



Counterinsurgency Is Dead: What Else?*

Here, on 26 July 1972 the Royal Thai Army burned all its American textbooks. From this dates our victory over the communists.

—Inscription over the incinerator
Royal Thai Army Headquarters

Combat is winding down in Afghanistan, and—as in Iraq—serious questions have arisen about the value and intent of counterinsurgency (COIN). We remember the motto No More COINs in the 1970s after Vietnam. Today, lessons learned should tell us again that we should avoid such wars, but it is doubtful that we can do so in the future any more than we have in the past. Thus, perhaps we should now think seriously about the fundamental cause of the most prevalent form of conflict—insurgency.

Given the impressive number of books on COIN, the abundance of new research on former guerrillas, military doctrine, lessons learned, and the experience of those who have led insurgencies (very few) and COINs (too many), do we better understand asymmetric warfare?¹ The interest in this phenomenon boils down to two questions: (1) What is an insurgency? and (2) Can a professional army overcome an insurgency by relying on the people of the country *where the insurgency takes place*?

Disagreement abounds on virtually every aspect of insurgency warfare, including its definition. Obviously, the terms *small war*, *long war*, *irregular warfare*, *asymmetric warfare*, *terrorism*, and so forth, do not delineate the problem. Insurgency encompasses all of the above and more. It acts along several broad lines of operation, shifts its emphasis, changes strategy, or appears to become a different kind of conflict. Insurgent warfare adapts, depending upon the location of popular support.

First of all, however, an insurgency has to do with people sharing the same grievances. A subjective formula based on the belief that an equal number of people

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support and oppose the insurgency but that most of the populace remains neutral, ready for the picking, still permeates COIN theories and doctrines. Such a formula was the product of an academic, bureaucratic approach and an oversimplification by some military practitioners, based on little realistic experience and formed in an environment unlike an insurgency. It had enormous implications that affected COINs waged by Western powers. A formulation of this type is highly arbitrary, if not dubious, for the following reasons:

1. Segmenting people into categories is virtually impossible because of the secrecy that an insurgency imposes upon itself and the people. To acquire the data that permit such segmentation requires a COIN intelligence beyond the ability of intelligence operations in an insurgency environment.
2. Mobilization of the people depends entirely upon the needs of the insurgency at a specific time and place and upon its long- and short-range objectives.
3. Deception is the forte of insurgents. Consequently, they could structure the population to play the role of neutrals or collaborators trusted by the enemy but in actuality lend support to the insurgency logistic. Insurgents may even encourage some of them to take up arms against the insurgency, all the while using them as a source of intelligence, ammunitions, and resting places.
4. One may safely start with the assumption that, with few exceptions, an insurgency has the support of all the people who share the same grievances.

The fundamental cause of an insurgency is a common, deeply rooted set of grievances among citizens that become pretexts for conflict. The insurgency takes shape and grows if its leadership establishes a link between the struggle and the demands of the population. Therefore, conflicts that develop within the civilian population are underwritten by such key ideas as justice and freedom. Insurgents conduct activities in an explicitly revolutionary context that seeks to effect radical change in the present situation by means of subversion and armed struggle.

An insurgency draws its strength from the absence of a “center of gravity,” a concept taught in Western military schools. Carl von Clausewitz’s notion of a war’s center has moved toward a revolutionary trilogy: (1) the will of the people as the strategic center of gravity, (2) the will of the insurgent to continue to fight as the operational center of gravity, and (3) the multitude of basic cells of a clandestine organization as the many tactical centers of gravity. These centers tend to be nested but autonomous and secretive; hence, elimination of any center of gravity at any level cannot contribute to the downfall of the others, thus ensuring

the survival of the insurgency, regardless of the number of battles or fighters lost. Clearly, a desire to win the “hearts and minds” of the population in an insurgency becomes a dangerous illusion, an acculturation, and a naïve, strategic myopia.

The goal of a professional army is to win wars; insurgency seems to have spoiled that mission. Western armed forces engaged in COIN have either suffered defeat or “exited strategically.” Heralded by many experts as the only military victory over an insurgency, Malaya actually represents a hyped-up case, according to Dr. Andrew Mumford: “A counterinsurgency campaign taking 12 years to eradicate an isolated insurgent group is not a glowing achievement and is hardly deserving of the academic salutations it has garnered.”² Max Boot sums up COIN by observing that “the long history of low-intensity conflict reveals not only how ubiquitous guerrilla warfare has been but also how often its importance has been ignored, thus setting the stage for future humiliations at the hands of determined irregulars.”³

So, what else? If we persist in considering an insurgency a military matter, we should fight it with special military means that are free of wishy-washy doctrine; bloated, bureaucratic commands; and self-proclaimed experts—that is, with all of our military might, including the right equipment and manpower such as intelligence, special forces, and airpower. We might do better than we have done so far.

“Preventive insurgency” might represent an even better option. If nonrepresentative governments create grievances, then we should “aggressively” encourage our autocratic allies and friends to change their systems. And if that fails (e.g., Egypt in the case of Hosni Mubarak), we should limit bloodshed and prevent the extremist segment of the population from taking over the country by openly supporting the insurgents. Finally, we should help build modern nation-states that are responsive to their people.

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Air and Space Power Journal—Africa and Francophonie
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Notes

1. Rémy Madoui [aka Mauduit], *J'ai été fellagha, officier français et déserteur: Du FLN à l'OAS* [I was an insurgent, a French officer and a deserter: From the FLN to the OAS] (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 4 April 2004).

2. Andrew Mumford, *Puncturing the Counterinsurgency Myth: Britain and Irregular Warfare in the Past, Present, and Future*, Advancing Strategic Thought Series (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, September 2011), 15, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/download.cfm?q=1086>.

3. Max Boot, “The Evolution of Irregular War: Insurgents and Guerrillas from Akkadia to Afghanistan,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2013, <http://www.cfr.org/afghanistan/evolution-irregular-war/p30087>.