

Winning the Ideological Battle for the Support of the Populace (Understanding the Role of Ideology in Insurgency)

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Five things that every U.S. leader should understand about ideology:

1. Insurgent ideology is largely disposable, and any particular message is useful only so long as it binds the populace to the cause, and the counterinsurgent is also either unwilling or unable to co-opt it.
2. The insurgent only has to tell the populace what they want to hear, the counterinsurgent must actually perform in providing the populace what they need.
3. There are two steps to an effective counter-ideology program:
 - Compete a superior ideology with the populace in the marketplace of ideas, and
 - Assess the populace, and co-opt or agree with the insurgent where logical.
4. Actions speak louder than words. One's major operations are their true Strategic Communications, and any official messages to describe those actions will either lend or take credibility based upon their consistency with the public's perception of the nature of those operations.
5. U.S. ideology holds that when government fails, insurgency is both the right and the duty of the populace.

Introduction

To date far too much focus has been placed on the nature of the specific (though ever changing) ideology espoused by Bin Laden, and also on the aggrandized, almost mystical, value assessed to the role of ideology in insurgency in general, and for the Global War on Terrorism in particular. To take the position that ideology is the strategic center of gravity (source of all strength and power) of this, or any, insurgency shows a lack of understanding of both the concept of centers of gravity and the nature of insurgency. This is a topic for an entire book in of itself, so this paper will merely address a few key points on the narrower topic of the role of ideology in insurgency.

I. Insurgent ideology is largely disposable, and any particular message is useful only so long as it binds the populace to the cause, and the counterinsurgent is also either unwilling or unable to co-opt it.

An effective ideology is essential to any successful insurgency. History bears this out in countless examples of where dynamic leaders have used a powerful message to rally the populace to achieve a change of the current governmental system. What the counterinsurgent needs to understand in countering these efforts is what makes an ideology “effective.” Upon understanding the role of ideology, efforts can then be focused upon increasing the effectiveness of one’s own message, while at the same time decreasing the effectiveness of the insurgent’s. First of all, to be effective does not require the ideology to also be enduring. Ideology is only enduring when the end result of the insurgent is the same as his current ideology. A classic example of this is the ideology of Christianity espoused by Jesus of Nazareth. His ultimate ends was not to rally the people of Israel to defeat some greater power, such as their Roman conquerors, the puppet government of King Harrod, or even the Jewish religion. His endgame was the same as his current message, with no ulterior motives. This is a profoundly unique example, and even in this case where the ideology could most appropriately be identified as the center of gravity, those of Christian faith would be quick to take you to task as to what the true “source of all strength and power” behind that movement was.

Bin Laden, on the other hand, is no Messiah. He uses an ideology infused with religious overtones to rally the populace to rise up for political change for the same reason so many leaders who have gone before him have: it works. The question then for the counterinsurgent, is how to defuse that message without affronting the valid religious beliefs of the very populace whose support, as the true center of gravity in any insurgency, we are battling for.

While the counterinsurgent absolutely must contend with the issue of ideology, it must be done with the understanding that if only the ideology is defeated, the insurgent leader will simply adopt a new one. This is true because the primary purpose of ideology in a movement aimed at effecting political change is that it binds the populace to the cause of the insurgency and that it takes a position that the government is either unable, or unwilling to concede. While the Insurgent leader may appear to be wed to his chosen ideology, if he is a true insurgent, he will remain focused on his desired ends, and not so much on the means to achieve it. Mao “divorced” failed ideologies four times during his text book example of popular insurgency, ultimately holding onto a message of land reform which carried his movement to success.¹ A success, by the way, that did little to provide the promise of land reform to the populace of China.

One way in which the counterinsurgent can achieve temporary success is to simply agree with essential elements of the Insurgent’s ideology. Imagine the impact on the American Revolution if instead of sending the military might of the most powerful nation in the world in response to the actions of a handful of dissidents, King George had instead sent a simple, but heartfelt concession of those points he was able to concede, wrapped in an apology. Such a move may quite well have ended the American Revolution before it was fairly begun. There is no greater use of power than that of constraint, and no greater virtue in those who possess great power than humility. Teddy Roosevelt style diplomacy works: “Speak softly and carry a big stick, and you will go far.”

Many experts would be quick to point out that King George had little choice but to send his military to deal with the growing acts of lawlessness and dissent within the British Colony in America. To do less would have put a valuable national resource at risk, and to make concessions or offer apologies would have been an ineffectual and unacceptable act of appeasement that would have weakened his sovereign authority as King. Certainly those are valid concerns, and no course of action is without risks. King George took a proud, though reasonable approach, and failed. After all, if good governance were easy, there would not be so little of it.

The key to remember is that the insurgent is still a part of the populace and should be treated as such. Just as important is to understand that the insurgent is merely a symptom of the larger problem of poor governance, and should be ignored as much as possible in an effective counterinsurgency program, which is aimed instead at returning good governance to the populace. Good governance provides absolute immunity against any ideological attack. When one applies the broader view on insurgency and counterinsurgency as being a result of failed governance and not simply the bad acts of a misguided segment of the populace, it shines new light on historical examples. For example, arguably the most successful counterinsurgency campaign waged by the U.S. Government was the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Consider in contrast to King George the approach taken by President Lynden Johnson to a similar growing insurgency in the American populace. The impact of World War II on America had been profound on so many levels. The war effort at home and abroad required the efforts of every American, and once the war was won the nation was forever changed. Those citizens who had been excluded from the benefits of good governance prior to the war were not willing to step back into that subservient role. The level of insurgency among minorities moved steadily upward, and was nearing a crisis state when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed. Virtually all power in America was vested in one small segment of our society, and it was incumbent upon that privileged group to concede a share of that power to those who were previously powerless. Once that law was not merely enacted, but also enforced, a growing American insurgency was defeated.

Sometimes what is mischaracterized as appeasement is not weakness, or lack of physical courage in the face of adversity; sometimes it is a sign of wisdom and moral courage. To include the entire populace in good governance often requires the leader to act in the face of strong criticism from that segment of the populace that is negatively impacted by the required concessions. Those critics are also likely to be the leader's base of legitimate power. Just like every kid on the playground, world leaders are faced daily with the challenge of having the physical courage to fight when they must fight, the moral courage to walk away when they must walk away, and the wisdom to both understand and differentiate between the two. *Simply put, a strong leader recognizes the difference between appeasement and simply doing the right thing.*

II. *The insurgent only has to tell the populace what they want to hear, the counterinsurgent must actually perform in providing the populace what they need.*

This particular point should be fairly self-evident. When the governments perform, the populace remains loyal. When governments begin to fail, dissent begins to develop, and leaders will emerge from the populace armed with ideologies aimed at building a base of support for their cause. Their messages can be, and typically are, merely words. However, it is important to note that the more ineffective and uncaring the government is, the more susceptible the populace will be to the insurgent's message. To bring the populace back into the fold, mere words are never enough, the counterinsurgent must actually perform. Whether or not those efforts are sufficient will be determined by the populace. As talk is easy and cheap, and good governance is difficult and expensive, the advantage clearly goes to the insurgent.

III. *There are two steps to an effective counter-ideology program:*

- *Compete a superior ideology with the Populace in the marketplace of ideas, and*
- *Assess the Populace, and co-opt or agree with the Insurgent where logical.*

The best arguments always stand on their own merits and do not rely upon attacking the relative merits of the opposing position. This is particularly true when the argument is about something as subjective and deeply personal as religion. Virtually any effort to discredit the Islamist ideology will be perceived as an attack on the religion as a whole, and must be avoided. The West must produce a superior message.

What the U.S. should do is fall back to its last credible position, which is probably the Truman Administration, and conduct a comprehensive review of all foreign policies and programs implemented since then as they are based on the Cold War model. The end of the Cold War and the advent of globalization have rendered much of that body of work obsolete. The U.S. should then design themes and enact programs and policies that reflect the principles upon which this country was founded, tailored for the world we live in today. The founding ideology of the U.S. is timeless, and words by men like Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln are relatively impervious to attack both at home and abroad. *Any U.S. President, current or future, would be well served in these troubled times to set their personal positions and those of their respective political parties aside, and stand instead upon the credibility of the office they possess, and the ideological foundations upon which the United States of America was built.*

The second step is to assess the insurgent's message carefully against the legitimate grievances of the populace, and where logical, co-opt or agree with him. This is where the U.S. State Department and Congress must step up and assume a leading role as the primary agents of counterinsurgency for the West. They must take the lead in re-tooling our Institutions and policies for the globalized that world we currently live in. Perhaps it is time for a "Civil Rights Act" for those populaces of the world that are as excluded today as the minority populaces of the U.S. were 40 years ago. Certainly it is time for a bottom up review of U.S. policy in the Middle East, and of institutions like the United Nations to ensure that they are still relevant. Bin Laden and a handful of radical leaders in the Middle East may well wish to establish a modern Caliphate, but the populace of the Middle East, and most of the nationalist insurgencies in the region merely want the same rights to good governance and self determination enjoyed in the West. *This war is not about either the insurgent, or the counterinsurgent, it is about the populace. The focus must be on the target populace when designing policies, programs and strategic communications.*

IV. Actions speak louder than words. One's major operations are one's true Strategic Communications, and any official messages to describe those actions will either lend or take credibility based upon their consistency with the public's perception of the nature of those operations.

Recognizing that actions speak louder than words, the current Western message is dominated by our operations in Iraq. One of the most notable aspects of U.S. actions in Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines, is that because the operations there are so clearly consistent with the West's message, that it not only sends a powerful Strategic Communication throughout South East Asia, it has also proven to be quite resilient to regular attacks by various Muslim and Philippine media. Applying what is termed the "Indirect Approach," no U.S. actions are done unilaterally, no U.S. bases have been built, and most importantly, nationalist insurgents are recognized as distinct from terrorist organizations, and all actions, be they counterterrorist or counterinsurgency, are done by, through and with the forces of the government of the Philippines. Contrast this with our experience in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The tactics being employed currently by General David Petraeus are turning the tide in a favorable direction, not only on the ground, but for our Strategic Communications as well.

The failed policies and tactics of the two years preceding General Petraeus' current operations destroyed the effectiveness of any message during that period. Any words that express an intent or purpose contrary to our actions carry little weight, and actually weaken the Western position by highlighting the apparent hypocrisy of our policies. The infighting between political parties and national allies enhances this effect, and all Bin Laden has to do is sit back and smile as our civil leaders, political pundits, and a free and open media do his work for him. Again, advantage to the insurgent.

V. U.S. ideology holds that when government fails insurgency is both the right and the duty of the populace.

The American Declaration of Independence is an amazing document. It is the cornerstone of American government, and forms the core of American Ideology. Many students of insurgency take the position that during the post-WWII insurgencies of the 50's and 60's that the U.S. Ideology was one of capitalism versus the ideology of communism used to unite the populaces of those poorly governed nations that rose up to throw off western colonialism.ⁱⁱ During the post Cold War insurgencies of this generation the conflict is characterized as one of democracy versus the fundamentalist Islamism that speaks to the populaces of those poorly governed nations that are currently rising up to throw off the less direct form of western exploitation that replaced colonialism. *The fact is, that neither capitalism nor democracy are mentioned directly in either the American Declaration of Independence, or the U.S Constitution.*

What makes the Declaration of Independence so amazing is that in such a concise and complete manner, it conveys a message that is universal and timeless. This is a powerful beacon of hope to populaces everywhere, and generations of every time. In this globalized age of shrinking state power, and growing popular power, this message is more than ever not just a relic of America's

noble past, but provides the roadmap to an even greater future. Consider these tenets contained within this codification of American Ideology:

- Certain rights, to include, but not limited to, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are *inalienable* (This means that they come from God, not man, and that no government can infringe upon them. This, by the way, is a point that no Islamic fundamentalist can well counter).
- That every populace has both the *right* and the *duty* to rise up in insurgency when their government fails, i.e., becomes “despotic” (rights and duties are two of the most powerful concepts in law. A right is an authorization to act that cannot be infringed, and a duty is an order to act that cannot be ignored. The populace not only *can* revolt, they *must*).
- That governance is “of, by, and for” the people, and that all populaces are unique in their needs, and will *chose the form of government which suits them best* (this means that government is subordinate to the populace, and that no power external to that populace has the right to dictate what form that governance will take).

America is uniquely positioned to assume a leadership role on a global scale that is focused not on the governments of the world, but on their populaces. America has the strength of resources and the proper ideology to not control the world, but rather to shape its development. By empowering populaces everywhere with the ideology contained in our Declaration of Independence, and by using our strength and wealth to facilitate good governance *on their terms*, we stand an excellent chance of becoming not the heavy handed nation that others see us as, but rather as that noble nation we see in ourselves.

Conclusion

The emphasis placed upon the role of ideology from the very beginning of this Global War on Terrorism has distracted our leaders from the true nature of the conflict, and resulted in a corresponding misshaping of our strategies. We must shift our focus from one of defeating ideologies to one of improving governance, and from one of defeating terrorists to one of bringing insurgent representation of the populace back into the fold of legitimacy. By understanding the true role of ideology we can stop fearing the messages that others may stand behind, and instead draw courage from the far superior message that we stand upon.

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ⁱ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (St. Petersburg, FL:Hailer, 2005).

ⁱⁱ Michael McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: U.S. Guerilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Counterterrorism, 1940-1990: The Problem of Ideology*, 2002.

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