



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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The Closers (Part 1): How Insurgencies End

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There are four ways to close an insurgency. Each of them is either good or bad depending on which side one is on. The first way is the best end for the insurgent; that is for the insurgents to win outright. It usually ends with the insurgents triumphantly marching through the nation's capital after ousting the incumbent government in a final battle. This is how the Chinese Communists came to power and Castro triumphed in Cuba.

The normal progression of an insurgency is to first gain strength as a covert organization. In the second stage, they attempt to create liberated areas where they can form a parallel government and begin to build up conventional military strength. In the final stage, the insurgent's military main force units have gained enough strength to defeat the government force in a conventional battle. Americans generally get involved in an insurgency where forces hostile to American interests are at work - and when it has become a crisis late in the second stage or early in the third.

Other insurgencies last a shorter period of time. In some, one group of elites replaces another in a government coup. Coups in fact, are the most common form of insurgency.

At the other end of the spectrum is the true popular uprising such as the People Power Revolution in the Philippines or the various colored revolutions in Eastern Europe and Central Asia as well as the recent Jasmine popular uprising in Tunisia. These make the nation virtually ungovernable and force the overthrow of the existing regime, although what will replace it is seldom clear at the time of the uprising. Communists who say that they hope that their insurgencies will result in a popular uprising don't truly believe it. Although the Bolsheviks were eventually able to gain control of the Russian Revolution, Iran's Communists were exterminated by the even more ruthless radical Shiite mullahs. Popular uprisings are very hard for any group to control.

The United States does not oppose all popular movements as a matter of policy. We have supported successful anti-Communist insurgencies, most notably in Nicaragua and Afghanistan. We have also generally supported the legitimate people power uprisings in the Philippines and in the former Soviet satellite states. The popular uprising that we truly disliked was the Iranian Revolution which birthed an anti-American theocracy as we did the Russian Revolution which was co-opted by the Communists in 1917. The tendency of hard-line anti-American elements to co-opt popular uprisings is what we do not like. How we come down regarding the Jasmine

Revolution in Tunisia and the popular uprising in Egypt, both of which are occurring as this is being written, will largely depend on who winds up in power.

At the present time however, most Americans efforts are aimed at opposing hard line Islamic Jihadist insurgencies, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The polar opposite of an insurgent victory is the crushing of an insurgency by overwhelming military and paramilitary action. The Roman victory in the Jewish Rebellion in the first century after the birth of Christ was an example of this type of end state. More recently the end of the Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka was a modern instance of this approach. There is no “hearts and minds” component to such counterinsurgency efforts; the support of the population is not a consideration. In such cases, the population in question is either a minority, as was the case of Sri Lanka, or a hostile subject nation in the case of the Jews in the Judean uprising. If the people are the sea in which the insurgent swims, as Chairman Mao asserted, the counterinsurgent in this case is not afraid to drain the sea if needed. The Romans ruthlessly suppressed the Jewish rebellions and eventually drained the sea of people through what we now call ethnic cleansing. The Sri Lankan insurgency was ended somewhat more humanely, but none-the-less, ruthlessly.

Neither of the first two manners of closing an out an insurgency is desirable or appropriate in the types of insurgencies that the United States currently faces. Americans don't like to lose, but we don't want to be seen as genocidal maniacs, no matter how odious the insurgents may be. We certainly don't want the insurgents to win, nor do we want to see the population destroyed or permanently harmed. The final two methods of closing out an insurgency are more likely to serve current American objectives.

The third method of closing out an insurgency is to degrade it to a point where it becomes a local governance and police problem; thus, it eventually fades away or becomes background noise. This is the way the Malaysian Emergency ended. In 1960, a clerk in the Malaysian Interior Ministry literally closed the book on the Emergency with a stroke of his pen. It briefly flared up in 1967, but was relatively quickly extinguished. The same happened with the Communist insurgency in the Philippines. The main disadvantage of such closings; they tend to smolder.

In many ways, the Malaysian Emergency represents a model of a counterinsurgency strategy, but it also represents a fairly simple problem that is far different than what the United States and its allies faced in Iraq, or that they continue to face in Afghanistan.

The Malayan Emergency was a special situation in that it primarily involved a single minority and a minority within that minority, the Chinese; supported by a Chinese Communist ideology. This made it fairly easy to identify the problem and isolate it.

Having said that, by the time it was identified as a threat, the insurgency had gone beyond the point where it could be controlled by police and paramilitary actions alone. By, 1950, it needed military intervention from elite British units. The British, having decided to grant Malaysia independence, wisely decided that once the situation was under military control, that it was time to treat the problem a civil-police matter.

It was a less complex problem than we deal with today. The Chinese were an easily recognizable minority in the country and it was fairly easy to cordon them off, although the “New Village” program the British and Malaysian government used during the height of the insurgency would appall human rights activists today. It isolated the Chinese population from the insurgent military cadres and denied the insurgents civilian support.

In addition, the British had created a tradition of colonial good governance that the Malay authorities were able to embrace upon independence. Neither the British nor the Malays had to deal with a truly popular based insurgency for independence, nor a sectarian civil war. It could be called a “simple counterinsurgency problem”. None-the-less, there are lessons that can be learned regarding counterinsurgency strategy.

There have been a number of insurgencies that have ended this way. However, without a peace agreement, some remain smoldering embers. The insurgencies in the Philippines have smoldered over the years. The leftist New Peoples’ Army (NPA) in the northern portion of the archipelago still simmers, as does the separatist Muslim Moro movement in the southern Muslim region rooted on the island of Mindoro.

Perhaps the best way to end an insurgency from an American perspective, where we are supporting a friendly government, is the fourth method; a negotiated settlement. This is the way that the insurgency in El Salvador ended, as did the insurgencies in several African nations such as Angola.

The real value of a negotiated end to an insurgency is that there is some form of agreement between the rebels and the existing governmental elites for potential power sharing. This represents a potential omega to the conflict rather than a slow degradation of the insurgency which, in the case of the Philippines, can always be reignited.

One of the most fragile of such agreements is the one in between South Sudan and North Sudan that was brokered by the United States in 2006, and led to the recent referendum in which preliminary results indicate South Sudan has opted for independence. That agreement remains tenuous as this is being written.

The reality of all of this is that the final two closing outcomes are the ones that Americans can accept in insurgencies where US intervention is required. Getting to the point at which the insurgency becomes a local police matter, or at which the insurgents are ready for a negotiated settlement, is the tricky part.

In Iraq, the Americans appear to have accomplished transition by a combination of negotiation with insurgent groups who had broken with Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) while degrading AQI through a complex process that involved counterinsurgency (COIN) and counterterrorism (CT). Similar efforts were made against the Shiite portion of the insurgency.

Slowly but surely, the Americans rolled back the insurgency - buying time for the Iraqi security

forces to ready themselves for transition. These efforts also involved a heavy infusion of civilian advisors to help rebuild Iraqi governance and infrastructure.

The Americans were acutely aware that the root cause of the Iraqi insurgency was their very presence, but they were also painfully aware that if they left precipitously, the vacuum in governance and the resulting anarchy and civil war would create a perfect sanctuary for the kind of terrorism that they incorrectly believed they were dealing with when they invaded Iraq in the first place.

Merely rebuilding Iraqi security forces would not, in itself, resolve the problem. Without some form of effective civil governance to provide the kind of basic government services that the Iraqis had grown used to under the decades-long Baathist rule, no Iraqi government could survive.

The United States government is now trying to replicate that success under very different circumstances in Afghanistan. This series will examine some of the lessons learned from the civil-military cooperation effort in the Iraqi experience and create observations that may help in Afghanistan; and perhaps in Yemen, Somalia, and other failed and failing states where we attempt to eliminate potential terrorist sanctuaries.

In my last experience in Iraq, I was one of the civilian closers who participated in the turnover of primary responsibility for counterinsurgency operations to the Iraqis. This series is based on my observations, and experience as well as research and comparison of notes with other veterans of the transition.

It will examine several issues these will include:

- How civilians can contribute to terrain denial (holding a liberated area)
- The role of civilians in rebuilding civilian governance institutions and infrastructure
- The role of civilians in rebuilding agricultural infrastructure
- The civilian role in intelligence gathering
- How civilians can ease the transition to civilian control

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