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Interview with Dr. John Arquilla:

How can French Encounters with Irregular Warfare in the 19th Century Inform COIN in our time?

by Michael Few

To complement the recent interviews conducted by Octavian Manea, we asked the faculty of the Department of Defense Analysis (DA) at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA to weigh in on the on-going conversation over the need and/or utility of rethinking modern counterinsurgency theory. This department provides mid-career, postgraduate instruction to the Special Operations Community. The Department of Defense Analysis is an interdisciplinary association of faculty, representing a wide range of academic and operational specialties. The Special Operations curriculum provides a focused course of instruction in irregular warfare, sub-state conflict, terrorism and counterterrorism, information operations, and other "high leverage" operations in U.S. defense and foreign policy. This interview with Dr. John Arquilla begins our series with the department.

How can French Encounters with Irregular Warfare in the 19th Century Inform COIN in our time?

Three of the most important concepts in counterinsurgency today have to do with the use of information operations, the role of swarm tactics in battle, and the need to understand how networks fight – and how to build networks of one's own. There is precious little discussion of any of these points in our own and others' doctrinal manuals and theoretical works on counterinsurgency. So, to build some theory and provide a basis for action, some data mining of earlier history is called for.

First, take information operations, particularly those involved with efforts to influence the populace, for whose support both insurgents and their adversaries vie. Perhaps the best example of success in this form of IO can be found in the war against the first "guerrillas" to be so named, the Spanish insurgents who resisted French occupation of Spain early in the 19th century. While Napoleonic forces were eventually driven from the country, two provinces, Aragon and Catalonia, were completely pacified by General Louis-Gabriel Suchet. One of his very first steps on taking command was to restore much of local governance to the Spaniards. He built hospitals, orphanages and schools. He spoke to the people of the French ideals of liberty, fraternity and equality – a welcome change from their own oppressive monarchy. The end result: French soldiers could go about unarmed amid the people. What we try so falteringly to achieve today with our influence operations, Suchet accomplished in a very hostile environment. He is worthy of study.

As to swarm tactics, one need only go a generation further among the French to find General Thomas Bugeaud waging his COIN campaign against the wily Algerian insurgent, Abd el-Kader.

The time was the 1830s and early 1840s, and when Bugeaud came in, he had to throw out virtually the whole French concept of operations – which was road-bound and dependent on artillery and the search for “decisive battle.” Instead, Bugeaud broke down French forces into myriad small combat teams – usually no more than a few hundred soldiers – and sent them off, far from the roads and without artillery, on sustained raiding operations. They soon swarmed Abd el-Kader, for he never knew where the French would strike next. And he was never able to cope with this new concept adequately, his forces suffering one of their worst defeats when a small French force, outnumbered by ten-to-one, came upon a major insurgent camp, or *smala*, routing the insurgents and capturing huge amounts of arms and supplies. Not too long after, Abd el-Kader surrendered, and over a century of generally peaceful conditions and prosperity came to Algeria. There is much to learn about swarming from Bugeaud.

Jumping ahead a half-century, to the 1890s, there is yet another example to be drawn from the French experience with irregular warfare, this time in Indochina against a network of pirates. The “Black Flags” were a consummate Vietnamese criminal/insurgent network that both preyed upon commerce and complicated French colonial rule in the region. In addition to their organizational suppleness, their various nodes enjoyed deep social ties, the bonds of loyalty often going back centuries to their origins. Colonel Joseph Galliéni, one of the key French commanders in the field, employed both Suchet’s influence strategies and Bugeaud’s swarm tactics. But he went beyond both, too, building a network of small outposts, jointly manned by French and friendly Vietnamese, throughout Tonkin (the northern part of Vietnam) where the Black Flags were strongest. A campaign that had previously stagnated soon turned decisively against the insurgents – much like Anbar in Iraq, once the Awakening got under way. The fight against the Black Flags is an excellent example of how to fight a network. It is also one of the best cases that can be used in support of the argument in favor of building networks of one’s own to fight insurgent networks.

It is interesting that all three of these examples come from French military history. Which should remind us, first, that France has had a long acquaintance with irregular warfare. But these earlier examples should also suggest to us that, even if IO, swarming and networks have risen in importance in recent years, these concepts did exist earlier on, and the lessons of their early applications should still resonate with us.

*Dr. John Arquilla has been teaching in the special operations program at the Naval Postgraduate School since 1993. The themes covered in his comments above – and many other ideas – are developed further in his forthcoming book, Insurgents, Raiders, and Bandits (due spring 2011). Additionally, John has authored Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy and co-authored The Three Circles of War: Understanding the Dynamics of Conflict in Iraq. For more on the threat of modern swarming techniques and tactics, see his recent opinion piece, US Not Prepared for Mumbai-like Terror Attacks, in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.*

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