Things Come Together: symbolic violence and guerrilla mobilisation

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ABSTRACT  Nascent insurgencies often face an opening mobilisation dilemma that can cripple their ability to grow into a mature threat to the state. The source of this dilemma lies in the fact that the great majority of people who are prepared to support an insurgency in principle are only willing to do so conditionally, depending not only on the costs and benefits of their alternatives but the probabilities they assign to each side’s success. At the outset of such conflicts, when the emerging group is very small, the probability that the insurgency will be successful is low and the probability that it will fail is high. The expected costs of participation are correspondingly high, and the expected benefits of supporting the opposition are low. Why would anyone join such an undertaking? We examine how armed opposition groups resolve this dilemma through the use of symbolic violence and the manipulation of violent images. If successful, they transform their generated images into facts to achieve a self-sustaining mobilisation programme.

It may be that the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong—but that is the way to bet. (Damon Runyon)

Insurgent organisations typically form around a core group of activists. Such groups think big, but begin small. They must eventually grow to win. The state, for its part, need only keep an emerging insurgency from growing to defeat it. Viewed from this perspective, the struggle between an insurgency and an incumbent regime can be thought of as a mobilisation contest with three possible outcomes. First, if the insurgency is able to maintain a positive rate of growth, over time it will eventually reach the point where it can either defeat or displace its opponent. Second, if its net rate of growth after attrition stabilises short of what is needed to win, but is still sufficient to allow it to stay in the game, the conflict can continue indefinitely. This will not change until the underlying parameters of the struggle change in a way that gives one side or the other a game-winning advantage, or changing political circumstances permit the players to achieve a negotiated ending. Finally, if

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the original charter group is unable to grow much beyond the size of its opening membership, it will not pose a significant political challenge. It may continue to be a political irritant, until defeated, without ever becoming big enough to pose a threat. When it comes to waging an internal war, as the saying goes, size matters.

While an insurgency must grow to win, the challenge it faces in carrying out a winning mobilisation programme varies widely over the course of the conflict. As an empirical rule, mobilisation is generally quite difficult during the early stages of the struggle, when the insurgency is small. It becomes much easier during the final period of the conflict when the correlation of forces between the two sides has been reversed, the insurgent group has seized the psychological initiative, and the state is approaching its breakpoint. The reason for this, which is easy to appreciate, is that most individuals who participate in such conflicts, on both sides, do so conditionally; they are rarely prepared to do so unconditionally. There will always be a small number of individuals who are willing to support their side under any circumstances. The great majority—though they may have a distinct preference for one side or the other—hedge their bets and are prepared in principle to support either player, as necessary, depending on each side’s relative prospects.

The underlying source of this dynamic is the fact that most people do not simply choose between one side or the other based on the benefits and costs they assign to their alternatives. They also do so in relation to the probability they assign to actually receiving the benefits and incurring the costs associated with these alternatives should they choose one course of action over another. This assessment, in turn, is strongly influenced by their beliefs about the relative strength of each side and the anticipated course and outcome of the conflict. By influencing popular expectations, and through this, the expected value of supporting one player against the other popular beliefs about the shifting balance of power has a significant and highly variable influence over the context in which both sides approach mobilisation. All things being equal, an image of relative strength makes the strong side relatively more attractive. Its mobilisation challenge, in this case, is smaller than it would be if it were ‘weak’. Similarly, an image of relative weakness makes the weak side less attractive. Its mobilisation challenge, in this case, is greater than it would be if it were ‘strong’.

The fact that the great majority of individuals who might be willing to support the opposition are prepared to do so only conditionally, based on their beliefs about the relative strength of the opposition, can pose a potentially crippling paradox for an incipient insurgency. If a budding opposition group is going to get to the point where it can pose a credible threat to the state and eventually go on to win, it must be able to mobilise significant popular support. Its ability to solicit such support is influenced by perceptions of its relative strength and the credibility people assign to its threats and promises. This, in turn, depends significantly on the size of its following. Herein lays the dilemma. A group’s ability to mobilise support in most environments is strongly influenced by its strength, but being strong
assumes that it has already mobilised a significant base of support. Why
would anyone join such an undertaking in the first place when the group is
weak, so weak in fact that the likelihood of an early and violent loss is all but
guaranteed? If no one is willing to join in the beginning, how do insurgencies
ever win in the end?

The short answer to this last question, of course, is that most do not. The
great majority of armed opposition groups die young, without ever resolving
the paradox of how to transform their opening position of weakness into a
winning position of strength. The purpose of this article is to examine how
insurgents overcome this paradox through the use of symbolic violence. If the
preferences and expectations of its target population influence the growth of
an insurgency, what role does violence play in shaping popular attitudes?
What influence can this be expected to have on an opposition group’s ability
to mobilise support? What influence will this have on the counter-mobilisation
efforts of the state? What factors influence the effectiveness of a mobilisation
campaign that is based, in part, on the targeted use of terrorism and other
forms of symbolic violence? What considerations influence an insurgency’s
targeting strategy and selection of targets? Are these factors constant, or can
they be expected to change during the course of the struggle? Our discussion
offers a way of evaluating these and related questions of interest.

The paradox of armed mobilisation

To evaluate this issue we must turn briefly to the fundamental question of
why individuals choose to support (or not support) opposition organisations.
We assume in our discussion that people are rational in the simple sense that,
given a list of alternatives, they will select the course of action they believe
will offer them the highest expected return. If the expected benefits of joining
or otherwise supporting the opposition seem to outweigh the expected costs,
and the payoff is higher than the net return of other alternatives, individuals
will sign on. If the expected costs of joining outweigh the expected benefits, or
another alternative appears to be more attractive, they will look for ways to
avoid co-operating. Should any of this change, people can be expected to
change their course of action, in turn. They will act and react in ways that
seem to offer them the best possible return.

None of this implies that the choices people make are not ‘embedded in
emotions, sentiments, social norms, conventions, or habits’. Nor does it
imply that a person’s ability to calculate the costs and benefits of his/her
alternatives, or even identify what his options are, is not often ‘based on
faulty information, distorted perceptions, and erroneous arithmetic’. In
every case (and in every way) the choices people make are subjective, based
on a highly personalised (and variable) utility function, socially conditioned
values, imperfect information, and a sometimes surprising inability to sort
through and evaluate the information they have available to them at the time.
The assumption of human rationality comes in ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ variants.
In the first instance people are assumed to act with an ordered and stable set
of preferences and with perfect information about their environment.
Accordingly, they are always assumed to be able to make accurate forecasts and optimal decisions. In the second case, which is the sense that we use it here, individuals are simply assumed to act in their self-interest according to their beliefs about the world, which are often at odds with reality. Their choices, in this case, are often sub-optimal, even if they appear to be the best course of action at the time.

Decisions of this type, though often imperfect, are still forward looking and consequential. The choices people make in such cases are based on their beliefs about the immediate and future consequences of current actions. Those operating with a high time discount will be concerned more with the immediate effects of today’s decisions. Those with a low time discount will place a greater weight on the future, focusing on the expected consequences of current choices down the road. In both instances, however, the decision to support (and not support) an opposition group, depends on the answers to four sets of questions. What alternatives are available? What are the expected effects of these alternatives? What value is placed on these expected alternatives? What decision rule should be applied to select the ‘best’ course of action given the alternatives and their consequences?² People’s ability to answer these questions may be limited by time, information, pre-existing biases, and other factors that will interfere with their ability to make an optimal choice. But, they will do the best they can, given the constraints they face, to select the course of action with the highest return.

In considering how such choices are actually made it is important that we distinguish between an individual’s pure and effective preferences. People can be said to act on pure preferences if their decisions are based only on their preferred outcomes, without regard to the probability that these outcomes will occur. They can be said to act on their effective preferences, by contrast, if their decisions are based on the expected utility of their alternatives, regardless of what their strict preferences might otherwise dictate. The net payoffs associated with the possible outcomes of these alternatives, in such cases, must be weighted by the probability that they will actually be realised. This requires not only evaluating the costs and benefits of one’s choices given an outcome, but assessing the probabilities of these alternative outcomes given one’s choice. This is a simple matter if the choice one makes will determine the event. It is a different problem altogether when an individual must make a decision which will have little or no influence over what actually occurs. What one chooses to do, in this case, will not influence the outcome, but the anticipated outcome will certainly influence what one chooses to do.

The distinction between the two perspectives is important in situations in which the payoff depends not only on what occurs but on the nature of one’s choice. This is one obvious difference between casting a ballot in the privacy of the voting booth and supporting (or refusing to support) an armed opposition group. The decision, in the first case, is a closed choice. The payoff one receives may depend on who is elected, but it does not depend on the candidate one chooses to vote for. This is not generally the case in an internal war. The decision to take sides (or not) in an insurgency is generally an open choice.
choice. This is certainly true in the eyes of the recipient, who will have a fairly good idea of whom s/he can count on for support. It will often be known (or at least suspected) by the other side as well, to the degree that it has been able to identify its opponent’s base of popular support, or that support for its own efforts was solicited and refused. The net payoff people can be expected to receive, in such cases, is not only tied to the outcome of the fight, but to which side they chose to back along the way. There will typically be a premium for having backed the winner and a penalty for those who have backed the loser.³

Popular expectations concerning which side is likely to win, in this respect, will have a key influence over each side’s level of popular support. Expectations, in turn, are shaped by the size of the opposition, which is used as a means of measuring its future prospects given the historical power of the state. At its inception and during the initial phase of the struggle, for example, the insurgents are operating from a position of distinct disadvantage. Their prospects for victory at this time are objectively quite poor and the expected net returns to membership are correspondingly low. Should this balance of advantage begin to change, the expected benefits of joining will improve. Other things being equal, the insurgency’s level of support, in this case, will increase (and that of the incumbent will decrease). More people can be expected to coalesce around the underground as the balance of advantage (and the likelihood of success) continues to shift against the state. As the regime disintegrates, the opposition will be swept into power on a wave of popular support. Where few people were willing to join in the beginning, many will do so in the end. Most ‘revolutionaries’ arrive at the revolution late.⁴

For most individuals the decision to support one side or the other in an internal war is not only influenced by one’s preferences, it is also influenced by the behaviour (or perceived behaviour) of other agents. These considerations can reinforce one another, which will be the case when one’s preferred outcome corresponds to the choices and corresponding actions of others, or they can offset one another, which is the case when what one prefers to see happen is different from what other people are doing. Deciding whether or not to support the opposition in the first case is easy. If one has a net preference for the insurgents and everyone else appears to be rallying to their side, the rational activist will support them in turn. Similarly, if one prefers the state and the opposition seems to be having difficulty mobilising support, the rational loyalist will continue to rally around the flag. It is when these two considerations offset one another that we will often see people make choices that are at odds with their preferences. This is true when one prefers the insurgents but does not support them because they are losing. It is also the case where one prefers the status quo but supports the opposition because it seems destined to win.

This dynamic is one example of a broad class of strategic problems in which an individual’s best course of action depends as much on the choices made by others as on the choices s/he makes for him or herself. Such considerations are important, as Biccheiri has put it, in situations in which it
is impossible to assign objective probabilities to different outcomes to which the subjective estimates of the participants will converge. The payoff associated with any particular choice in these cases continues to depend on the outcome of the game. The game’s outcome, however, depends on what others decide to do. One’s payoff, in this case, is tied to the behaviour of other participants. The actions taken by other agents help define one’s own decision environment, just as one’s own actions help define the decision environment of others. The interdependent nature of such decisions means that, while an individual’s best choice still depends on the expected costs and benefits of the alternatives, the probabilities that s/he assigns to these alternatives depend on his/her assumptions about how others will respond to the same set of choices.

This is precisely the situation that confronts individuals considering whether or not they should join or otherwise support an armed resistance group. For most people the right choice will depend on the context of the struggle. Who is in charge? Is the opposition winning or losing? Are these trends likely to continue or change over time? The answers to these questions will depend, to a significant degree, on the relative strength of the insurgency. As noted above, if the insurgency is large and appears to be gaining the upper hand, getting on board may seem to be a smart option. If it is small and appears to be unable to gain any political traction, joining will be much less attractive. The problem in this case, of course, is that it takes people to attract people. While an individual’s willingness to support the resistance will depend on its relative size and future prospects, its size and associated prospects will depend on the number of individuals who have already decided to join. How many people are willing to support the opposition, in other words, will depend to a significant degree on how many people (appear to) have already signed on.

The relationship between group strength, group prospects and an individual’s readiness to join leads to a central paradox of collective action. Support for the opposition, under these circumstances, will increase in direct response to an increase in popular expectations of its success. Its prospects for success, however, will increase in relation to its base of popular support. While this can work to a group’s advantage once they are up and running, it leads to the question of how such groups ever get started in the first place. Even if some percentage of the target population finds it advantageous to throw their support behind a group that is likely to succeed, there is little to gain for most people in supporting a cause that is likely to fail, and should it do so, fail violently. At the beginning of the game, the probability of failure is very high. Why, then, would anyone wish to join such an enterprise in the first place? If no one is willing to be first, no one can be second, in which case the group will never be able to grow beyond its opening, hard-core membership. Insurgencies face a dilemma: until they are able to establish an effective base of support they cannot go on to win, but until they convince people that they are winning, it is very hard to mobilise a winning base of support.
A simple model of conditional mobilisation

This mobilisation relationship can be modelled as a classic example of conditional response. It has been studied generally by Schelling, and more specifically, with regard to the problem of collective action, by Granovetter, Kuran, and Marwell and Oliver, among others. The mobilisable population, as we have suggested elsewhere, can be divided into three groups: core supporters of the state, core supporters of the insurgency, and a large middle group of individuals who are prepared to support one side or the other depending on the circumstances of the struggle. Each side’s ‘hard-core’ base of support is recruitable by that side alone. For the sake of simplicity, we will also assume that each side’s core supporters offer their allegiance unconditionally. That is to say, their choice is defined ideologically and is not tied to the behaviour of other members of the population or other criteria that bear on each side’s performance and prospects; by contrast, the majority of the population can be recruited by either side. While most people are likely to have an opening preference for one side or the other, which side they support will depend on the expected costs and benefits of their alternatives. This will be conditioned by their assumptions of others’ behaviour.

The decision on the part of most members of the population to either join the opposition or join the state, in this respect, depends on two sets of considerations. The first is the relative costs and benefits they assign to supporting the two sides, given their preferences. Second is the probability they assign to each side’s chances of success. In its simplest form, then, this decision is based on the following assessments, where the insurgency = r and the incumbent = s:

\[
\begin{align*}
    b_r, & \text{ present benefits of joining } r \\
    c_r, & \text{ present costs of joining } r \\
    b_{rr}, & \text{ benefits of joining } r \text{ if } r \text{ wins} \\
    c_{rr}, & \text{ costs of joining } r \text{ if } s \text{ wins} \\
    p_r, & \text{ probability that } r \text{ will win}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
    b_s, & \text{ present benefits of joining } s \\
    c_s, & \text{ present costs of joining } s \\
    b_{ss}, & \text{ benefits of joining } s \text{ if } s \text{ wins} \\
    c_{ss}, & \text{ costs of joining } s \text{ if } r \text{ wins} \\
    p_s, & \text{ probability that } s \text{ will win}
\end{align*}
\]

We assume that individuals can choose to either support the insurgency, support the incumbent, or support neither side. Those who side with the opposition receive a net present benefit of \( b_r - c_r \). The insurgency goes on to win with probability \( p_r \) and its supporters receive the downstream benefit \( b_{rr} \). It also loses with probability \( 1 - p_r \) and its supporters incur the future cost \( c_{rs} \). Thus, the expected value of supporting the opposition is given by the expression

\[
\text{EV}(r) = b_r - c_r + p_r(b_{rr}) - p_s(c_{rs}), \quad \text{where } c_{rs} \geq 0.00
\]

Similarly, those who choose to support the state receive an immediate net return of \( b_s - c_s \). The incumbent wins the fight with probability \( p_s = 1 - p_r \) and they receive the downstream benefit \( b_{ss} \). The state loses with probability \( p_r \).
and its supporters incur the cost $c_{sr}$. Thus the expected value of supporting the state is

$$\text{EV}(s) = b_s - c_s + p_s(b_{ss}) - p_r(c_{sr}), \quad \text{where } c_{sr} \geq 0$$

Considering these simple alternatives, the rational individual will decide to support the insurgents (and, if necessary, abandon the incumbent) when

$$\text{EV}(R) > \text{EV}(S)$$

or, when

$$b_r - c_r + p_r(b_{rr}) - p_s(c_{rs}) > b_s - c_s + p_s(b_{ss}) - p_r(c_{sr}).$$

The elements of this last expression are broken out and compared in Table 1. As we can see, the likelihood that a person will agree to support the insurgency will increase with an increase in the present net benefits of joining, an increase in the future benefits of joining, and a decrease in the future costs of joining. Or, of particular importance for our discussion here, the rise in support will flow directly from an increase in the probability that the insurgents will prevail and the state will be defeated. The latter will not only increase the expected benefits of supporting the opposition should they win, it will increase the expected benefits and decrease the risks of supporting the group over the course of the struggle.

The probability individuals assign to an opposition win, as we have said, is a rough function of the perceived size (strength) of the rebellion in relation to the strength of the state. Their willingness to join the rebellion is conditioned accordingly. For any given set of preferences, then, our recruitable population can be distributed according to the minimum number of people that must already have chosen to join the rebels before each individual in the population decides it is in their interest to participate. Every ‘conditional’ member of society, in this sense, has a response number. These response numbers can be aggregated in a bar chart that illustrates the responsiveness of the population as a function of group size. The vertical axis of the bar chart, in this case, measures the total number of people who are willing to support the insurgency, $x_w$, in relation to the number of people who (are believed to) have already joined, $x_n$, for a given perceived size (strength) of the state, $y_0$. If we idealise this relationship, we have a continuous function

| Table 1. Comparing the expected value of supporting the insurgency and the incumbent |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| **Insurgency** | **Incumbent** |
| Present net benefit of joining       | $b_r - c_r+$     | $b_s - c_s+$     |
| Expected future benefit of joining   | $p_r(b_{rr})-$   | $p_s(b_{ss})-$   |
| Expected future cost of joining      | $p_s(c_{rs})$    | $p_r(c_{sr})$    |

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x_w = f(x_p), for 0 ≤ x_p ≤ 1 where f(x_p) consists of that fraction of the population that is prepared to join the insurgency based on their belief that x_p of the population has already done so. It is reasonable to assume that f(x_p) is a monotonic non-decreasing function of x_p.

Our resulting cumulative function f(x_p) will be represented by an S-shaped curve, as shown in Figure 1. As we can see, there is a small subset of the population P, represented by k_x*, which is prepared to join the opposition regardless of group strength. This represents the insurgents’ core base of support. It serves as the initial nucleus for the creation of a larger, follow-on organisation. The incumbent, as we have said, enjoys a similar core base of support represented by P – k_x = k_y*, where k_x measures the limit of the insurgent’s mobilisation potential. For everyone else (k_x – k_x*), the decision to support the opposition will depend on their beliefs about the size of x. As we can see in our example, the insurgent’s mobilisation curve starts out slowly from x_p = 0 to roughly x_p = 0.1, where it begins to curve upward at an increasing rate. As x appears to grow, the number of people who are willing to support the opposition will begin to grow at an increasing rate. At roughly x_p = 0.45, the curve shows an inflection point. At this point it begins to bend downward. The numbers of people who are willing to support the opposition during this phase in the mobilisation process are still increasing as a function of x_p, but at a decreasing rate. At about x_p = 0.9 the slope of the group’s mobilisation curve approaches zero. At this point the number of people willing to join the opposition equals k_x or P – k_y* and the group has reached its zenith.

The changing slope of the group’s reaction curve reflects the changing conditionality of recruitment over the course of the mobilisation process. A group’s mobilisation curve, in this respect, represents the responsiveness of potential supporters. The responsiveness of the group’s potential base of

![Figure 1. Hypothetical mobilisation curve.](image-url)
support can be measured at any point by the difference between the number of people who are willing to join the group and the number that must appear to have joined to maintain that same level of membership. All things being equal, the less sensitive people are to the size and prospects of the opposition, the more rapidly mobilisation will proceed. What is of particular importance, however, is whether or not this measure is greater or less than 1. Where the degree of conditionality is greater than 1, any perceived increase in group size will result in a greater than equal increase in the number of people who are willing to support the group in turn. By contrast, in cases where the conditionality of recruitment is less than 1, a perceived increase in the size of the group will result in a less than equal increase in potential members.

To explore the significance of this measure we can turn to Figure 2. At those points along the group’s reaction curve \( f(x_p) = x_w \), we can see that the mobilisation process is in equilibrium: the number of people who are willing to support the insurgency at these points is equal to the perceived strength of the insurgency defined by \( x_p \). In our example there are three such equilibria, which correspond to the points at which \( f(x_p) \) intersects the reference line \( x_w = x_p \). If we pause to consider the mobilisation dynamics that underlie each of these equilibria we can see that the growth problem an opposition group faces along its mobilisation path is quite different. During the later period of the mobilisation process, between \( x_c \) and \( x_2 \), the group’s reaction curve is upwardly unstable. Any increase in \( x_p \) will generate a self-reinforcing increase in \( x_w \). Beyond \( x_c \), in other words, the group’s ability to expand its base of support will be self-sustaining. The opposite is true, as we can see, during the initial period of the mobilisation process. The mobilisation effort between \( x_1 \) and \( x_c \) is downwardly unstable. At any point along this portion of the curve the group will tend to collapse back to \( x_1 \). Where growth, in the end, is self-generating, in the beginning it is unsustainable.

![Figure 2. Stable and unstable equilibria.](image-url)
The character of a group’s mobilisation challenge, then, can be quite different, depending on the shape and position of its response curve. This is illustrated in Figure 3, where we show three alternative response curves, each of which represents a different mobilisation environment. Curve A represents an environment of high ‘revolutionary readiness’. A significant percentage of the population, in this case, is spring loaded to revolt. While people’s willingness to declare themselves for the opposition still depends on the behaviour of others, every point along the response curve is greater than 1. Achieving a high steady state in this environment will not be difficult. Any initial effort to jump start a rebellion will prove to be self-sustaining from its inception to the point at which a stable equilibrium is approached at about \( f(x_{p}) = 0.7 \). This can be contrasted with the case represented by Curve C, in which every point along the curve is less than 1. The group, in this instance, faces a paradox over the entire course of its response curve. While a significant percentage of the population is prepared to support the opposition in principle, its would-be supporters are waiting for others to make the first move. Because others view the problem in a similar manner, no first move is made and the group is never able to get off the ground. The state wins by default.

The typical insurgent mobilisation environment is shown in Curve B, which corresponds to the response curve shown in Figure 2. The dynamics associated with this environment illustrate the mobilisation dilemma that opposition groups face during the opening period of the struggle. If the insurgents can manage to reach and surpass \( x_{c} \), they can be confident of continuing to expand to \( x_{2} \). The group’s ability to expand to \( x_{2} \), in this case, is aided by a bandwagon effect that is achieved once it reaches a point of critical mass. We refer to the threshold at \( x_{c} \) as the insurrection point. The problem the group faces is getting to this point in the first place. While it is easy to see

![Figure 3: Alternative mobilisation environments.](image)

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how mobilisation will reach $x_1$ and take off between $x_c$ and $x_2$, it is not apparent how the group will be able to grow from $x_1$ to $x_c$. Regardless of how many people the opposition will be able to attract short of its insurrection point, it appears to be doomed to fall back to the stable equilibrium at $x_1$. This problem captures the central paradox of collective action. Even people who might otherwise be sympathetic to the resistance will be reluctant to join if a sufficient number of others have not already done so. In the absence of an early willingness to join, this 'sufficient' number can never be generated and the opposition is unlikely to ever become strong enough to pose a viable threat.

To summarise, a population’s willingness to support an armed opposition group is typically conditioned by the participation of others. Where this is the case, insurgents face an opening mobilisation challenge that must be overcome before they can pose a significant threat to the standing government. If a group is able to resolve this dilemma, it can grow to the point where its subsequent ability to grow is self-reinforcing. This can continue until the group reaches a high-level plateau at $k_x$, which defines its hypothetical limit. In our simple model the only subsets of the population that will still be unwilling to play ball at this point are core supporters of the old regime. If the opposition is still not strong enough to win, (ie if it is unable to push the incumbent below its breakpoint) it will be in a position to continue the game indefinitely. It is likely to continue to pose a significant threat to the state until it is either pushed back below its point of critical mass or it experiences a fundamental change in the parameters that underlie its mobilisation function.

**Violence and conditional mobilisation**

The question, then, is how do insurgents overcome their opening paradox? According to much of the literature on collective action, rebel groups attempt to resolve this dilemma by offering selective incentives (side payments) to those they wish to recruit until the net payoff of supporting the resistance is greater than the net payoffs associated with their alternatives. Those who are not wedded to the old regime, in this argument, are essentially bought off by the insurgents with a package of (individual and individualised) incentives to solicit their co-operation. While this explanation is an important one, it is able to tell us only part of the story. This is particularly true at the beginning of the game, where the same material weaknesses that limit a group’s ability to mobilise (even sympathetic) supporters during the early phase of the struggle also limit its ability to offer meaningful side payments. Second, and perhaps more importantly, an insurgent group’s ability to offer effective incentives is itself conditioned by popular expectations that the opposition will make good on its promises (and threats), in contrast to those made by the other side. This, again, is limited by the opening weakness of the opposition, which must demonstrate its credibility before it can make a credible case. This brings us back to our original mobilisation dilemma, which remains unresolved.
To complete the picture of how insurgents are able to resolve this paradox, we must not only consider a group’s ability to influence the costs and benefits of participation (and non-participation), but the ways in which these costs and benefits are influenced by agent expectations. Popular expectations, as we have said, are themselves conditioned by the expectations and subsequent behavior of others. What this means as a practical matter is that getting people on board will often require shaping (or reshaping) popular beliefs about what other people are doing. What is important in this case is not what is true, but what people believe to be true. Opposition groups, in this respect, are in a position to manipulate popular beliefs about their size and future prospects in an effort to increase the expected benefits of participation. Should people come to believe that an ever larger percentage of the population is losing confidence in the incumbent and is shifting its support to the opposition, an ever larger percentage will be willing to support them in turn. This can result in a situation in which popular beliefs are eventually self-confirming.\(^{15}\) If the guerrilla organisation’s resulting growth in support is great enough to exceed its point of critical mass, its mobilisation effort will experience a bandwagon effect that can push it up to a new high-level, sustainable equilibrium.

Insurgent groups attempt to overcome this opening mobilisation challenge through the manipulation of *violent images*. Specifically, we can identify three important effects that symbolic violence can have on the mobilisation process.

**Agitation effect**

Violence, in this case, is used as an instrument of armed propaganda. The objective is to advertise the existence of an emerging opposition, raise popular consciousness and define the terms of the struggle. As Thomas Thornton has suggested, incumbents typically enter an insurgency in a natural state of political ‘inertia’, even in the absence of significant popular support. The insurgents, for their part, begin the game as outsiders, an alien political force which ‘the organism of society will be predisposed to cast out’.\(^{16}\) Before the opposition can even begin the process of building a base of popular support it must first be able to disrupt the system’s inertial stability.\(^{17}\) ‘In order to do this, the insurgents must break the tie that binds the mass to the incumbents’ by removing ‘the structural supports that give [the system] its strength.’\(^{18}\) These actions, as Thornton goes on to explain, will gradually sever the socio-psychological bonds that tie conditional elements of the population to the state and force them to choose between a disintegrating status quo and an emerging opposition. This cannot be achieved with words; it can only be achieved with violence. In the words of a 19th century anarchist refrain:

The slave hath no other weapon

But the dagger, or dynamite

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15 THINGS COME TOGETHER

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Downloaded by [NPS Dudley Knox Library] at 16:23 12 July 2016
Is justified in using both
To snap the chain that binds him tight.

The struggle itself, under these circumstances, is an instrument of agitation. The objective ‘is to raise the level of revolutionary anticipation, and then of popular participation [to such a degree] that the revolution becomes general throughout the country’. This view was echoed by Menachem Begin in his reflections on his years as the leader of the Zionist underground organisation, Irgun Zvail Leumi. ‘The very existence of the underground’, Begin argued, must ‘undermine the prestige of [the state] that lives by the legend of its omnipotence. Every attack that it fails to prevent is a blow at its standing. Even if the attack does not succeed, it makes a dent in that prestige, and that dent widens into a crack which is extended with every succeeding attack.’ The Irgun was never able to command attention, Begin suggested, until it showed that it was able to act: ‘We were loved or hated’, he wrote, ‘but no longer jeered at’. Any insurgency, he concluded, ‘that passes beyond the stage of inevitable initial ridicule has gone halfway—perhaps the more difficult half of the way—to its goal.’

**Provocation effect**

Violence is also used to provoke the state into engaging in excessive counter-measures in an effort to improve the relative image of the insurgency. The state, as noted elsewhere, begins the game with a force advantage but an information disadvantage. It is generally able to hit what it sees, but it has a limited ability to see what it wishes to hit. The insurgents, by contrast, enter the game with an information advantage and a force disadvantage. They are generally able to see what they wish to hit, but have a limited ability to hit what they see. This asymmetry can be exploited by provoking the state into striking out at targets it cannot see, alienating the population—who become ‘victims-by-substitution’—and pushing people into the arms of the insurgents. ‘Because it is much easier to identify the movement’s sympathizers than its participants, the unfortunate tendency is to apply repression indiscriminately…This not only creates moral outrage, [it] destroys the incentive not to join the battle among the opponent’s weakly committed adherents.’ The utility of such attacks ‘derives not from [their own] popularity, but from the unpopularity of the ensuing repression’.

Much of the mobilisation potential of an insurgent group, in this respect, will result indirectly from its violent interaction with the state. This relationship has been elevated to a point of necessity by many historical commentators such as Carlos Marighella, author of the *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*, who argued that lack of discrimination on the part of a regime is a critical precondition for establishing a mass base. Growing the opposition, in this view, requires manoeuvring the incumbent regime into the position where it ‘has no alternative except to intensify repression’. The guerrillas, for their part, must have positioned themselves to pick up the
pieces. Similar views were advanced by Che Guevara who, despite his many failures as a guerrilla theorist, clearly understood the potential advantages of government repression for promoting a group’s efforts to establish a broad popular base. The state, he wrote, in an effort to preserve its appearance of legitimacy, would always prefer to govern without the use of force. An emerging insurgency must do everything it can to provoke the incumbent regime into engaging in acts of indiscriminate violence, ‘thereby unmasking its true nature’. Winning, he suggested, depends on forcing the state into a Hobson’s choice—to either ‘retreat or unleash the struggle’. Regardless of what it chooses to do, in this case its resulting decision will lay the groundwork for a wider popular war.28

**Demonstration effect**

Finally, and most importantly, violence is used for the purpose of generating an exaggerated impression of insurgent strength and regime weakness. At the beginning of the game the insurgents are organised clandestinely. While the populace will have a pre-existing impression of the size of the incumbent, the relative balance of power between the opposition and the state \((x/y)\) is not known. In the absence of this information, would-be supporters of the underground estimate \(x\) (and by association \(x/y\)) by observing what the opposition is able to achieve. The most visible of these activities are insurgent attacks, which are used as an easily observable measure of group strength. As the level and significance of opposition-directed actions grows, popular estimates of the relative size, capability and political prospects of the resistance grow in turn. This can be expected to result in an increase in the number of people who are willing to support the opposition and a decline in support for the regime. Popular support, in this case, is not based on the facts but on a generated illusion of insurgent capabilities.

This relationship is one of the enduring insights advanced by Regis Debray, who argued that, if the guerrillas are to gain strength, they must appear to be strong. At the outset of the struggle ‘the physical force of the police and the army is considered [to be] unassailable’. This condition, Debray suggested, which must be overcome before an insurgency is able to get off the ground, can only be challenged ‘by showing that a soldier and a policeman are no more bullet-proof than anyone else’. The guerrilla must ‘use his strength in order to show it, since he has little to show but his determination and his ability to make use of his limited resources. He must make a show of strength and at the same time demonstrate that the enemy’s strength is first and foremost his bluster’. ‘In order to destroy the idea of unassailability’, he concluded, ‘there is nothing better than combat.’ 29 The objective, in this case, is not to ensure that ‘the populace prefers the authorities or the revolutionaries; what is important is perceived power: what the people believe about the relative power of the two sides and about what will happen to them if they support one side or the other’.30

How can these effects be interpreted in terms of our model of conditional mobilisation? The *agitation effect*, for its part, plays an important role in
‘fixing’ and ‘stiffening’ popular attitudes toward the opposition and the state. In doing so, it will help to influence the shape and position of the guerrillas’ mobilisation function, \( f(x_p) \), which is based, at least in part, on the underlying distribution of popular preferences between the two sides. Action, in short, forces people to choose sides. As Kropotkin observed, ‘Indifference [once the fight has been joined] is impossible. Those who [may never before have asked] themselves what “those lunatics” were after, are forced to take notice of them, to discuss their ideas, and to take a stand for or against. By actions which compel general attention, the new idea seeps into people’s minds and wins converts.’ One such act, Kropotkin concluded, can make more propaganda in a few days ‘than thousands of pamphlets’. Above all, he argued, ‘it awakens the spirit of revolt [and] breeds daring... The people observe that the monster is not so terrible as they thought... hope is born in their hearts’.

The shape and position of the opposition’s mobilisation curve can also be influenced, indirectly, by the *provocation effect* of insurgent actions. Any actions that provoke the state into responding indiscriminately against uncommitted elements of the population will result in a shift in popular attitudes towards the other side. The significance of this shift will depend on the magnitude of the government’s response, its lack (or otherwise) of discrimination, the percentage and distribution of the population that is either directly or indirectly affected by government counter-violence, and the elasticity of popular preferences to incumbent attacks. To the degree that the political preferences of the population change in favour of the opposition, it will result in a leftward shift in the rebel’s mobilisation function. The nature and consequences of this move are illustrated in Figure 4 in a shift from Curve A to Curve B. The most important effect of this shift is to raise the...

![Figure 4. Shifting mobilisation curve.](image-url)
insurgents’ low-level equilibrium point from \( x_1 \) to \( x_1' \) and lower their insurrection point from \( x_c \) to \( x_c' \). The combined effect of these changes is to reduce the opposition’s mobilisation dilemma by reducing the group’s opening ‘mobilisation gap’ between \( x_1 \) and \( x_c \).

The same leftward shift in the mobilisation curve can be generated through the demonstration effect by reducing popular perceptions of the strength of the state, \( y_p \). Just as a growing preference for the opposition, as noted in the paragraph above, results in an increasing incentive to support the rebellion for a given opportunity to do so, any reduction in the perceived strength of the state increases the opportunity to rebel for a given distribution of preferences. These effects can work to support one another in cases where the insurgency’s symbolic attacks not only make the state look vulnerable to guerrilla actions but also incite it to lash out indiscriminately against the population. They can offset each other in cases where regime counter-actions further alienate the population but also reinvigorate popular estimates of its ability and willingness to carry the war to the insurgency. What is ultimately important, once again, is the net effect not only of the initial actions of the insurgency, but of the resulting counter-actions of the state. If the combined net effect of each side’s actions shifts the insurgents’ reaction curve to the right, it will increase \( x_c \) and retard mobilisation. If the net effect shifts the curve to the left, \( x_c \) will decrease and the insurgency’s mobilisation environment will improve.

Finally, the demonstration effect can help resolve a group’s mobilisation dilemma by altering popular perceptions of insurgent strength, \( x_p \). Where a reduction in popular perceptions of state strength, \( y_p \), moves the group’s insurrection point to the left, making \( x_c \) easier to achieve, any increase in the perceived strength of the insurgency has the effect of moving \( x_p \) to the right, pushing the organisation closer to the point of critical mass. A well designed campaign of symbolic attacks, of course, can achieve both of these effects at the same time. Opposition groups attempt to generate images of group strength and regime weakness through the targeted use of high-profile violence. Oberschall has referred to actions of this type as ‘identification moves’.\(^{32}\) In contrast to his discussion, however, where the purpose of the action is to demonstrate how powerful the opposition has really become to an unbelieving regime, the insurgents’ objective in the early days of the struggle is to create an illusion of strength for its unbelieving constituents. The strength of this illusion will be a function of the illusion of strength the insurgents are able to create in the minds of their would-be followers.

**Resolving the mobilisation paradox**

The manipulation of violent images, then, can create an impression of group strength and regime weakness that is quite different from the actual correlation of forces between the insurgents and the state at the beginning of the game. This, in turn, can be used to induce individuals to act in a manner that will turn their impressions into facts, changing the real balance of power over time. The use of violence, in this respect, is not an expression
of insurgent strength, but an instrument for elevating the group to a position of strength in the first place. Carrying out such a programme, of course, would be an easy matter if the group were as good as it wished to appear. The problem it faces is to put together a targeting campaign, given its limited capacity to act, that makes it appear to be better than it is. If the opposition is going to offset its opening limitations and create the illusion that it is a going concern, its actions must produce a combined perceptual effect that is greater than the sum of the physical consequences of its operations.\footnote{33}

The ideal action, in this respect, is one that not only gains local attention, but one that is picked up and retransmitted by mass media. Media attention amplifies the symbolic content of insurgent attacks and expands the insurgents’ pool of observers. In the past decade traditional media have been augmented by the proliferation of internet-based and other insurgent-controlled outlets that have revolutionised the way in which insurgent imagery is packaged and conveyed to target audiences. The internet, in particular, has emerged as a natural medium for underground groups to advertise their actions (and the crimes of their opponents). It is the rare insurgency today without at least one website. Many groups, such as al-Qaida, Hezbollah, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), to name a few, have launched multiple sites in different languages, each tailored to a specific viewing audience. In contrast to traditional media, the web offers opposition groups easy access, little or no regulation, an unlimited audience, a multimedia environment, and a near real-time reporting cycle.\footnote{34} As we have seen in Iraq and Lebanon, attacks carried out in the morning can be viewed on a group’s website in the afternoon, complete with video, audio and an accompanying message. The internet has made symbolic violence a more powerful instrument of insurgent mobilisation than at any time in the past.

The media value of insurgent operations is influenced by the level, the direction and the rate of change in the pattern of violence. It is also shaped, significantly, by the symbolic quality of the insurgents’ target set. Opposition violence, in this respect, is not an undifferentiated variable. Different types of actions, against different types of targets, carried out under different circumstances, at different times will not only elicit different impressions on the part of those who witness them, they will also influence the level of exposure these attacks can expect to receive in the first place. These factors, in turn, will influence the degree to which insurgent actions will contribute to their follow-on recruiting effort. With this division in mind, the first decision the opposition must make is to determine what percentage of their limited resources they are going to invest in ‘organising’ and what percentage they are going to invest in ‘operating’. Their second decision is to design a schedule of attacks, given this investment strategy. As a general rule rational insurgents will attempt to design a targeting schedule that offers them the highest possible perceptual return, given their material and political constraints.

In the end, of course, organising and operating are reciprocally related. While a programme of directed violence, as we have argued, is often a
prerequisite for growth, a group’s organising investment will help determine the facility and the speed with which it is able to build on its attacks to expand its organisational base. Its rate of growth, in turn, will influence the scope of its operations in the next time period. How insurgents manage this relationship and decide to divide their operational and organisational efforts is an interesting issue in its own right. For our purposes it is sufficient to point out that translating a schedule of violence into organisational growth presupposes the existence of an institutional mechanism for identifying, enlisting, organising and employing the efforts of new supporters. At the outset of the struggle these organising functions must be performed by the same revolutionary nucleus that is responsible for preparing and executing the group’s targeting campaign.\(^{35}\) Even as the insurgency begins to grow, the disparity between the opposition’s ambitious ends and limited means will often result in a continuing tension between these two lines of effort. The early success or failure of the insurgency will depend on its ability to carry out these parallel activities as efficiently as possible and in a co-ordinated manner to resolve its opening dilemma.

Complicating these considerations is the natural trade-off that exists between the security and efficiency of underground organisations. Insurgencies, like other kinds of illegal organisations, must be able to maintain some minimal level of security to stay in the game, much less to grow the force and go on to win.\(^{36}\) This, in turn, requires maintaining some minimal level of organisational invisibility in the face of regime efforts to uncover their leadership, infrastructure, and routines. What these minima are, at any point in time, will depend on group size, group structure, the group’s breakpoint and the nature of the prevailing security environment. This trade-off imposes operational and organisational constraints. The first of these will influence the scale, number, character and targets of insurgent attacks. The second will limit the openness and, hence, the efficiency with which the group is able to exploit the effects of these attacks and expand its active base of support. Should the group’s security environment become more restrictive over time, this tension will become more acute. Should this environment become more permissive, the group’s security–efficiency trade-off will become less restrictive.

The operational challenge facing insurgent decision makers, then, is to design a targeting plan that will allow them to push beyond their point of critical mass in view of: a) their opening resource constraints; b) the facility with which they are able to mobilise new cadre; and c) the restrictions imposed by their security context. By way of analogy this problem is similar conceptually to the problem of determining the best regimen for taking a prescription drug. In most cases there is a minimum level of concentration below which the drug is ineffective, and a maximum level of concentration above which it is unsafe. Typically one must also maintain a minimum level of concentration in the bloodstream for a specified period of time for the drug to be effective. One complicating consideration is the fact that the level of concentration from any single dose of the drug is naturally reduced over time as the drug is eliminated from the body and one’s tolerance level
gradually increases. With these factors in mind, the questions that must be asked are: how much of the drug should be administered in each dose, how frequently should it be taken, and for how long should it be prescribed to achieve the desired result?

These are the same questions that are asked by an insurgency considering how to use violence to promote organisational growth. To extend the analogy, the critical ‘concentration level’ that must be achieved by the opposition, in this case, is defined by its point of critical mass, $x_c$. The operational problem it faces is to design a feasible targeting schedule that will push $x_p$ beyond $x_c$ and hold it there long enough to exploit its bandwagon effects. In doing so, the opposition must account for the fact that the perceptual impact of any actions it will carry out will dissipate with time and that popular resistance to such images will gradually increase as violence becomes more routine. The insurgency must also be concerned with the question of risk in an environment where a sufficiently large breach in security could kill the patient. In principle, the insurgents are highly likely to have alternative targeting strategies available to them for achieving their objectives. Their decision problem will be to determine what the best of these alternatives is given the various constraints they must operate under during this phase of the struggle.

The nature of this problem is shown in Figures 5 and 6, which illustrate two different paths for achieving a position of critical mass. We assume in both cases that the group’s insurrection point, $x_c$, is constant and situated well below its minimum security threshold at $x_s$. The insurgents’ security environment, in this case, is a permissive one in relation to their objective. In Figure 5 we see them carry out a strong opening campaign to boost $x_p$ above $x_c$ through a single and significant set of demonstration attacks. In the

![Figure 5. Achieving critical mass.](image)
absence of any immediate follow-on attacks, $x_p$ will gradually decline before it is boosted up again in a subsequent set of actions. This pattern of follow-on actions continues until the group is able to exploit the shift in popular perceptions and reach the point where the size of $x = x_p = x_c$. In Figure 6 we see the same point reached by a different targeting schedule. Rather than lead with a large opening attack, the insurgents carry out a larger number of smaller (and less risky) actions that gradually push $x_p$ across the same threshold point over time. Assuming that the group is able to successfully exploit the perceptual results of these armed actions along the way, $x = x_p = x_c$ is reached by a different route.

A similar situation is depicted in Figure 7, but with a declining insurrection point. As discussed earlier, because the insurgents’ mobilisation curve is ultimately tied to popular preferences as well as to perceptions of state strength, $y_p$, the shape and position of their mobilisation function will change with a change in either of these variables. Any change in the shape of the insurgents’ reaction curve, of course, also influences the conditionality of mobilisation more generally, changing the rate at which new individuals will be willing to support the opposition given the number of people they believe have already signed on. A favourable shift in the insurgents’ reaction curve, in this respect, will not only push down its insurrection point, $x_c$, it will also tend to speed up the rate at which people will be willing to support the insurgency in the wake of a perceived increase in group strength, $x_p$. The opposite, again, will be true in the event the shift in the curve is favorable to the state.

Finally, Figure 8 depicts a case where, at the outset of the game, the insurgents confront a situation in which $x_c$ is situated well above $x_s$. The opposition’s security environment in this instance is a highly restrictive one. Even assuming it has the resources to do so, the group will be unable to push
\( x_p \) beyond \( x_c \) without crossing well above its minimum security threshold and jeopardising its existence. The longer it must operate above this minimum to successfully exploit the effects of its actions, furthermore, the more likely it will be that the group will be put out of business before it achieves critical mass. The guerrillas’ targeting campaign, under these circumstances, must first be directed against the state’s instruments of control in an effort to expand its room for manoeuvre. While such attacks have a demonstration value of their own, this will typically require the insurgents to go after a
different (and often better ‘hardened’) set of targets (eg police, military and intelligence targets) than those that would otherwise be selected. If they are successful, as illustrated in Figure 8, these efforts will provide them with the operational space they require to eventually achieve critical mass. If they are unsuccessful, they will remain below $x_c$. While this may be sufficient for the group to survive in some form, it will be insufficient to win.\textsuperscript{37}

**Conclusion: things come together**

Any given population, we have argued, can be divided into conditional and unconditional political participants. Unconditional participants, who will typically comprise a small percentage of the population, constitute the ‘hard core’ supporters of each side. Conditional participants, by contrast, are willing to support one side or the other depending upon their expectations concerning the course and outcome of the struggle. These expectations, in turn, are conditioned by their beliefs about what the rest of the population is doing. If popular sentiments appear to be tilting towards the opposition, conditional participants will tilt in turn. If the opposition appears to be unable to gain a significant popular base, they will tend to withhold their own support as well. A population’s pure preferences, in these circumstances, are an unreliable guide to political behaviour. Conditional ‘loyalists’ cannot be depended on to support the state should its perceived base of support continue to decline over time. Similarly, conditional ‘activists’ cannot be depended on to support the insurgents in the face of a continuing decline in insurgent support. The ultimate victor in this contest, whichever side it is, will win with a weak popular coalition.

Drawing on Schelling’s general analysis of conditional response, we show how the dynamics of conditional support can place opposition groups in an unusually difficult position during the opening period of an insurgency. If the majority of the population, regardless of its pre-existing political sympathies, is reluctant to support the opposition until it is a going concern, it can prove difficult to get anyone to sign on in the first place. While an incipient insurgent group faced with this situation can depend on the continued support of its hard-core base, it will have difficulty generating the level of conditional support it needs from the rest of the population to become a significant political force. If the opposition is operating in a typical mobilisation environment, there is some critical size beyond which its level of popular support will begin to grow of its own accord. Once this crossover point is reached, the group will enjoy the bandwagon effects associated with achieving a position of critical mass. The chief operational problem it faces is getting to this point in the first place. Any attempt to expand the ranks of the opposition that does not achieve this critical value will tend to collapse back to its initial low equilibrium point. This point is unlikely to be much larger than the group’s core base of support.

Armed opposition groups attempt to overcome this dilemma through the manipulation of violent images. Directed violence is used, in the first place, as an instrument of agitation or ‘propaganda by the deed’, designed to define
the terms of the struggle and force people to take a political position. It is also used to provoke the state into the excessive and misdirected use of counter-violence in the hope that this will alienate otherwise neutral elements of the population and reshape their preferences in favour of the opposition. While such actions, as we have argued, may well reduce the insurgents’ mobilisation dilemma, they are unlikely to eliminate it altogether. Regardless of what people think of the standing regime, most will still be unwilling to back the opposition unless they believe it has a reasonable chance of success. This, in turn, will depend on their subjective perceptions of its size and level of support. To overcome this barrier, violence is used to signal group strength. The initial challenge in this case is not to communicate how strong the group has become in fact, but to create the impression that it is stronger than it really is.

A group’s impression of strength will depend on the strength of the impression it is able to generate in the minds of its would-be supporters. As a clandestine organisation, the actual strength of the opposition will be unknown to its target audience. The group’s visible performance, in such cases, will be used as a surrogate variable to measure its capabilities and prospects. The most important measure of performance is the quantity and quality of its attacks. All other things being equal, an effective and rising pattern of violence is a signal of strength. It will appear that the future belongs to the insurgents. An ineffective and declining level of activity, by contrast, is a signal of weakness. It will appear that the opposition’s days are numbered and that the future belongs to the state. In the short run the opposition must depend on its ability to create a false reality through the perceptual effect of its armed actions. To the degree that it is able to do so, it will have created the opportunity to turn its generated images into facts and resolve its opening mobilisation dilemma. While the insurgency must still be able to effectively exploit this opportunity to win, it will have overcome a primary barrier to its success.

Notes

3 Leites and Wolf refer to this as the ‘dominance of predictions over preferences’. While some percentage of the population may begin the game as active (but conditional) supporters of the incumbent, as they come to believe that the opposition is likely to win, the expected benefits of continuing to support the status quo will decline and the expected payoff of supporting the insurgents will increase. Should these trends continue, it will be advantageous at some point to switch sides. Note here that the pure preferences of this sub-set of the population have not changed, only their predictions concerning which side is likely to win. The result is a change in behaviour. They are prepared to abandon the side they would prefer to see win in order to support the side they would prefer to see defeated. N Leites & C Wolf, Rebellion and Authority: An Analytical Essay on Insurgent Conflicts, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, R-462-ARPA, 1970.
This 'precipitating' function, which is a prerequisite for getting things started, can also be played by Schelling, *Micromotives and Macrobehavior*. T Thornton, ‘Terror as a weapon of political agitation’, in *H Eckstein (ed), Internal War*. The reader should note that a change in \( x_p \) results in a movement along the reaction curve, while a change in \( y_p \) results in a movement of the curve itself.

This is the so-called ‘spark and tinder model’ of revolt. ‘A spark’, in this model, ‘will create a prairie fire’. Mao Tse-tung, ‘A single spark can start a prairie fire’, in *Selected Military Writings*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1967. According to this theory, all that is required to get things moving is a ‘precipitating event’ that will pull people into the streets. Once this begins, the rebellion will feed on itself. A rebellion, in this case, is essentially an event. While this model is often associated with Mao’s famous 1930 essay, cited above, it actually has little to do with Mao’s mature operational doctrine, which assumes that political mobilisation is a problematic and iterative process of gradually shifting the balance of power between the guerrilla and the state over time. This is the strategy that must be pursued in the type of mobilisation environment shown in Curve B. The ‘spark and tinder’ assumption underlies the ‘Cuban or ‘fooco’ model of rebellion advanced by Guevara and Debray, as well as their many theoretical followers. E Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1985; and R Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution: Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980. According to this doctrine, the power of example, provided by the actions of the foco, is enough to set things in motion. Once this is done, the revolt will take on a dynamic of its own, sweeping the old regime from power. The actions of the foco, in this respect, serve as a *manufactured precipitant*. For a theoretical discussion of the differences between these two models, see G McCormick, ‘People’s wars’, in *J Ciment, KL Hill, C Skutsch & D Macmichael (eds), Encyclopedia of Conflicts Since World War II*, Armonk, NY: Sharpe Reference, 1999. For a discussion of the roles of precipitants and causes in revolt, see H Eckstein, ‘On the etiology of internal wars’, *History and Theory*, 4, 1965, pp 133 – 163.

Curve B is ‘typical’ in the sense that it describes a mobilisation environment in which who wins and who loses will be a function of how both sides play the game. Victory is not preordained. Curve C, by contrast, represents an environment in which the insurgency is destined to lose, at least for as long as its response curve \( f(x_p) \) remains below the diagonal \( x_w = x_p \). While hard-core supporters of the opposition may still be in a position to carry out attacks indefinitely, within their means, they will never be in a position to generate widespread popular support. Curve A represents an environment in which the insurgency, once initiated, has the potential to expand catalytically. The insurgents, in this case, assuming they know how to exploit the effects of this potential catalytic response, have a good chance of winning. By way of example, Kuran has suggested that this was essentially the situation that prevailed in Eastern Europe on the eve of the revolutionary outbreaks of 1989. Kuran, ‘The East European revolution of 1989’. As in the East European case, most situations that have reached this point, however, are likely to have evolved out of the kind of environment represented by Curve B as a result of a long-standing interaction between the opposition and the state.

resistance in mid-2003 was the occupation authority’s unwillingness or inability to put down the looting that swept across much of the country in the wake of the invasion. In failing to establish law and order, the US military signalled that would-be opponents had the room for manoeuvre needed to resist the occupation.

18 Thornton, ‘Terror as a weapon of political agitation’, p 74.
21 Ibid, p 121.
23 The phrase is that of Regis Debray in Debray, Revolution in the Revolution, p 42.
27 Ibid, p 40.
28 Guevara, Guerrilla Warfare, p 189.
29 Debray, Revolution in the Revolution, pp 51–52, emphasis in the original.
30 JS Coleman, quoted in Lichbach, The Rebel’s Dilemma, p 74.
33 As with any kind of symbolic action, one should distinguish here between the ‘target of attack’, against which the operation is carried out, and the ‘target of influence’, which is the audience or audiences for whom the image generated by the attack is actually intended. If the insurgency is going to achieve its intended effects at a price it can afford to sustain, its actions must be ‘symbolically efficient’; the indirect effects of its targeting programme on those it needs to influence must be greater than its direct consequences on the battlefield. During the initial period of the struggle, at least, the latter will be largely insignificant, which is why the insurgency must resort to a campaign of ‘smoke and mirrors’ in the first place.
35 These efforts can be and often are supplemented by outside assistance. There are limits, however, to the degree to which outside support can offset an unfavourable mobilisation environment if the insurgents’ operational objective is to grow an opposition force (and undermine the state) by mobilising a popular following. At some point exogenous assistance will result in diminishing returns to scale.
36 The nature of this minimum can be interpreted in a number of different ways. In the short run it can be defined by what it would take to put the group out of business at a point in time, effectively pushing it below its breakpoint. Over the long run it can be defined by the (typically fluctuating) point at which the group’s rate of attrition (in leaders and followers) begins to exceed its rate of growth. In either case underground organisations require a minimum level of internal security (by maintaining a critical level of invisibility) to stay in the game and go on to win.
37 We should remind the reader that we are discussing the conditions for victory in a closed fight between an armed opposition group and a domestic incumbent. If the insurgency is unable to grow beyond its low level equilibrium point it will never be in a position to pose a terminal threat to the state. Assuming it is operating in a typical insurgent environment, as we discussed earlier, this will require it to achieve a self-sustaining level of growth at \(x = x_p = x_c\) (see Figure 4, Curve B). It should be noted, however, that this is not a requirement for victory in the event that the insurgency is facing a foreign opponent, such as an occupying power. (The obvious example is the USA in Afghanistan and Iraq.) Victory in this case does not require the opposition to grow to the point where it is strong enough to seize power, but only to the point that it is able to inflict a level of pain that it is sufficiently high to force the occupying power to reconsider the costs and benefits of remaining in the game.