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A Handout on US Doctrine and Western Hemisphere Counterinsurgency

Not yet able to contain or explain all that the above title could require, I confine myself to a much smaller subject that fits within the title's reach: how some arguments of the violent left occupy US counterinsurgency doctrine. That is to say, US political and military doctrine regarding the nature of insurgency and the conduct of government counterinsurgency has carried within it some of the doctrinaire thinking (or propaganda) characteristically expounded by violent leftist revolutionaries. The US tendency to re-export this thinking has had a variable impact on the conduct of counterinsurgency in the Western Hemisphere.

I don't claim that the above assertion regarding the anti-status quo spirit and content of US counterinsurgency doctrine is globally generalizable, although it may be. The examples I use herein come almost entirely from Latin America and mostly from Colombia. None come from recent American experience in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Seven themes, most of which can be tied to arguments or argumentation used by the violent left in Latin America, can be identified within the body of US counterinsurgency doctrine. All of them have their utility; most have risen to the status of articles of faith in insurgency and counterinsurgency writing; and all are over-believed to the point that their matter-of-fact presence causes misapplication of resources, operational impotencies, and displacement of more important factors. Before listing and discussing those themes, however, the initial assertion -- that US counterinsurgent doctrine is insurgent-friendly -- can be defended using a series of historical mentions.

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They are admittedly selective, anecdotal, and tailored to the argument. They should be used with caution. They are not the whole story. Still, after all the disclaimers possible, they tell an important truth about the determinants of tone and bias that often cause American counterinsurgency doctrine to be limited in utility and light.

The Declaration of Independence, birthing document of the North American experiment, is unavoidably and undeniably insurgent. It explicitly justifies the use of violence to overthrow a constituted government. It reasserts indelibly the proposition that an insurgent force, and its use of violence, can be legitimate. By corollary logic, this announcement of legitimacy in the use of illegal force planted the idea that the legitimacy of government, derived of its conduct, was a question for constant contemplation. Today, the notion is all but taken for granted that grooming a perception of government legitimacy is a principle necessity of successful counterinsurgency. The life of that assumption can be traced back through the fact that in North America the dominant, millennial piece of writing on the subject is a call to rebellion.

Moreover, this past June 14th the US Army celebrated its 233rd birthday, not its 232nd. On June 14th, 1775, "Congress adopted 'the American continental army' after reaching a consensus position in The Committee of the Whole. This procedure and the desire for secrecy account for the sparseness of the official journal entries for the day."¹ The military arm of the American insurgency was created by underground movement. America's mechanism for managing insurgent political violence was created before the public statement of revolutionary intent. It is symbolic that in the United States, the 14th of June is celebrated, quietly, every year before Independence Day by many who

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recognize the day not only as the birthday of a military institution, but as the de facto birthday of the people's revolutionary enterprise. As will be developed further on, the fact of secrecy lies at the heart of what makes insurgency unique, not asymmetry of belligerent capacity, style of warfare or propensity in the use of surprise.

The United State's first major military adventure to the south was the war against Mexico in 1848. In that war, clearly of an international character, the invading US commanders found themselves in the midst of indifferent and ambivalent Mexican nationalism, not the fervent, monolithic and decided Mexicanness that is often portrayed. In that context of scattered dissidence and superficial national identity, Winfield Scott found willing subversives to help defeat the "Napoleon of the West," General Antonio López de Santa Anna Pérez de Lebrón. America's imperial adventure into Spanish-speaking lands did not find stubborn opposition to occupation, but more often a mixture of indifference and willing opportunism. That Mexican insurgents might hold the moral high ground vis-à-vis their government was by the Americans presumed. Rebellion was good.

In the American Civil War, for many American historians and sociologists the crucible of the American nation, we note the publication of General Order 100, also known as the Lieber Code. Fittingly, it was written by a professor from the University of Columbia then passed through a board of army officers to be promulgated by President Lincoln. It is by general consensus recognized as the root document of the written international laws of war that followed, and progenitor of human rights theory and doctrine in the modern age. It may well be the first US paper that can be properly

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characterized as counterinsurgent doctrine, but it does not deal with resources, maneuver or objectives in stopping insurgency. It deals exclusively with the moral and ethical conduct of the government's own troops. It appropriately remains a notion tied to insurgent legitimacy.

Jumping to the first 20th century intervention by the United States into the internal conflicts of other countries in the Western Hemisphere, consider US support to insurgents of the Colombian isthmus that created US space for construction of the Panama Canal. (One could effectively argue US intervention into Cuba as the first intervention of the century, in which case this proposition of American preference for insurgency would be equally supported.) US encouragement of separatist insurgency came after the Colombian congress had declined to sell canal rights at the price offered by the US, a refusal that drew Theodore Roosevelt's now famous invective—that the Colombian leaders were 'homicidal corruptionists.' President Roosevelt got away with using such language in part due to the perception, supported by considerable evidence, that it was true, if not unexceptional. He also called for a "spontaneous revolt", a categorization that was disingenuous at the time, remains a cliché of the American concept of true insurgency, and which I believe is almost never to be found. Selling to the American public the idea of support to a grass-roots insurgency against a nominally illegitimate government was easy. That it had a patent geostrategic objective goes without saying, but without the right moral sentiment, there perhaps would not have been enough reason, even after the "splendid little war" of 1898 (splendid in part because, however hapless, the opponent was an established empire), to motivate American public support for the arrogation.

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Skipping well ahead to the current conditions and times, we offer the language of President William Clinton's Presidential Decision Directive/NSC 73, August 3, 2000, which stated in relevant part,

“As a matter of Administration policy, we will not support Colombian counterinsurgency efforts. We will, however, provide support, in accordance with existing authorities and this policy, to the Government of Colombia for force protection and for security directly related to counterdrug efforts, regardless of the source of the threat. This Administration remains convinced that the ultimate solution to Colombia's long-standing civil conflict is through a successful peace process, not a decisive military victory, and believes that counterdrug progress will contribute to progress towards peace.”

US government perceptions of its national interests in the Western Hemisphere have not necessarily been consistent with those of other parts of the world, but it is safe to say that President Clinton's policy for Colombia was constrained by a quantity of American thought, represented in the legislature and foreign affairs bureaucracy, that prefers insurgency over counterinsurgency, all else aside.

The above selection of anecdotes is offered as evidence of a permanent current of American attitude. As is typical of US culture, it is but one of many intermixed currents, but it would be hard to deny that a fundamental preference, a favoring presumption, for the insurgent underdog exists in American thinking. That preference allows for a much

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easier reception, acceptance and internalization of insurgent arguments than might otherwise be the case. In turn, and as a natural consequence, some of the insurgent arguments find space in US military doctrine related to low-intensity or internal conflicts. Below I offer seven themes that have eased themselves into the basket of guiding assumptions in US counterinsurgency doctrine. I am not suggesting that they are simply insurgent, but rather that it would be useful to recognize some of the insurgent preference or origin resident in the lot. I am also not suggesting that they are wrong, but rather that as a group they may be less than appropriate in given circumstances, and incomplete in any case. I call the seven “misdirecting” themes, not because they are wrong, but because they are right enough to throw doctrine off-scent, to mislead. I think the verb in Spanish *despistar*, to throw off-track, would be appropriate appropriate.

Eight Misdirecting Themes Seen in US Counterinsurgency Doctrine

Socio-economic causation

That the causes of and reasons for insurgency are to be found in inequitable socio-economic conditions.

Natural Protraction

That the war of insurgents is by its nature protracted.

Asymmetry

That the unique characteristic of insurgent warfare is the differential in resources, methods and objectives between the insurgent and counterinsurgent.

Popular Support

That the center of gravity of insurgency and counterinsurgency is the greater population. From this it follows the “hearts and minds” orientation.

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Spontaneity

That insurgent resistance can spring to life without hierarchical leadership or centralized design.

Political over Military resolution

That the answer to insurgency must be more political than military ,and that lessons of the 19th century masters of operational strategy don't apply.

Legitimacy

That government legitimacy is the basis of success of counterinsurgency, and that electoral democracy is the basis of legitimacy.

So ubiquitous are these concepts in American counterinsurgency doctrine that to require citation would be to disrespect the logical burden of proof. That is to say, it is hard to find any official US writing on counterinsurgency into which all or most of these terms have not insinuated themselves. One of the best examples, however, is an unclassified pamphlet on insurgency that has been used by the US intelligence community for decades.² As part of a definition of insurgency it asserts,

“Insurgency is a protracted political-military activity directed toward completely or partially controlling the resources of a country through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations. Insurgent activity...is designed to weaken government control and legitimacy while increasing insurgent control and legitimacy.
...”

In a paragraph titled “Effective Counterinsurgency” the same pamphlet states, inter alia,

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“A country faces or soon may face an insurgency. Can its government wage a successful counterinsurgency campaign? What variables should be evaluated? At least 14 factors—seven military and seven nonmilitary—are critical to a government’s counterinsurgency effort. Virtually all of these factors influence popular support for the government’s cause....”³

Four of the seven “misdirecting” items – protraction, popular support, legitimacy and political action are found in high dosage in the pamphlet, with socio-economic causation being the lone absent exception.

As a group, the seven themes deserve greater caution than they are given, and even some measure of rejection. Partly this is because several of them promote and reinforce ploys and justifications used by violent illegal armed groups, whatever their ideological disposition. As a lot the seven serve to divert government attention away from the most compelling insurgent concerns, prominent among these being the physical safety of the insurgent leadership.

Socio-economic causation.

Although the counterinsurgency pamphlet mentioned above did not stress socio-economic causation, the notion that the causes of insurgency can be found in human suffering has been lavishly serviced by other studies and findings sponsored by the US government. One of the most recent of these is a sequence of three reports on “state failure.”[defined “state failure” as revolutionary wars, ethnic wars, adverse regime

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changes, and genocides or politicides.] The 1994 version of the report determined that the presence of three primary factors predict seventy percent of all insurgency problems. The variables identified by that report were a failure of international trade, high infant mortality and undemocratic elections. According to the latest of the reports the “odds of state failure was [sic] seven times as high for partial democracies as for full democracies and autocracies.” Sidestepping the issue of the validity or usefulness of the reports, it is clear that near the center of their analyses lies an unshakeable assumption regarding the significance of underlying socio-economic conditions as either a cause of state failure and insurgency, or as an integral part of the definition of state failure itself. Compare this to related comments in the 1972 Human Factors Considerations of Undergrounds in Insurgencies, one of a series of works from the Special Operations Office of the American University that at the time, toward the end of the Vietnam War, held considerable sway as an influence on US government counterinsurgency thinking.⁴ On the question of socio-economic factors, the 1972 work noted that “There are few comprehensive studies on the relationship between economic factors and insurgencies.” The work mentions that one contemporary comparison of Gross Domestic Product (GNP) and domestic political violence showed low levels of violence in countries with very high levels of GNP and in those countries with a very low level of GNP. The middle range countries seemed most susceptible. In Latin America, the work noted, some of the highest economic achievers relative to the region – Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba – suffered insurgencies while others did not. Haiti was an opposite, being among the poorer countries. Since 1972, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Peru, and Guatemala have all been stricken, as well as other countries to a lesser extent.

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Constant mention of socio-economic performance as a referent in the measurement of insurgencies seems to lead inexorably, even if unintentionally, to prescriptions aimed at improving general socio-economic conditions. It remains pure speculation, however, whether or not any such improvements in general socio-economic performance move a given society away from or toward the range of conditions most likely to encourage insurgency. Economic development measures often aren't targeted so as to influence the specific sets of individuals positioned to help the government in counterinsurgency. Furthermore, there are examples of insurgent movements, such as Spain's ETA, about which the economic causation model seems wholly irrelevant.

Latin American insurgents universally justify violence by pointing out economic suffering and injustices. Governments, however, are rarely able to influence overall economic performance to any great degree within the time of the practical life cycle of the insurgency. Socio-economic improvement is a good idea in its own right, and of course a general economic improvement can provide a government with necessary resources, but an observation regarding socio-economic injustice should not be misinterpreted as the first part of a logical syllogism that offers socio-economic improvements as a counterinsurgent strategy in its own right. Local exceptions abound, and some programs aimed at improvement in individual material well-being are obviously effective. In Colombia, for instance, school lunch programs helped keep children in the school buildings, rather than out in the neighborhood where they were easy recruitment fodder for illegal armed groups.

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Protractedness.

Insurgents typically make the argument that a conflict will be prolonged indefinitely if a political solution is not found (that government concessions must be made, negotiation undertaken). The counterinsurgent may be too quick to assert the same notion, often in order to explain or justify slow progress. The Colombian administration of Andres Pastrana adopted this position, explicitly stating that the government had to negotiate with the guerrilla because the guerrilla could do so much harm and because the war's protracted nature made it essentially un-winnable in time to keep the guerrilla from doing grave harm. A number of US doctrinal materials state explicitly that insurgent war is a naturally protracted affair. It is not. The Japanese were in near constant conventional campaign from the early 1930s until 1945 while Che Guevara, (heralded as a brilliant insurgent general and strategic theorist) was beaten badly in Congo then quickly dispatched in Bolivia.⁵ The comparison of the two (Imperial Japanese vice Guevarista pretensions) would yield a result that conventional war is ten times more protracted than insurgent war, and I believe that such a seemingly errant statistic is closer to the general truth. The broad history of insurgent wars in the Western Hemisphere, including those won and lost by the government, does not reflect that they are necessarily prolonged. If we were to include *golpes de estado* (coups) under the semantic umbrella of "insurgencies," then Western Hemisphere insurgencies would in no way average out longer than conventional wars. US attention tends to fixate on those insurgent wars that take a long time, thereby gaining tautological strength for the notion, but even without including *golpes de estado*, a review of insurgent efforts in Venezuela, Argentina,

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Uruguay, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Bolivia, Peru, and elsewhere does not suggest that insurgencies are by their nature protracted. Someone protracts them if they can, and that someone is almost always a guerrilla leader with uncommon capability and opportunity.

Pointing out the historical occasions of abbreviated insurgencies does not erase the fact that many insurgent wars of the twentieth century, in Latin America in particular, have been all but interminable. The central point I wish to make here is not about average duration, but about the tendency to avoid or to skew the question of causation by use of the passive voice. Statements to the effect that the 'war is prolonged' or that 'guerrilla wars are protracted affairs' are at times lazy usages. Observers of internal war who are seeking objective pathways to their resolution might do better to focus on the active voice. Insurgent, rebel, revolutionary leaders survive by keeping secure their lines of movement and retreat to refuge. They must prolong the conflict in order to survive. They protract the violence because their personal demise means the end of their insurgency. Internal wars are never just protracted. Guerrillas protract them, and the reason for protraction is a matter of life and death – theirs. At times, however, it appears the counterinsurgent also protracts the insurgent war by having internalized the idea that longevity is the nature of the beast. Consequently patience and a low-gear, sustainable flow of resources and willpower is the presumptive advice. This mindset, however, is what the guerrilla needs. In most situations I think it is only the insurgent who is benefited by the notion of natural prolongation.

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Asymmetry

Asymmetry is the latest and perhaps the most tedious of terms currently in US counterinsurgency conversation. The term has gained widespread international use in response to US writing, and is used fluidly to refer to the methods and operational objectives suitable for warring against the United States. Useful is the term's connotation that the insurgent, by necessity, will be more inventive and strategic than his US adversary, who is presumably complacent. Additionally, there may be useful room for the word in order to describe the relative moral latitude with which the insurgent may act as opposed to the counterinsurgent. Otherwise, the practical utility of the observation of asymmetry should be questioned. It falls too quickly to the scorn of "Of course," and "So what?" A military contest of any description in which no overall asymmetry exists between the contenders would logically go on forever. Only symmetrical warfare would by its nature be protracted. The 2008 US manual Counterinsurgency is mercifully free of the term, except for one unfortunate entry: "Protracted conflicts favor insurgents, and no approach makes better use of that asymmetry than the protracted popular war."

Asymmetry, as a guiding theme, has another unfortunate consequence. It creates and enforces a predisposition for the defense. When asymmetry comes to mean the use of surprise by the insurgent enemy in both his methods and selection of objectives, the natural response of the counterinsurgent is to concentrate on anticipating, watching for and defending against that surprise. While useful, such a mindset seems to relegate initiative, even strategy itself, to the insurgent enemy.

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Popular Support.

There is little from Latin American examples, and especially from Colombia to suggest that broad popular support is necessary for the success of an insurgency. As for successful counterinsurgency, logic insists that such support would be helpful. Any cursory review of insurgencies in Latin America reveals that some of the longest surviving illegal organizations/movements have been able to profit, protect and encourage their leaders for decades on the back of miniscule public support. The numbers in Colombia speak clearly. President Alvaro Uribe was reelected with over 62% of the popular vote during a first round election that was essentially a referendum on his hard line against the country's illegal armed groups. Active supporters of the guerrillas probably do not exceed 2% of the population. It appears that only the amount necessary to secure routes of escape and places of refuge for guerrilla leadership is actually necessary.

The mixture of relevant public psychological quantities bearing on insurgent or counterinsurgent success includes ambivalence, apathy, fear, confusion, sport, revenge, etc. These influence the resources and options available to the various contenders, and so it would be foolish to suggest that efforts to foster public support are not valuable. Of course they are, and competitors in internal wars attend vigorously to the various components and dimensions of public attitude. That said, the public psychological needs of a successful insurgency require particularized definition, and in a given case may be quite sparse. Ignorance on the part of the majority population may alone suffice, and fear among the right sectors always seems to go a long way, at least for the insurgent. It is for

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this reason that I include popular support as a misdirecting concept. Yes, the government should expend some measure of resources on the general morale and psychological details of the population, and more particularly on those elements of the population that can immediately assist in defeating the insurgent. The counterinsurgent might do better, however, to not pay too much heed to insurgent arguments that the war is principally a psychological question, an ideological fight, or a fight for hearts and minds. While the public psychological dimension is worthy of attention and resource assignment, the insurgent leaders is the real insurgents. As long as insurgent leaders have the minimum morale necessary to carry on, they will be able to prolong the insurgency. With rare exception, the insurgent leaders must be physically defeated or be made to arrive at a conclusion that their physical defeat is immediately unavoidable.

Political over military resolution.

One of the most often suffered shibboleths in discussions of insurgency and counterinsurgency is the presupposed dichotomy of political solutions vice military solutions, with an almost automatic pandering to the notion that political solutions are the necessary and dominant preference. Of the eight misdirecting themes this may be the most common submission to insurgent argumentation, as it makes so little sense on the surface. That the two concepts are on the same plane such that one can be favored over the other is a semantic deception created by the bifurcating form of the sentence.

'Military' and 'political,' however, do not stand as opposable options. The finessed distinction is a near universal argumentation staple of the Latin American guerrilla leader -- who understands full-well that he must avoid being killed, captured or physically

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separated from his sanctuary and refuge. The resourceful guerrilla leader can overcome every other setback, but not physical capture or demise. In most cases, when the insurgent leaders are gone, the insurgency withers.

The idea of spontaneous, networked, multi-leader revolt may be in vogue in the Internet age, but it is not seen; I cannot provide an example, at least not from Latin America. No leaders, no nothing. So the guerrilla leader must preoccupy himself with protection of his skin (and often of his family members), and to do this, it is convenient and natural for him to raise as high as possible -- even to the level of political philosophy -- that it is impossible to eliminate insurgent leadership, that other leaders will inevitably appear. Better yet if he can obfuscate altogether the central fact that military progress in counterinsurgency means to kill or capture the insurgent leaders. There is no politics vs. military, but if the insurgent leader can confabulate the word *political* with the word *negotiated*; and *military* with *brutal* or *intransigent*, his potential to protract his conflict is improved. There exists, meanwhile, a logically available political solution for the government: to press the government's instrument of military power to close with and eliminate the insurgent leadership. There exists as well a politic of creating those institutions and conditions in a society likely to reduce the possibility that erstwhile guerrilla leaders will be successful in mounting future insurgent movements. The competent counterinsurgent might, however, do well to wholly reject the dichotomy of political vs. military.

A concomitant of the "Political over Military" theme, and an exact propagandistic goal of the insurgent left, is to cause the counterinsurgent explicitly to disregard classic strategy as inapplicable. In Latin America we see cases in which guerrilla leaders take

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scrupulous interest in the vocabulary and lessons of classic strategy, explaining their designs for territorial dominance in terms of lines of communication, centers of gravity and culminating points, etc. In Colombia in the late 1990s occurred the spectacle of an insurgent force nearing 20,000 well armed and uniformed members forming brigade-size task forces. In nearly the same breath that FARC leaders confirmed their goal of taking over the country, they argued that no military solution to the conflict could be found or was appropriate and that conventional military thinking would be forever unresponsive to the conditions of the conflict. Sadly, much of this dissemblance was internalized by the Colombian government and even the Colombian army. When that changed, when leadership determined that the FARC could and would be beaten militarily, a strategic and military-intellectual corner was turned.

Legitimacy

All of the other misdirecting concepts lead to and feed off that of *legitimacy*, which I consider to be the most deviating and distracting of the group. The notion of legitimacy is so amorphous, and so close in connotation to the word *good* that to place it as an operational goal or value in counterinsurgency is just to beg the question, even while it is admittedly a necessity. Mentioning legitimacy may leave a good taste in the mouth, but it wants in nutritional value for counterinsurgency planners. It rarely moves doctrine toward action, and becomes a formless quantity that is equally available to the argumentation abilities and pursuits of either contender. In a given conflict we can forcefully assert that liberal, pluralistic, egalitarian democracy is legitimate – or we could assert with equal vigor and sincerity that God-centered, cleric-lead mortal sacrifice is the

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more legitimate path for the soul. So what? Looking at the world coldly it seems that many autocratic governments (scarcely legitimate in “Western” measurement) have been successful in crushing insurgencies. The search for and creation of legitimacy tends toward pure perception, and while perception is important, I offer that it would be better that counterinsurgent doctrine not found itself on ephemeral elements -- of what might reasonably be labeled the cult of legitimacy, but rather on those aspects of governance and population control that are rooted in practical administrative experience. If open elections are considered legitimate, then such an election is good in and of itself. However, the creation of public records – boring census, marriage, corporate and cadastral data for instance – will yield an important counterinsurgent efficiency that is independent of standard arguments about legitimacy.

What is it, then, that US doctrine has been made to overlook? I restate the disclaimers tied to the list of distracting themes: The eight themes are not falsehoods. They are important. They need, however, to be correctly dimensioned and not allowed to exclude what in a given situation may be more important. I believe that the subjoined laundry list (an appropriate term in that *laundry list* suggests the modesty of a mnemonic device suitable to a field manual rather than presuming a set of doctrinal principles) of considerations to be intermixed with the eight mentioned themes.

Anonymity

Insurgent lines of communication

Culminating points in pursuits

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Economic value of terrain

Control architecture and infrastructure design

Security land-use planning

Territorial scrutiny

Forensic geography

Social contract development

Fortification design and placement

Some items on this laundry list may not be familiar and require elaboration -- but that is for another brownbag.

¹ Robert Wright, *The Continental Army* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1983), p. 23.

² One of the best, perhaps is an undated and unclaimed reference used lovingly within the US Intelligence Community titled Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency

³ Among the "Military Factors" mentioned in the pamphlet are:

Leadership. The degree of professionalism that characterizes a country's military force.
Troop behavior and discipline. The quality of the relationship between soldiers deployed in the field and the surrounding population.

Civil-military relations. The ability of civilian authorities to influence military operations, especially with regard to proper consideration for political objectives.

Popular militia. A government's ability to establish and maintain a popular militia to assist regular forces in maintaining security."

Note that most of the "Military Factors" aren't.

⁴ Human Factors Considerations of Undergrounds In Insurgencies, Special Operations Research Office, the American University Washington, D.C reprinted from the 1972 edition. > University Press of the Pacific, Honolulu, Hawaii, 2001 p.71.

⁵ See, "The Death of Che Guevara: Declassified," by Peter Kornbluh, in [National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 5](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB5/index.html#chron), online at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB5/index.html#chron>