Drawing Strategic Lessons from Dahomey's War

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Recently, research on a variety of international security issues, including types of foreign and domestic conflict, has made impressive progress. This intellectual endeavor partly reflects an effort to meet the increasing demand for information about untraditional security threats following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Many unanswered questions remain, however, regarding other types of conflict fought on the West African continent, including those known as "extrasystemic wars" or confrontations between state and nonstate actors, seen in places such as Somalia in the early 1990s and late 2000s. This article examines a war fought between the third French Republic and the Dahomey kingdom (in what is now the Republic of Benin) during the 1890s as an illustration of how foreign government forces engage in military conflict with rebel groups in geographically distant locations. It demonstrates that one of the key facilitators of government victory rests with the choice of rebels to fight as a regular army rather than as guerrilla forces, which they used to do quite often through the nineteenth century in many parts of the world, including Dahomey.[1] Specifically, the article identifies a set of strategic incentives that drove the Dahomey fighters to adopt a conventional military strategy, which in turn improved France's chances of defeating them because the war suited the foreign forces' specialization. This study explores the experience of the Dahomey people (also known as the Fon) and provides insight that addresses several important issues of modern wars beyond Dahomey. In so doing, it extends a set of modest proposals for Western powers to consider with regard to the role of conventional military assets in their war plan against insurgent adversaries.

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One of the lessons for Western nations from recent counterinsurgency experiences—whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Somalia—involves the fact that the effectiveness of indigenous forces who adopt guerrilla strategy compels regular forces to fight like irregulars (or at least behave similarly) to defeat them. One finds very few lessons dealing with the opposite situation, in which irregulars confront powerful forces by fighting like a modern army. The Dahomean war represents one such rare scenario whereby a Western nation intervened to fight a violent insurgency that betrayed a common strategic logic: despite the fact that, as an underdog, the Fon had every reason to adopt the "strategy of the weak," they kept an impressive modern army and used it, only to lose.

An ancient kingdom with a certain degree of political, military, and social structure, Dahomey did not generate so-called insurgents as we understand them today. This article, however, deals with Dahomey as a nonstate entity rebelling against French invasion. That Dahomey at the time did not merit recognition as a state member of the international system is consistent with the existing literature's coding the Dahomean war as "extrasystemic."[2] A survey of multiple counterinsurgency cases in recent years shows that the Fon experience is no historical anomaly; in fact, regardless of several differences, the war presents characteristics that resemble some of the recent conflicts faced by Western nations elsewhere. Beyond the Gulf War of 1991 and the strife in Kosovo in 1998–99, it resonates with some of the major conventional battles during the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and the early phase of the Iraq war of 2003, which ended fairly quickly before transitioning to a guerrilla phase.[3] Because of its relevance to these key combat experiences (and likely more other cases), the Fon war of Dahomey offers useful insight for the recent past, present, and future wars of Western powers.

Consequently, this article addresses the causes and effects of the Fon's decision to fight like regular forces. First, it examines three major explanations available in political science for how nonstate insurgent groups lose to stronger actors, showing that none of them indicates why Fon rebels lost the war and why we need a new perspective. Second, the article explores several reasons why some groups betray the conventional wisdom of fighting like irregulars to defeat regulars, instead favoring an orthodox military strategy that helps state actors. Third, it traces the process of the Dahomean war, examining several factors that enabled France to defeat

Dahomey and arguing that the latter's inclination to adopt conventional strategy generated a number of problems for the rebels and facilitated a French victory. Finally, the study concludes with a set of implications for the military strategy of Western powers.

Existing Explanations

Theories of asymmetric war seek to describe how underdogs defeat superior adversaries in international conflict, a question not addressed directly here. Rather, we consider how the strong defeat the weak—more specifically, how the French beat the Fon. The most representative theories in this field include (1) balance of resolve, (2) strategic interaction, and (3) democratic weakness. The first theory posits that in war between unequal powers, the stronger side is less motivated to fight and therefore more likely to lose.[4] When applied to the Fon context, this theory argues that Dahomey lost the war because it had less determination than the French to withstand the cost of fighting. Indeed, French forces appeared to have high resolve because they had strong support from a powerful colonial lobby at home and public determination to invest in conquering Dahomey. Therefore, the theory considers a relatively low level of resolve the main cause of Fon defeat. Second, scholars argue that the weaker side will likely to win if it adopts a military strategy (either conventional or guerrilla) opposite that of the stronger side.[5] According to this theory, the Fon lost the war not because of their lack of determination but because they used the same strategy as did France in a series of army-to-army interactions from the beginning to the end. Had they adopted guerrilla strategy against conventional French armies, in other words, then they would have won. Finally, the theory of democratic weakness holds that insurgents will probably win when their opponent, a democratic government, suffers from the rise of middle-class opposition to the war that constrains the government's military policy and reduces military resources necessary for defeating the insurgents.[6] From this perspective, the Fon lost the war not because of their weakness, disorganization, or use of the wrong military strategy, but because France could fend off domestic rivals who sought to destabilize internal politics.

These theories are important to our understanding of the interactions of warriors in asymmetric combat environments, but they fall short of providing sufficient detail to explain exactly how rebel organizations, particu-

larly those in West Africa during colonial times, have fared against Western nations like France. Further, they do not discuss the many resource-poor insurgent groups that have managed to build a well-equipped modern army capable of battling enemies they would otherwise evade. Against the backdrop of these theories, in fact, insurgent groups have a collective propensity to use armies in combat that give Western states a number of strategic advantages. This development represents a long-term trend of Western forces benefiting tremendously from confronting these groups—a trend that the former ideally should sustain as a basis for carrying out military intervention effectively. Provided this tendency continues around the globe, it follows that state actors are well positioned to capitalize on the enthusiasm of hostile insurgents to fight conventionally, using the trend as a metric to assess the need to intervene and the likelihood of success. The next section identifies conditions under which, as illogical as it may sound, irregular forces will likely fight in regular fashion—a practice substantiated by a variety of insurgent groups in many parts of the world.

Irregular Forces That Fight Like a Regular Army

In the field of security studies, the propensity of the weak to fight in guerrilla fashion has a theoretical and empirical basis. Needless to say, few underdogs are willing to engage organized adversaries armed with better weapons and do so in open terrain. Because efforts to professionalize armed forces require a large capital infusion, even fewer could develop such forces. Yet as shown elsewhere, a look at a series of modern colonial wars in the third world demonstrates that a number of insurgents and their leaders have defied this ordeal and adopted a counterintuitive strategy. Of course, ways of conventionalizing forces differ among a variety of insurgent groups in terms of weapons acquisition, training, discipline, logistics, transportation, and unit movement. But the strategy of regular war by insurgent groups is no historical accident; instead, it was the norm for much of the nineteenth century when subnational ethnic groups—whether the Xhosas, Zulus, Senegalese, Sikhs in India, Afghans, or even Algerians—confronted colonial powers with armies, albeit in their own different ways. By the time they fought the British in 1845, for instance, the Sikhs had developed a splendid regular army in the Punjab after, like many other tribal groups of India, they had bought European weapons and invited in Western military

strategists.[7] Before fighting France in 1854, Hajj Omar had formed an army of a few thousand conscripted levies in Senegal.[8] In China during the early twentieth century, Mao Zedong developed a concept of a modern army based on guerrilla war and foresaw creation of a people's army as the final stage in the evolution of peasants' struggle against Japanese forces. Indeed, as described in detail elsewhere, several reasons tempt insurgent groups to modernize armed forces even if they know their defects.

For instance, rebels may believe in the advantage of features such as modern weapons, organized unit formations, and discipline as a source of military power. One may cultivate the belief that capital-intensive armies are superior to labor-intensive guerrilla groups because of what they bring with them through careful comparison of alternative strategies and interactions with outside merchants, traders, and military operatives. Such a conviction is precipitated by the sense of inferiority accorded to guerrilla strategy and the appeal of armies generated by those who adopted them elsewhere.[9] Rebels may also see military modernization as symbolic of a civilized nation and an indication of improvement in socioeconomic life. This view is embedded in modernization theory, which posits that certain industrial, economic, and military developments lead directly to positive social and political change.[10] In the 1870s, for instance, the Ashanti in Ghana had developed a strong predilection for a modern army through their interactions with Europeans, and established one to battle the British.[11] In the 1880s, Mahdist forces under Muhammad Ahmad in Sudan were attracted to the European way of war as a way of modernizing their otherwise primitive group as they fought the British for independence.

Furthermore, rebels may find opportunities for advancing militarily from their arms trade and by receiving material support from external actors. A number of tribal systems and feudal kingdoms in many parts of colonial and postcolonial Africa benefited broadly from intercontinental commerce in slaves, ideas, and weapons, which helped build up powerful armies.[12] At the same time, colonial masters may have installed and institutionalized such forces as a main combat doctrine. The literature of historical institutionalism informs us that colonial experiences give insurgent groups incentives to use conventional strategy.[13] After the colonization of such groups, state forces infuse capital into the colonial economy and develop levies to increase local manpower and create ties to the colony.[14] Finally, strategy

may have a great deal to do with conditions associated with past experiences of insurgent groups, such as learning from positive events or failing to learn from mistakes. Openness to various interpretations of historical events may represent a key determinant of insurgent strategy. At the same time, the maturity and age of these organizations may also exert an influence. Young groups may pursue new challenges while old ones, who have established standard operating procedures, may have trouble adopting new assignments. Additionally, they may have bureaucratic reasons for resisting the introduction of new combat methods because doing so would assail established norms and hierarchies.[15]

Rebel groups' multiple incentives to use armies have rarely turned into favorable outcomes. Instead, the widespread tendency of regular war has served the interests of Western nations who, in the past several centuries, have competed to colonize foreign territories as they overcame the tyranny of long distances to crush insurgents, capitalizing on their edge in military technology, transportation, communications, and logistics. Western hegemony in conventional wars continued into the early twentieth century when indigenous groups learned from a broad application of Leninist revolutionary ideology and Maoist strategy to fight more like guerrillas, as seen in Indochina, Malaya, Kenya, the Philippines, and elsewhere. These insurgents subsequently profited from the postwar collapse of the colonial system, the proliferation of global norms that favored decolonization and self-determination, and the advocacy of international organizations like the United Nations that advanced third world claims. Such institutional and normative support as a whole boosted the insurgents' prospects for victory in the early to mid twentieth century, and, as a result, their victorious leaders became heads of newly independent states. The apparent linkage between insurgents' military strategy and war outcomes indicates that sticking to the strategy of the weak would more likely produce victory. Conversely, success would favor Western nations if insurgents reciprocated with their preference for conventional strategy. We clearly see this linkage in the Fon experience in Dahomey.

The Fon War of Dahomey

Like most wars involving unequal powers, the Dahomean war was an asymmetric struggle between the powerful Third Republic and the Fon tribe—but asymmetric in mixed ways. On the one hand, the Fon possessed

lesser weapons, training, and discipline; subcolonial status; and perhaps a small expectation of victory (and therefore a low resolve to fight). On the other hand, they enjoyed advantages in manpower size as well as knowledge of terrain and local languages. Led by King Béhanzin, they tapped into a large reservoir of people, mobilizing more than 10,000 male and female soldiers. In two years, this force grew to 15,000, incorporating a number of brave female soldiers and outnumbering the French by at least two to one for the rest of the war.[16] The Fon operated according to the norm of modern battle formation and reliance on firepower; no guerrilla commands, militias, or special forces operated as major combatants. When the first campaign began in 1890, they charged hard toward Cotonou, an adjacent naval kingdom, where they met with French gunboat shells and retreated. The Fon then turned and repositioned themselves toward the north in the face of French reinforcements from Porto Novo, a major port city. At this point, they signed an armistice recognizing Porto Novo as a French protectorate and ceded Cotonou in exchange for an indemnity. Despite these concessions, the first campaign ended practically in a draw because the armistice prevented immediate French decolonization but stopped further Fon aggression. The year 1891 was peaceful, during which Fon insurgents revived the slave trade in order to buy weapons as part of their rearmament program.

Despite the embarrassment of the stalemate, the French had fewer forces when the second campaign began in 1892. Alfred-Amedee Dodds, the commanding general, arrived with a force of nearly 2,000 (Porto Novo added some 2,600), while the Fon army totaled around 12,000 men. Dahomey grew more confident since it had fought the first campaign to a draw, but the army proved mostly incapable of general combat. Subsequent fighting generated more Fon casualties than French, forcing Béhanzin to take arms and attack French forces himself. The Fon mounted several more charges that nevertheless failed in the face of French bayonets. Soon the French picked up a key victory at Adégon before marching toward Abomey where they overran the Fon. After capturing Béhanzin, France proclaimed victory in 1894.

Theoretically speaking, the Fon insurgents could have prolonged the short-lived and lopsided war by adopting a strategy that would have spared them direct confrontations. Powerful states such as France favor regular war for the obvious reason that it allows the armed services to maximize their

material superiority and elicit the greatest payoff. Conventional strategy boosts orthodox training methods, rewards organized operations, hastens the procurement of advanced weapons, and becomes embedded in the culture of modern military organizations, which grow resistant to change over time and integrate new battle methods only slowly. Thus, even in the face of unknown enemies in unfamiliar places, Western armies retain the conventional style most of the time.

France's military institutions of the 1890s were no exception; they had inherited the Napoleonic tradition, which relied on the use of artillery, square formation, and rigid doctrine, precisely embodying this doctrinal conservatism.[17] Of course, Dahomey's combat method was not particularly European but conventional in the African context of armies conducting slave raids. The "orthodox" method of army-to-army combat, however, is far from what we expect to see today in places like Afghanistan, Somalia, or Yemen where insurgents mount a series of irregular combat in villages, towns, highlands, and mountains to raise the cost of fighting for adversaries and undermine their will to fight. Given the recent proliferation of insurgency strategy across parts of the world such as the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, one might find the Fon strategy an anomaly if not irrational. Then why did the Fon use regular armies when they could have chosen differently?

For the inferior side, the notion of fighting in conventional settings appears suicidal. A rational response would call for *avoiding* direct confrontation and adopting the strategy of "weapons of the weak" by fighting like guerrillas, taking hostages, and using them as human shields. Given the centuries-long history of guerrilla war, the Fon might well have known about it and employed it.[18] In fact, fortune-tellers had advised Béhanzin against waging pitched battles, recommending ambushes and night movements instead, which the Fon used at the battle of Dogba and Ouémé.[19] The Fon, however, stayed mostly with the strategy they were accustomed to for some of the reasons discussed above. Specifically, the strategy helped them justify a need to modernize their forces and strengthen the Fon kingdom by setting up a primitive military system and using it to protect the kingdom. In contrast, guerrilla war did not appear too helpful. Success with such warfare hinged on the need to voluntarily cede a territory to enemy penetration, which in turn would hinder Dahomey's own ground opera-

tions and prove highly unpopular among its people. Béhanzin would rather protect his own land than let the French exploit it and suffer from an unruly population. Additionally, conventional strategy gave Dahomey the appearance of an aspiring modern nation that could challenge a foreign "equivalent," offering the sense that despite a wide gap in material power, the Fon could fight the French on equal terms. The powerful Fon army, consisting of male soldiers and famed female warriors, reflected this confidence. Furthermore, Dahomey's topographic features, especially its plain and desert areas, favored the organized movement of infantry operations. The savanna climate also made guerrilla war difficult. Two dry seasons a year impaired the growth of a dense forest in which irregular forces could hide—but not improperly dressed combatants.[20] Finally, because of the institutionalization of conventional battle in Fon society and its proven success in repeated wars with neighbors, such as the Whydah and Oyo kingdoms, the army considered organizational and doctrinal change unnecessary.

It was no coincidence that Dahomey had a reputation for military might.[21] Archibald Dalzel, British governor of the country in the 1760s, wrote that Dahomey boasted a considerable standing army led by officers with a high level of discipline and ability based on the imported principle of "levee en masse"—the recruitment of all able-bodied adults. The king could gather his regular forces quickly, commanded by these well-trained officers.[22] He put a commander—the "Gau"—in charge of planning military strategy and logistics and brought in military experts from Portugal and Germany who rivaled the French in terms of teaching training, weapons use, and siege tactics.[23] Aside from a brief guerrilla-like skirmish in 1892, the Fon rarely trained for hit-and-run missions, protected its civilian populations, or sought to instill and exploit fear among the French.[24] Its strategy mostly dispensed with operations that pinpointed enemy weaknesses. Yet the very preference for orthodox combat generated six problems that led to disaster for Dahomey in the second campaign.

Consequences of Conventional Strategy for the Fon

First, Dahomey suffered a resource shortage that compromised its ground operations. Aside from the fact that sophisticated weapons were expensive and generally hard to obtain, shortages stemmed from smaller but serious problems. For example, occurring in the context of a vast territory and harsh

environmental conditions, the war caused a decline in food output—a severe problem because the first campaign broke out during a planting season, interrupting normal production of agricultural crops by removing needed hands. The war not only destroyed parts of arable soil but also prevented farmers from cultivating it, blocked their harvest for the following year, and forced soldiers to prepare their own food.[25] Lack of self-sufficiency, made worse as the French army inflicted damage on local people and areas, forced Dahomey to diversify sources of revenue and raid adjacent territories for slaves and capital. Aggression and looting left little for the disgruntled farmers, who went to capture slaves to sell, which in turn reduced the number of laborers needed for soldiering.[26] Furthermore, the relative brevity of previous campaigns made planning for this war more difficult in terms of logistics and food transportation, whereas the French army was used to such requirements. Finally, harsh taxation and calls for mobilization took a toll on villagers, who gradually learned to resist military service. The decline of public contributions reduced the availability of war materiel, forcing Dahomey to depend upon female soldiers and, again, the slave trade.[27]

Once the war began, this resource constraint yielded a second problem—the imbalance of military power between the two sides. French soldiers had more guns and bayonets, effectively offsetting Dahomey's manpower advantage. French military power drew not only on its previous experiences in colonial wars but also on its advanced weapons, such as the Maxim gun, which fired much faster and with longer range than Dahomey's blunderbusses. French soldiers wielding rifles with fixed bayonets outreached Fon swords, and artillery pounded their defensive positions.[28] These weapons proved so effective that they destroyed repeated Fon charges before they could get within musket range of the adversary. The French combined this technological edge with their maneuvers to generate maximum effects. By utilizing smaller expeditions that permitted greater mobility, they dodged Fon attempts to intercept, cut off, and envelope them. Superiority in technology and movement allowed French soldiers to transport a high volume of firepower. Additionally, a naval blockade cut arms and food import to the insurgents, who became less able to rely on the slave trade. Thus, the combination of technology, maneuver, and sanctions helped the smaller French force defeat a larger Fon army.[29]

The third problem involved the fact that Dahomey treated the war more as a social enterprise than a life-affecting duel, thus reducing its combat effectiveness. According to the Fon concept of war, soldiers dedicated their energy in peacetime to court ceremonials; consequently, they considered combat training more of a ritual than a necessary ingredient for unit cohesion, discipline, and other aspects of military improvement. Thus the army consisted of right and left wings, not necessarily to match enemy formations but for the sake of ceremonial occasions during which they formed two sections, one on each side of the king. Fon army movements reflected their social expectations, whereas the French army aimed to fight and win. Furthermore, the social imperative encouraged the Fon to use available slaves less to win wars than to ensure the continuous supply of human sacrifices. Although the Fon used surprise and night raids to surround a town in the darkness, achieve surprise, and then force an entry, they sought not to kill but to capture as many people as possible. Therefore, if the army itself was taken by surprise, it would quickly fall into confusion, which encouraged desertion.[30]

Fourth, differences in battle styles generated problems for Dahomey. Under the square formation, French troops trekked across combat areas with reliable sentries who helped protect supply routes, informed vulnerable units, and warned units to fend off night raids. French bayonets fixed on guns in proper formations cut Fon defensive stands at natural and man-made hazards.[31] In contrast, Dahomey adopted an arc formation composed of two divisions that included the most important village chief on the right and lesser chiefs on the left where warriors entered the field. This method did not work well because the insurgents lacked adequate resources and because responsibility for rearming rested with individual soldiers. As a result, they often found themselves poorly armed, thrown into disarray after each battle, and unable to quickly prepare for subsequent confrontations.[32]

The failure of Fon insurgents to get used to new weapons and rearm themselves between the two campaigns represented the fifth problem. Such an interval between weapons acquisition and adoption, a common problem for any armed force, had different meanings for insurgent groups and advanced European powers. The latter monopolized arms manufacturing and other supply sources, employing the products in war as soon as they became available. New inventory relatively quickly spread to various military units

for testing and then adaptation for the purpose of increasing lethality. A decade before the Fon war broke out, the baron Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz of Prussia argued that "all advances made by modern science and technical art are immediately applied to the abominable art of annihilating mankind," although the very scientific progress and military application of new technology were less prevalent and consistent outside Europe.[33] Although France as a supplier and exporter of weaponry seldom suffered a problem in assimilating new weaponry into its system, the same cannot be said of Dahomey as an importer. Accustomed to old weaponry and feeling generally good about it, Fon soldiers of the first campaign were fortunate to acquire new weapons. However, they then discovered the need to change and had to receive training before they could use them. Besides, they did not know whether they would have enough weapons in time to assimilate them—a problem that troubled the Fon in distinct ways. Specifically, they were unsure and hesitant about, as well as resistant to, coordinating the new weapons with earlier ones. Further, they did not have time to train and become familiar with the weapons, as did the French. Finally, they found the weapons and their users vulnerable to French countermeasures—a matter of fact as long as France remained more advanced in weapons production. This problem resulted in widespread confusion among the Fon and proved difficult to solve in only a few months.[34]

Ambitious Military Strategy, Weak Political Foundations

The critical sixth problem—an ambitious military strategy backed by a weak political system in Dahomey—receives extensive attention here. The Fon insurgents devised a military strategy to match up against a powerful army, but they made little effort to bolster the stability of the kingdom. As the Fon confronted a more mature nation, in the sense of Western modernity, that enjoyed both the means to cross the ocean and move across a large continent, their kingdom remained a loosely structured hierarchical system with a simplified leadership. Under Dahomey's political system, the Migan took up multiple responsibilities as prime minister, chief policy executioner, supreme judge, and chief law enforcement officer, in addition to commanding the army's right wing. Under the Migan, the Meu prepared budgets, supervised ceremonies, and ran communications across the system.[35] Several chiefs below them, the Togan, collected taxes, recruited men, and led agri-

cultural projects.[36] These institutions were so internally focused that the decision-making and execution processes functioned without much external oversight. Indeed, virtually no independent body checked Béhanzin's conduct of war and provided an objective assessment and advice on strategy.[37]

These institutions remained generally stable throughout the war, managing to discourage internal revolt. Yet, little beyond them offered unity to Dahomey's political and social structures. Widespread institutional inertia severely constrained the country's ability to incorporate the diverse interests of the 120 internal tribes residing in the territory, generate incentives for farmers to join the army, and nurture a sense of nationhood. Hence, breakaway movements were common, constituting part of a phenomenon that John Hargreaves calls the "African partition of Africa," which included the neighboring Porto Novo and Cotonou, which had seceded from Dahomey before the war broke out.[38] Resultant fears of losing more power to the periphery caused Dahomey to refrain from dispersing defensive capabilities and command authorities across its vast territory while, contrary to common sense, Béhanzin invested little to strengthen internal capabilities. Thus, Fon conventional strategy relied upon army operations whose command and control systems did not function. Béhanzin's political system encountered challenges not just externally but internally. Although he remained the most important figure in the insurgent regime, he was no more powerful than his predecessors and found himself surrounded by provincial leaders who questioned his authority to hold together various tribal interests and generate the collective force to defeat France.[39] As Jeffrey Herbst argues, "the ambiguous nature of authority in outlying areas was aggravated because there was no way for states to substitute for the use of coercion when extending their writ of authority."[40] Dahomey's political structure, like that of most of its neighbors in precolonial Africa, remained extremely loose. As Igor Kopytoff describes it,

> the core . . . continued to be ruled directly by the central authority. Then came an inner area of closely assimilated and politically integrated dependencies. Beyond it was the circle of relatively secure vassal polities. . . . This circle merged with the next circle of tribute-paying polities straining at the center's political leash. Beyond, the center's control became increasingly symbolic. . . . The center could only practice political intimidation and extract sporadic tribute through institutionalized raiding or undisguised pillage.[41]

Research shows that throughout much of recent history, African kingdoms have been either unwilling or unable (if not both) to project power

over territories beyond their centers. Regimes cared little about what local territories did, as long as they offered tributes, or how much development in the periphery could affect their wartime stability.[42] Similarly, Dahomey invested little in local and national development as part of war efforts. This complemented France's minimalist intent in Dahomey, wishing only to prevent imperial rivals from affecting its operations, as opposed to waging a sweeping conquest of all Western Africa. Consequently, it did little more than ensure that Dahomey remained weak. The French objective, after all, was not so much to build a strong colonial government as to weaken and subjugate it in order to exploit Dahomey's resources and invade its neighbors. Expecting only moderate economic and strategic returns from the conquest, France found the act of striking insurgents from a distance a politically justifiable endeavor. All of this in turn allowed the French to take advantage of the political vacuum and use violence to deny Dahomey an opportunity for reform.

In hindsight this analysis indicates that Dahomey would have fought the war better had it managed any of the six problems above. Most of its difficulties discussed here stemmed from having an ambitious military strategy that suffered multiple issues common to weak armed forces and from dispensing with the benefit of maintaining a stable, centralized political regime. Institutions of a centralized regime would have allowed the Fon to offer a variety of public assets, such as law and order, defense, and infrastructure, which could function as a foundation for internal stability and a source of territorial defense. Once in place, these systems would have provided a powerful administrative engine to run a large machine of political and economic institutions designed to generate sustained support for local tribes and regional groups, whether in terms of defense, taxation, or existential matters. Later, nation-states in Africa would be characterized not only by borders and citizens with national identities but also by a set of effective bureaucracies and widespread representative systems. The Fon insurgents fought France largely without these assets.

The insurgents also might have benefited from assigning greater defensive roles to Dahomey's neighbors as well as its population in accordance with the concept of buffer zones. Had the country secured an effective centralized governance that regulated flows of people and capital peacefully from neighboring kingdoms, it would have enjoyed a greater degree of self-

sufficiency and evaded the need to deploy external coercion to save resources for wars with stronger foes. A more rigorous regional defense network around Dahomey would have presented the French intrusion an additional obstacle, likely undermining the penetration. At the same time, resources accumulated at the center could have been distributed among the populace to guarantee a steady supply of recruitment and revenue. Of course, a wider distribution of assets would have proven difficult to carry out because, as Robert Bates argues, "those who held positions of privilege had to insure that the benefits created by the states were widely shared"; otherwise, they would be left without a popular mandate.[43] A centralized authority probably would have permitted Dahomey to secure a firm territorial basis. Instead it remained a decentralized anticolonial regime, dependent upon the slave trade to buy weapons to modernize its forces and warring in neighboring areas only to undermine itself before facing the French. Research on political development in Africa, particularly the work of Bates, points to relatively low population density as a causal factor regarding the absence of institutions in Africa.[44]

Of course, all of these tasks, ranging from centralizing the political structure to distributing resources among the people and neighbors to matching all of these resources to the military strategy they had, would have been enormously difficult for the Fon—an indication that they likely had little chance to win the war. This situation also suggests that the incentives among some of the third world rebels to pursue constant military modernization along Western norms are so pervasive today that they will probably remain a major strategic problem shared by other insurgent groups. Some rebel organizations in the developing world are subject to suffer these problems when they use conventional strategy without a stable political system. Insurgent organizations would do well to build a set of political institutions capable of sustaining armed forces if they wish to adopt this particular force structure. This has implications for Western powers as well, insofar as the Fon experience generates a set of modest proposals for future encounters with foreign rebel groups. Specifically, Western nations are well positioned to identify a number of strategic conditions that would allow them to capitalize on their edge in material power, draw insurgent groups into conventional war, and subsequently exploit their strategic defects in orthodox

combat. In light of the fact that insurgents worldwide fight like guerrillas, the stakes become higher and this proposal sounds ever more urgent.

Conclusion

The types of violent insurgent groups that Western nations face these days deviate in many ways from the Fon, so we cannot draw direct inferences from Dahomey's war. Similarly, this analysis may have differing implications for each of the Western powers. Yet the case study illustrates an important perspective that is reasonably generalizable across time and space. That is, by developing strong incentives to fight conventionally (contrary to accepted thinking), insurgent groups may unknowingly make it easy for Western powers to fight them. This incentive mechanism, seemingly counterintuitive, is often shaped by socioeconomic, cognitive, and geographic constraints largely independent of what Western powers do. Yet, those powers often overlook this tendency, taking for granted that insurgents would employ guerrilla tactics and that they should respond in kind. We must note, however, that the incentive structure is multifaceted and consistent with a historical pattern of strategic behavior seen in many parts of the world. Thus, regular war with nonstate insurgents has never been obsolete and will remain quite relevant for government forces and rebels alike. Today, national armies are reorganizing according to irregular doctrine and experiences with unfamiliar security threats, but Western defense papers indicate that many of them continue to spend enormous resources to train their service members for orthodox missions and to conduct arms acquisition on conventional baselines. These powers will probably win most of these wars without much trouble when insurgents suffer from multiple strategic defects. The rebels' incentives and flaws noted here may not apply to every nonstate group, but they demonstrate some of the major problems that such organizations are prone to face when they make this error.

More than likely, these issues will continue to haunt insurgents. Western powers will enjoy an edge in military technology, communications, training, and logistics that will give them an upper hand in every conventional operation they carry out against insurgents. The latter, in contrast, will have trouble procuring adequate resources, training warriors, and assimilating new weapons in a timely manner and using them effectively in open terrain; therefore, they will stick to relatively old weapons and ineffective combat

methods. This will take place as Western nations continue to capitalize on their monopoly of new inventories and proper training. More than likely, insurgents will also have to contend with internal subgroups that undermine their authority and operational bases in ways that reduce the resource burden of major powers seeking to find effective ways of conducting military interventions. To make such actions less costly, Western states should actively consider the positive aspect of fighting the insurgents that adopt conventional military strategy.

Of course, this approach involves a number of obstacles. First, policies that effectively permit hostile insurgents or potential rivals to gain modern technologies, allow proper training in units, and grow generally stronger for the sake of fighting them later (with somewhat optimistic presumptions) are militarily dangerous—a politically difficult sell for Western democratic audiences. Taxpayers will rightfully oppose and discourage their lawmakers from taking up such measures that empower adversaries and raise the cost of war. Thus, any move to encourage the modernization of insurgent organizations must be coupled with logic, reason, and consistency. Second, financial and military resources for conventional war, ranging from advanced hardware to maintenance, are likely more expensive than those for irregular war—another hard political sell in many European and American capitals during times of financial austerity. Difficulties with budgetary politics will probably challenge proper strategic judgment. Finally, Western armed forces mindful of the need for constant innovation will no doubt oppose a *return* to conventional strategy after having installed the doctrine of irregular combat throughout their organizations. Current dedication to counterinsurgency missions in the theaters of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of the Middle East—as well as the inevitably high sunk cost involved with it—makes radical reorganization of force structure extremely problematic if not prohibitively costly. For these reasons, this article does not call for a wholesale reversal of a large chunk of military resources to the conventional age. Rather, a more appropriate way to proceed appears to encourage Western powers to find ways to draw hostile insurgents into making strategic errors in ways described herein. Doing so can bring about two important benefits that shed new light on the future military strategy of Western powers.

Specifically, it can yield a set of rare strategic gains for Western interventions. By luring foes into making mistakes in future conflict scenarios,

Western powers will avoid letting their enemies grow powerful in ways that compromise the former's security interests. Dealing with insurgents and striking them early in this strategically advantageous time frame will help defray the long-term cost of enemy empowerment. This is particularly the case in the early phase of insurgents' development, according to Dominic Johnson and Joshua Madin's research, when the initial population of a territory that they target is too small to draw on for mobilization, preventing them from interacting frequently enough with locals. Government forces can take advantage of this situation by arresting their growth at this stage. Of course, governments will probably have trouble detecting these groups during this phase because the latter may intentionally assume a low profile or simply fail to attract much attention. Yet some of them might modernize at this stage and attract attention. Determining which of them will develop into a significant threat that justifies quick and serious reaction by state actors, however, remains an issue. As Johnson and Madin convincingly argue, even if the government detects a genuine threat early, it must still garner necessary support to deal with a hypothetical threat. These difficulties remain even though the task of *attacking* groups is *easier* during the stages of population growth because the group is small, inexperienced, geographically dispersed, and therefore vulnerable. Under such circumstances, the government can strike fast, hard, and early.[45]

The other benefit allows some of the concerned Western states like the United States to prepare for the escalation of conflict with great powers with growing conventional capability. For instance, China's rapid growth in military technology, especially development in air, cyber, and naval assets in recent years, signals a strong sense of alarm across the Pacific. The likelihood of this escalation, preferably avoided at all costs, may be low today but could rise quickly if precipitated in the near future by creation of a security vacuum in the Asian theater. Such a situation could arise in relation to the forthcoming global repositioning of American military assets based on the recent troop withdrawal from Iraq and a planned redeployment from Afghanistan. This article does not call for rapid Western preparation for war with China, but it highlights one of the potential side benefits of focusing more intently on conventional military strategy as a side effect of predictable counterinsurgency contingencies in the third world. Making strategic choices is not easy for policy makers, but one of the West's past experiences

with insurgents in a remote area of Africa reveals several benefits that it can realize by devising a strategy that appears counterintuitive—even to the insurgents themselves.

Notes

1. I distinguish between conventional and guerrilla/insurgency strategies, following Herbert Wulf, "Dependent Militarism in the Periphery and Possible Alternative Concepts," in *Arms Transfers in the Modern World*, ed. Stephanie G. Neuman and Robert E. Harkavy (New York: Praeger, 1979), 246–63. I define *conventional war* as conflict in which both sides use standing armies in open terrain. As for *insurgency*, it is a "political-military campaign by nonstate actors who seek to overthrow a government or secede from a country through the use of unconventional . . . military strategies and tactics." See Seth G. Jones, "The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency: State Failure and Jihad," *International Security* 32, no. 4 (Spring 2008): 9.

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3. Richard Andres, Craig Wills, and Thomas Griffith, "Winning with Allies: The Strategic Value of the Afghan Model," *International Security* 30, no. 3 (Winter 2005–6): 124–60; Stephen D. Biddle, "Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare: The Afghan Model in Afghanistan and Iraq," *International Security* 30, no. 3 (Winter 2005/06): 161–76; Stephen T. Hosmer, *Why the Iraqi Resistance to the Coalition Invasion Was So Weak* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007); and Kevin Woods, James Lacey, and Williamson Murray, "Saddam's Delusions: The View from the Inside," *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 3 (May/June 2006): 2–26.

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7. Byron Farwell, *Queen Victoria's Little Wars* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 37–50; and Charles Allen, *Soldier Sahibs: The Men Who Made the North-West Frontier* (London: John Murray, 2000), 58–87.

8. M. Hiskett, "The Nineteenth-Century Jihads in West Africa," in *The Cambridge History of Africa*, ed. John E. Flint, vol. 5, *From c. 1790 to c. 1870* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 158–59.

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10. Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (March 1959): 69–105; Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968); and Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, "Modernization: Theories and Facts," *World Politics* 49, no. 2 (January 1997): 155–83.

11. Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 180–89.

12. For this logic, see Jeffrey Record, *Beating Goliath: Why Insurgencies Win* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2007).

13. David B. Ralston, *Importing the European Army: The Introduction of European Military Techniques and Institutions into the Extra-European World, 1600–1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

14. Wendt and Barnett, "Dependent State Formation," 331.

15. Michael C. Horowitz, "Nonstate Actors and the Diffusion of Innovations: The Case of Suicide Terrorism," *International Organization* 64, issue 1 (Winter 2010): 45–46.

16. On the key roles of female soldiers in Dahomey, see Stanley B. Alpern, *Amazons of Black Sparta: The Women Warriors of Dahomey* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 199–200; and Anthony Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa* (London: Brassey's, 1988), 72.

17. Douglas Porch, "Bugeaud, Galliéni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 376–407.

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21. Obichere, *West African States*, 252; and Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 60–61.

22. Archibald Dalzel, *The History of Dahomy: An Inland Kingdom of Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1967), x, 55.

23. Obichere, *West African States*, 67–69, 93; and Alpern, *Amazons of Black Sparta*, 147.

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25. J. A. Skertchly, *Dahomey As It Is: Being a Narrative of Eight Months' Residence in That Country, with a Full Account of the Notorious Annual Customs, and the Social and Religious Institutions of the Ffons* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1874), 447.

26. Jack Goody, *Technology, Tradition, and the State in Africa* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 36.

27. Goldstein, *War and Gender*, 64.

28. Alpern, *Amazons of Black Sparta*, 195, 201.

29. Porch, "Bugeaud, Galliéni, Lyautey," 383–84.

30. W. J. Argyle, *The Fon of Dahomey: A History and Ethnography of the Old Kingdom* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1966), 81, 89; and David Ross, "Dahomey," in *West African Resistance: The Military Response to Colonial Occupation*, ed. Michael Crowder (London: Hutchinson, 1971), 154–55.

31. Ross, "Dahomey," 160.

32. Argyle, *Fon of Dahomey*, 86; Ross, "Dahomey," 151; and Porch, "Bugeaud, Galliéni, Lyautey," 396.

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34. Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Evolution of Weapons and Warfare* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), 302–5.

35. Alpern, *Amazons of Black Sparta*, 147; and Frederick E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans: Being the Journals of Two Missions to the King of Dahomey, and Residence at His Capital, in the Years 1849 and 1850*, vol. 1 (London: Frank Cass, 1966), 22.

36. Argyle, *Fon of Dahomey*, 75, 85; and Melville J. Herskovitz, *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom*, vol. 2 (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1938), 29.

37. Argyle, *Fon of Dahomey*, 63.

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44. Bates, *Political Economy of Rural Africa*. See also Robert F. Stevenson, *Population and Political Systems in Tropical Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).

45. For a relationship between population size and insurgency effectiveness, see, for instance, Dominic D. P. Johnson and Joshua S. Madin, "Population Models and Counterinsurgency Strategies," in *Natural Security: A Darwinian Approach to a Dangerous World*, ed. Raphael D. Sagarin and Terence Taylor (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 162.