intelligence should not be directed solely towards order of battle and other conventional knowledge objectives but towards understanding the insurgent shadow government, supply structures, and leadership cadre. It is also imperative to have a strong partnership with a competent host government that is willing to redress the legitimate grievances of the population and institute needed reforms.

Not only can democracies win counterinsurgencies, it is at least arguable that they have certain advantages in doing so, given the type of strategy outlined here. There are at least four aspects of democracy that possibly give them an advantage in carrying out population-centric counterinsurgency: 1) democracies are usually wealthy, 2) they are often multicultural and tolerant of pluralism and diversity, 3) they possess a legitimate form of government and the ability to assist others in developing legitimate governing structures and institutions, and 4) democracies tolerate internal dissent and debate and are therefore capable of recognize suboptimal decisions and changing course.

Democratic states are more likely to be wealthy than are autocracies.⁷ This is important in regards to population-centric counterinsurgency in that it is likely to be expensive. Fielding the appropriate number of troops, assisting the host nation in providing services to the people, building up the host nation military capability, and general nation-building efforts are all expensive. We saw in Chapter Three, based on research by Lyall and Wilson, that wealth can be counterproductive in counterinsurgencies in that it allows for the overuse of mechanization in order to prevent casualties. This is not a necessary outcome, however. Democracies are capable of learning and the realization that mechanization is counterproductive has the potential to lead to a more optimal use of resources. Democracies have the financial wealth and resources to be successful counterinsurgents, but they need to utilize those resources wisely and in accordance with counterinsurgency theory.

Conducting counterinsurgencies in foreign lands requires cultural respect and adaptability. Without the ability to function in a foreign culture, the counterinsurgent force is unlikely to obtain the support of the people. Democratic societies are usually multicultural, pluralistic and tolerant. One of the core values of democracy is respect for differences and alternative modes of life. Such values have the potential to provide a significant advantage to democratic counterinsurgents. They will likely have an easier time adjusting to the host culture and should prove adaptable and open to cultural difference, especially with appropriate cultural training and the use of programs such as

⁷ Adam Przeworski, Michael E. Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

the Human Terrain System. A non-democratic society, on the other hand, may not have the same set of values leading to an appreciation of difference and pluralism. This may put such societies at a disadvantage when it comes to operating in a foreign culture.

The development and support of host nation legitimacy is a vital key to counterinsurgency success. It is often the area over which the assisting nation has least influence and may be one of the most intractable of problems facing them. As difficult as it may be, however, democratic regimes likely have an advantage in this area. Though there are varying forms of legitimacy, democratic governance is rapidly becoming the most widely accepted of those forms. It's also unlikely that a foreign counterinsurgency effort would not have democratization of the host nation as one of its goals (if that nation is not already democratic). Democracy is, therefore, the most likely path to the development and sustainment of host nation legitimacy. And who better to assist in the development of democracy than a democratic regime? In fact, it is quite counterintuitive to imagine a non-democratic regime assisting another nation in becoming democratic.

Democratic regimes are most likely to be able to assist a host nation in developing a democratic constitution or political framework (as the United States did in Afghanistan and Iraq) as well as functional and legitimate political institutions. The best example of this is the U.S. occupation of Japan in which a completely autarkic government, based on the rule of the emperor, was converted into one of the richest and most functional democracies on the planet in a matter of years. Although this type of transition represents the best case scenario, it is only a democratic regime that has any hope of bringing such transition about.

Finally, democracies tolerate internal dissent. Though seen by many as a unique handicap of democracies when fighting counterinsurgencies—because they are beholden to popular opinion and support—it can also be a great strength. In democracies failing strategies can be challenged. Though the United States started off with a flawed strategy in both Vietnam and Iraq, those deficiencies were eventually recognized and the course was corrected. That this could have happened in an autocratic regime is unclear. Such regimes are often insulated from criticism, even by those within the government itself. Protected from dissent, such regimes may continue with a flawed approach and be impervious to change. The rigidity that can come with autarkic decision-making may be a distinct disadvantage in population-centric counterinsurgency warfare.

The above speculations about the possible advantages that democracies may possess in conducting population-centric counterinsurgency are just that—speculations. Further research into these suggestions, if it were to empirically support them, would provide powerful additional evidence that democracies can win counterinsurgencies, and counter to the conventional wisdom, may even be better at it. Even if demonstrated to be false, however, the evidence examined in this dissertation has demonstrated that democracies are at least capable of victory. Determining that they have the potential of actually being superior at counterinsurgents would be icing on the cake.

In either case, insurgent warfare is not likely to go away. Because powerful democratic states such as the U.S. do not like engaging in counterinsurgency does not mean that they won't be faced with an insurgency and forced to do so. In fact, such low intensity conflicts are much more likely to endanger the national security of democratic states than is full-scale conventional warfare conducted by large mechanized land units

and naval vessels. This is especially the case in a world filled with failed states from Somalia to Afghanistan and the persistence of jihadist terrorist organizations around the world. Failing to prepare for such an eventuality will only make success less likely. The conclusion drawn by many from the U.S.'s experiences in Vietnam and Iraq (as well as Afghanistan) that counterinsurgency efforts are futile is not only incorrect, but dangerous. Countering a determined insurgency will always be hard. But democratic states can defeat them. Learning the correct lessons from history and instituting the right strategy based on those lessons is the way to do it.

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