

Counterinsurgency *Redux*

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Counterinsurgency is fashionable again: more has been written on it in the last four years than in the last four decades. As William Rosenau of RAND recently observed,

insurgency and counterinsurgency...have enjoyed a level of military, academic, and journalistic notice unseen since the mid-1960s. Scholars and practitioners have recently reexamined 19th- and 20th-century counterinsurgency campaigns waged by the United States and the European colonial powers, much as their predecessors during the Kennedy administration mined the past relentlessly in the hope of uncovering the secrets of revolutionary guerrilla warfare. The professional military literature is awash with articles on how the armed services should prepare for what the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) refers to as “irregular warfare,” and scholars, after a long hiatus, have sought to deepen our understanding of the roles that insurgency, terrorism, and related forms of political violence play in the international security environment.¹

This is heartening for those who were in the wilderness during the years when Western governments regarded counterinsurgency as a distraction, of interest only to historians. So it is no surprise that some have triumphantly urged the re-discovery of classical, “proven” counterinsurgency methods.²

But, this paper suggests, some of this enthusiasm may be misplaced. In fact, today’s insurgencies differ significantly — at the level of policy, strategy, operational art and tactical technique — from those of earlier eras. An enormous amount of classical counterinsurgency remains relevant. Indeed, counterinsurgency provides the “best fit” framework for strategic problems in the War on Terrorism.³ But much is new in counterinsurgency *redux*, possibly requiring fundamental re-appraisals of conventional wisdom.

The term “classical counterinsurgency” describes the theory of counter-revolutionary warfare developed in response to the so-called wars of national liberation from 1944 to about 1982.⁴ The term “counterinsurgency” was invented in this period, which produced a canon of works now regarded as “classics” (and listed as such in the latest U.S. counterinsurgency manual).⁵ Key theorists included David Galula, Robert Thompson, Frank Kitson, Bernard Fall, Mao Zedong, Che Guevara and Vo Nguyen Giap. These classics have colored the modern view of earlier theorists like T.E. Lawrence, Louis Lyautey and C.E. Callwell (whose works are often seen through the lens of 1960s counterinsurgency). Classical counterinsurgency constitutes a dominant paradigm through which practitioners approach today’s conflicts — often via the prescriptive application of “received wisdom” derived by exegesis from the classics. The 1960s theorists cast a long shadow.

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This paper builds on field evidence gathered in the 1990s during fieldwork for a doctoral dissertation on insurgency.⁶ It draws on personal experience as a commander, operations officer, intelligence officer and military advisor to indigenous forces during operations in the Middle East, Pacific and Southeast Asia over the past decade. More importantly, it reflects insights gained since 9/11, including firsthand observation of counterinsurgency in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, Thailand and the Northwest Frontier of Pakistan.⁷ In the light of this evidence, classical counterinsurgency seems curiously divorced from contemporary reality. This paper asks why.

Two theoretical points may help frame the discussion. First, obviously, the concept of “*counter-insurgency*” is logically contingent on that of “*insurgency*”. Counterinsurgency is “all measures adopted to suppress an insurgency”.⁸ Thus, the nature of counterinsurgency is not fixed, but shifting: it evolves in response to changes in insurgency. There is no constant set of operational techniques in counterinsurgency; rather, this is a form of “*counter-warfare*”⁹ that applies all elements of national power against insurrection. As insurrection changes, so does counterinsurgency. Hence, to understand modern counterinsurgency one must first understand modern insurgency.

Second, insurgency is a struggle to control a contested political space, between a state (or group of states or occupying powers), and one or more popularly based, non-state challengers.¹⁰ Therefore changes in the state, its functions as an independent polity or member of a regional community, or in the international system, change the nature of insurgency. As Gordon McCormick argues, history shows that insurgents rarely overthrow nation-states, but when they do there are usually world-historical consequences.¹¹ Thus, to understand insurgency we must understand the state system insurgents are attacking.

Against this background, the paper will examine some characteristics of contemporary insurgency, before exploring possible new models for this form of warfare.

Contemporary Insurgency

Classical counterinsurgency theory posits an insurgent challenge to a functioning (though often fragile) state. The insurgent challenges the *status quo*; the counterinsurgent seeks to reinforce the state and so defeat the internal challenge. This applies to some modern insurgencies — Thailand, Sri Lanka and Colombia are examples. But in other cases, insurgency today follows state failure, and is not directed at taking over a functioning body politic, but at dismembering or scavenging its carcass, or contesting an “ungoverned space”. Chechnya, Somalia and East Timor are examples of this. In other cases (like Afghanistan) the insurgent movement pre-dates the government. This situation is covered in works on colonial wars (such as C.E. Callwell’s *Small Wars*¹² and the Marine *Small Wars Manual*¹³) but not emphasized in classical 1960s counterinsurgency theory.

Similarly, in classical theory, the insurgent initiates. Thus, Galula asserts that “whereas in conventional war, either side can initiate the conflict, only one — the insurgent — can initiate a revolutionary war, for counterinsurgency is only an effect of insurgency”.¹⁴ Classical theorists emphasize the problem of recognizing insurgency early. Sir Robert Thompson observes that “at the first signs of an incipient insurgency...no one likes to admit that anything is going wrong. This automatically leads to a situation where government countermeasures are too little and too late”.¹⁵ But, in several modern campaigns — Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Chechnya, for example — the government

or invading coalition forces initiated the campaign, whereas insurgents are strategically reactive (as in “resistance warfare”). Such patterns are readily recognizable in historical examples of resistance warfare, but less so in classical counterinsurgency theory.¹⁶

Politically, in many cases today, the counterinsurgent represents revolutionary change, while the insurgent fights to preserve the *status quo* of ungoverned spaces, or to repel an occupier — a political relationship opposite to that envisaged in classical counterinsurgency. Pakistan’s campaign in Waziristan since 2003 exemplifies this. The enemy includes al-Qa’ida (AQ) linked extremists and Taliban, but also local tribesmen fighting to preserve their traditional culture against 21st century encroachment.¹⁷ The problem of weaning these fighters away from extremist sponsors, while simultaneously supporting modernization, does somewhat resemble pacification in traditional counterinsurgency. But it also echoes colonial campaigns, and includes entirely new elements arising from the effects of globalization.¹⁸

One of the most significant “globalization effects” is the rise of a worldwide audience, giving insurgents near-instantaneous means to publicize their cause. Globalized internet communication also enables moral, financial and personnel support, creating a strategic hinterland or “virtual sanctuary” for insurgents. Classical theory deals with “active” and “passive” sanctuaries, methods to quarantine such sanctuaries and their effects on insurgent performance.¹⁹ But it treats sanctuary as primarily a geographical space in which insurgents regroup or receive external support. However, today’s internet-based virtual sanctuary is beyond the reach of counterinsurgent forces or neighboring governments, and its effects are difficult to quarantine. Insurgents in Iraq are adept at exploiting global media effects, while the “Global Islamic Media Front” (*al-Jabhah al-'ilamiyah al-islamiyah al-'alamiyah*) and AQ’s *as-Sahab* media production arm have achieved new heights of professionalism.²⁰ Internet-based financial transfers, training and recruitment, clandestine communication, planning and intelligence capabilities allow insurgents to exploit virtual sanctuary for more than just propaganda. Classical counterinsurgency theory has little to say about such electronic sanctuary.

As Oxford’s Audrey Cronin convincingly argues, cyber-mobilization or “electronic *levee en masse*” is a major new factor. “Individually accessible, ordinary networked communications such as personal computers, DVDs, videotapes, and cell phones are altering the nature of human social interaction, thus also affecting the shape and outcome of domestic and international conflict”²¹, she observes, noting that

the Internet is utterly intertwined with the insurgency in Iraq, for example. Insurgent attacks are regularly followed with postings of operational details, claims of responsibility, and tips for tactical success. Those who use insurgent chat rooms are often monitored by the hosts and, if they seem amenable to recruitment, contacted via email. Insurgent sites contain everything from practical information for traveling to Iraq to morale boosters for those currently involved in the struggle. Videos of killings by the “Baghdad Sniper” or “Juba,” who is claimed to have killed 143 American soldiers and injured 54, are posted on the web. Cyber-mobilization already has changed the character of war, making it much harder for the United States to win in Iraq, and it has the potential to culminate in further interstate war in the 21st century.²²

The trans-national character of modern insurgency is also new. Classical-era insurgents copied each other (for example, the Algerian FLN copied the Viet Minh, and EOKA

copied the Jewish *Irgun Zvai Leumi*).²³ But each movement operated in its own country, emulation typically happened after the event, and direct cooperation between movements was rare. Thus classical theory typically regards insurgency as something that occurs within one country or district, between an internal non-state actor and a single government.²⁴ This is reflected in official definitions of insurgency.²⁵ By contrast, in the field today we see real-time cooperation and cross-pollination between insurgents in many countries.²⁶ Ayman al-Zawahiri has referred to a four-stage strategy in Iraq, involving expulsion of U.S. forces, creation of an Islamic Emirate in Sunni areas, its extension to neighboring countries and then attacks on Israel.²⁷ This goes far beyond classical single-state insurgent goals. AQ operatives pass messages between Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq.²⁸ Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that first appear in Chechnya proliferate to Iraq and Afghanistan. Iranian IED technology appears in Iraq²⁹, and Pakistani extremists operate in Afghanistan.³⁰ Insurgents in Iraq mount operations in response to events in Lebanon, and conduct attacks in Jordan.³¹ Southeast Asian insurgents apply methods developed in the Middle East, which circulate via the internet or on CD-ROM.³² This trans-national pattern is part of a deliberate AQ strategy, but there is evidence that non-AQ groups (including extreme environmentalists and far-left groups) are also noting and copying AQ methods.³³

Modern insurgent strategy — being, not doing

Classical theory describes insurgent movements as seeking to gain control of the state, or a portion of it. Galula asserts flatly that “the conflict arises from the action of the insurgent aiming to seize power – or at splitting off from the existing country”.³⁴ This was arguably appropriate for 20th century revolutionary and separatist movements.³⁵

But the intent to replace existing governments or create independent states is only partly evident today. For example, in Iraq multiple groups are seeking to paralyze and fragment the state, rather than to gain control of its apparatus and govern. Insurgents favor strategies of provocation (to undermine support for the coalition) and exhaustion (to convince the coalition to leave Iraq) rather than displacement of the government. This is a “resistance” insurgency rather than a “revolutionary” insurgency.³⁶ Insurgents want to destroy the Iraqi state, not secede from it or supplant it. As Anthony Cordesman pointed out in March 2006, the

insurgency has not been able to...establish sanctuaries, win larger-scale military clashes, or dominate the field. ...Much of its activity consists of bombings of soft civilian targets designed largely to provoke a more intense civil war or halt the development of an effective Iraqi government, rather than progress towards control at even the local level...Provoking civil war and undermining the Iraqi political process may not bring the insurgents victory, but it can deny it to the Iraqi government and the US.³⁷

Similarly, Afghan insurgents act as “strategic spoilers”, seeking to discredit and undermine the government by targeting coalition forces, officials and President Karzai’s support base in the Durrani tribal confederation. Again, there is no apparent strategy to seize the instruments of the state. The insurgents seek to expel foreigners, but have little to say about what might replace the current government.³⁸

Indeed, some modern insurgents lack any unified strategy, compared to classical insurgents. As Jeffrey Record and Andrew Terrill noted in 2004,

In Vietnam, the Communists waged a classic, peasant-based, centrally directed, three-stage, Maoist model insurgency, culminating in a conventional military victory. The Communists also had a clear and well-publicized political, economic, and social agenda. In Iraq, small, scattered, and disparate groups wage a much smaller-scale war of ambushes, assassinations, car bombings, and sabotage against U.S. and other coalition forces and reconstruction targets, including Iraqis collaborating with coalition forces. Nor do the insurgents have an explicit set of war aims.³⁹

This lack of a practical strategy in the Iraqi and Afghan insurgencies is reflected in the absence of guerrilla counter-government, a feature of classical counterinsurgency.⁴⁰ “Local Taliban” in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas have acted against local criminals and sought to impose law and order in a limited fashion.⁴¹ Some Iraqi groups have rudimentary local administrative systems to intimidate the population.⁴² But there has been little attempt to create permanent liberated areas, raise taxes, regulate daily life or control social interaction, as would be expected if insurgents were trying to replicate the “state capabilities” identified by Joel Migdal.⁴³ Analysts have used Migdal’s model to map the effectiveness of insurgents as shadow governments.⁴⁴ But the parallel hierarchies⁴⁵ of classical counterinsurgency are largely absent today.

Classical counterinsurgency also tends to assume a binary struggle between insurgent and counterinsurgent.⁴⁶ In fact, classical-era insurgencies such as Algeria and Indochina involved multiple insurgent movements, and most immature insurgencies include numerous factions, though this complexity was often not reflected in classical writings. But insurgencies today remain multilateral even in their mature state, incorporating many diffuse, competing insurgent movements. In contrast to revolutionary war theory, these conflicts lack a “united front”. Rather, dozens of competing groups pursue their own, frequently conflicting agenda. Field experience from Iraq suggests that it may be harder, not easier, to defeat such a complex, inchoate and disorganized swarm of opponents.⁴⁷

The PROVN study⁴⁸, a masterpiece of best-practice traditional counterinsurgency, argued that a sustainable, independent, democratic state was the object of the Vietnam War.⁴⁹ Similar perspectives led theorists to describe insurgency as a “struggle for legitimacy”⁵⁰ or “competition for government”⁵¹. Bernard Fall expressed this succinctly in 1965, arguing that a government which is losing to an insurgency “is not being outfought; it is being out-administered”.⁵² The same view is expressed in the latest U.S. counterinsurgency manual.⁵³

But this assumes the insurgent has real-world objectives, and a practicable strategy that can be defeated by denying these objectives. The religious ideology of some modern insurgents creates a different dynamic. Particularly in AQ-linked insurgencies, the insurgent may not seek to *do* or achieve any practical objective, but rather to *be* a *mujahid*, earning God’s favor (and hope of ultimate victory through his intervention) through the act itself. Usama bin Laden alluded to this in an October 2001 interview with al-Jazeera journalist Tayseer Alouni:

[ALOUNI]: ...How can al Qaeda defeat America militarily?

BIN LADEN: This battle is not between al Qaeda and the U.S. This is a battle of Muslims against the global crusaders..... God, who provided us with his support and kept us steadfast until the Soviet Union was defeated, is able to provide us once more with his support to defeat America on the same land and with the

same people. We believe that the defeat of America is possible, with the help of God, and is even easier for us, God permitting, than the defeat of the Soviet Union was before. ...Remember the saying, "If they want to exile you, they can't exile you unless it is written by God."⁵⁴

Insurgent operational art — the self-synchronizing swarm

At the operational level, there are many similarities between today's insurgents and those of the classical era. Insurgencies remain popular uprisings that grow from, and are conducted through pre-existing social networks (village, tribe, family, neighborhood, political or religious party).⁵⁵ Thus insurgent operational art remains fundamentally a matter of aggregating dispersed tactical actions by small groups and individuals, and orchestrating their effects into a strategically significant campaign sequence. Similarly, the operational art of counterinsurgency remains fundamentally concerned with displacing enemy influence from social networks, supplanting insurgent support within the population, and maneuvering to marginalize the enemy and deny them a popular base. Thus, at the operational level counterinsurgency remains a competition between several sides, each seeking to mobilize the population in its cause. The people remain the prize.

But today's environment ensures that this operational art develops differently than in the past. Modern insurgents operate more like a self-synchronizing swarm of independent, but cooperating cells, than like a formal organization. Even the fashionable cybernetic discourse of "networks" and "nodes"⁵⁶ often implies more structure than exists.

Classical theorists considered the aggregated effect of many small incidents — the "war of the flea" — as the key driver⁵⁷ even while recognizing the impact of well-publicized incidents. By contrast, modern communications compress the operational level of war, so that almost any tactical action can have immediate strategic impact. This makes counterinsurgency more unpredictable and even less linear, rendering statistical trends⁵⁸ less important as an operational driver than the "single narrative" of public perception. Again, this factor was accounted for in classical theory but "globalization effects" have dramatically increased its influence.

The term "strategic Corporal"⁵⁹ was coined to illustrate this, but media penetration has created strategic Privates (like Lynndie England, "whose smiling poses in photos of detainee abuse at Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison made her the face of the scandal,")⁶⁰ strategic Marines (like the Marine who killed a wounded Iraqi in a mosque during the second battle of Fallujah)⁶¹ and strategic civilians (like the Blackwater contractors whose murder sparked the first battle of Fallujah).⁶² According to Tom Ricks, the contractors' deaths provoked political intervention that forced the operational commander to abandon a well-developed campaign plan and instead pursue, then precipitately abandon, a set-piece urban battle.⁶³ This contributed to a strategic shift in the insurgency, although the roots of the crisis lay deeper, according to George Packer.⁶⁴ More generally, given pervasive media presence, the demeanor of a single soldier or official instantaneously communicates more about the state of a campaign than any public information operation.

Media-driven political interference, of course, featured in classical counterinsurgencies.⁶⁵ And historical experience starkly illustrated the influence of mass media.⁶⁶ But media penetration has reached unprecedented levels, largely through the emergence of *insurgent* mass media⁶⁷, with every incident in Iraq⁶⁸, and many in Afghanistan, Palestine and Chechnya⁶⁹ being recorded for propaganda purposes by insurgent video teams. Political leaders' involvement is entirely valid given the importance of home-front morale as a

success factor in counterinsurgency. Educating these leaders, and proactively controlling “spin” from incidents, is now central to the operational art in counterinsurgency. Hence, most coalition operations in Iraq and Afghanistan now routinely include embedded video teams to record events.⁷⁰

A key component of insurgent operational art in classical revolutionary warfare was the creation of local, regional and main force components able to transition from defensive to offensive and, ultimately, decisive conventional operations.⁷¹ Theorists like Mao and Giap spent considerable effort on the operational development of insurgent forces, treating the transitions between developmental “stages” as key campaign milestones.⁷² Classical counterinsurgency therefore emphasized the creation of a range of security forces to counter local, regional and main force insurgents and cadres.⁷³

By contrast, today’s insurgents often employ diffuse, cell-based structures and “leaderless resistance”.⁷⁴ This generates far less organizational superstructure than in classical movements. Such methods were recognized in traditional counterinsurgency — “focoist” insurgency used this system, and the IRA developed a cell structure based on “Active Service Units”.⁷⁵ But today’s movements apply this approach on an immense scale, creating mass movements without mass organization and rendering classical countermeasures ineffective. For example, the Phoenix program targeted a stable and well-developed Viet Cong Infrastructure. No equivalent exists in Iraq or Afghanistan, where independent cells and micro-movements cooperate in constantly shifting alliances of convenience.⁷⁶ So Phoenix-style operations might have tactical benefits in eliminating “players”, but have less operational impact than the original program. Moreover, in Iraq (a community-based insurgency), or Afghanistan (a tribally-based insurgency), the blood feuds and community alienation arising from this would be more severe than in Vietnam, where professional party cadres (often from other districts) were often key targets.

Logistically, classical insurgency assumes that the insurgents live off the population and resupply themselves from their opponents. Thus, the 1954 *Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya* states that “the most important factor in destroying the [Communist Terrorist] is to complete his isolation from the rest of the community. He must get no money, no food or clothing; no help of any sort.”⁷⁷ The key operational concept of the Malayan Emergency – the Briggs Plan – was designed to achieve precisely this,⁷⁸ and similar efforts occurred in most other classical counterinsurgencies.

But the economic relationship between insurgents and the population is exactly the opposite in some modern insurgencies. For example, in Iraq the insurgents’ primary funding sources in 2004 were courier infiltration and access to buried caches.⁷⁹ The insurgents were wealthier than the population, and routinely paid poverty-stricken locals to conduct attacks for cash.⁸⁰ Thus, efforts to isolate the insurgents (intended, based on classical theory, to hurt the guerrillas and protect the population) had precisely the opposite effect.⁸¹ Donations from abroad also provide funds for insurgents: the emphasis on videotaping attacks is intended precisely for sponsorship and fund-raising purposes. In Afghanistan narcotics, corruption and extortion also provide funds. Thus, the economic and logistics base of modern insurgency may be very different from classical theory.

Insurgent tactics – the urban bomb

At the tactical level, one obvious feature of today’s campaigns is their urbanized quality. Classical theory treats insurgency as primarily rural — urban insurgency is usually

considered a supporting action (as in Vietnam, Malaya or the Irish Civil War) or ultimately futile (as in some Latin American cases). Classical insurgencies actually included several campaigns with urban components, such as Aden, Algeria, Cyprus and Palestine. But these also had significant, and ultimately dominant, rural components. The reason was straightforward: insurgents must hide to survive, and in classical-era insurgencies in “colonial or independent under-developed territories”⁸² concealment was better in rural areas.

But this is often not so today, as is apparent when flying in Afghanistan or Iraq. Cover and concealment are far greater in the urban jungle of Baghdad with its no-go areas and sectarian slums than in the open desert outside the Tigris and Euphrates River valleys. Incidents in Iraq cluster in urban centers or areas of suburban sprawl around Iraq’s major cities.⁸³ The insurgent, as in classical theory, continues to hide amongst the population. But in urbanized societies (like Iraq) or countries with under-populated mountains, deserts and forests (like Afghanistan), the cover is in the cities.

This has significant tactical implications — engagements are short-range and fleeting as in traditional insurgencies, but bystanders are now always present and cleverly exploited by insurgents. Media presence is greatest in cities, fuelling propaganda-based tactics that target the population to generate shock and provoke sectarian unrest. Traditional counterinsurgency methods like fencing villages, cordon and search, curfews and food control (accepted as routine in Malaya) have drawn sharp criticism in Iraq and Afghanistan because of the enhanced disruption they cause in urban neighborhoods, combined with the negative propaganda effect of enhanced media coverage.⁸⁴

Internet, cellphone and television coverage (most houses in Iraqi cities have at least one satellite dish, for example⁸⁵) enables web- and cellphone-based coordination, changing insurgent tactics and countermeasures. Underground newspapers, pirate radio stations and posters still matter in places like the Northwest Frontier, which lacks the internet coverage and urbanized population of Iraq.⁸⁶ But perception management is vastly more complex when the population has instantaneous access to media broadcasts intended for third nation audiences.⁸⁷

Modern insurgent tactics center on the urban bomb and its exploitation for propaganda and intimidation purposes, rather than the more traditional rural ambush. IEDs, particularly suicide bombs, generate “good copy” for insurgents and ensure sponsorship from supporters. IEDs also overcome the “lethality self-limit” of classical insurgents, whose rifle-based tactics meant that they had to field more fighters, and risk more casualties, to generate greater lethality.⁸⁸ The IRA developed this approach twenty years ago, but unlike Northern Ireland (where acquisition, storage, transport and caching of IEDs were so difficult that insurgent quartermasters were key players⁸⁹) theatres like Iraq are awash with military-grade ordnance.

This has forced changes in counterinsurgent tactics — particularly for patrolling. In classical counterinsurgency, patrolling is a key tactic designed to dominate an area, reassure and protect the population, disrupt insurgents and gather intelligence. But IEDs have forced patrols (and private security details)⁹⁰ to move down the center-line of roadways, disrupting traffic and alienating the population. And IED attacks on patrols usually cause civilian casualties, making locals wary of foot patrols and frightened to be near them. Far from finding “presence patrols” reassuring, the population finds them

alienating and a source of danger.⁹¹ The intelligence value of patrols is reduced, along with their ability to disrupt insurgents. Emplacement of snipers overlooking likely IED sites, employment of informant networks and targeted raids, have proven more effective than classical-style patrolling in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus the purpose of patrolling remains valid, but classical patrol tactics may require substantial modification.

In summary, many fundamentals of classical counterinsurgency remain relevant, but their application often differs substantially. Classical theory is necessary, but not sufficient, for contemporary counterinsurgency. Mastering it may demand new mental models.

New counterinsurgency paradigms

It is dangerous to be prescriptive, since the latest cycle of counterinsurgencies is just beginning, and there is undoubtedly more adaptation ahead. But, fortunately or not, we have at our disposal a continuous live experiment, enabling us to validate tentative hypotheses in the field. What follows is a series of preliminary judgments to be refined as events disprove them. They are presented in a spirit of open inquiry, not as firm conclusions.

In modern counterinsurgency, the side may win which best mobilizes and energizes its global, regional and local support base – and prevents its adversaries doing likewise.

Most fundamentally, we might reconsider the classical conception of counterinsurgency as a competition for legitimate government, seeing it instead as a *competition to mobilize*, interpreted in the broadest sense. Modern insurgents may not seek to seize government, relying instead on their ability to mobilize sympathizers within a global audience and generate local support. Thus local government legitimacy may be a secondary factor. Likewise, the counterinsurgent must mobilize the home population, the host country, the global audience, the populations of allied and neutral countries, and the military and government agencies involved. Success may be less about local legitimacy and more about the ability to energize and mobilize support, and to deny energy and mobility to the enemy's support base.

In modern counterinsurgency, the security force “area of influence” may need to include all neighboring countries, and its “area of interest” may need to be global.

The classical single-state paradigm for counterinsurgency may no longer apply, since insurgents operate across boundaries and exploit a global “virtual sanctuary”. Legal and political considerations will probably prevent military activity outside a single-country “area of operations”. But border security, money transfers, ungoverned areas, ethnic minorities, refugees and media in neighboring states may all play key operational roles for the insurgent — hence the counterinsurgent must be able to influence them. Similarly, the insurgents' propaganda audience, funds, recruits and support may be global. So the counterinsurgent's parent government must work globally to counter propaganda and disrupt funding and recruiting. This implies a vastly increased role for diplomacy, global intelligence liaison and information operations.

In modern counterinsurgency, the security force must control a complex “conflict ecosystem” — rather than defeating a single specific insurgent adversary.

Classical counterinsurgency focuses on securing the population rather than on destroying the enemy. But it still fundamentally views the conflict as a binary struggle between one insurgent (or confederation) and one counterinsurgent (or coalition). Modern insurgencies belie this binary approach, since there are often multiple competing insurgent forces fighting each other as well as the government, and the “supported” government’s interests may differ in key respects from those of its allies. Hence, we might conceive of the environment as a “conflict ecosystem” with multiple competing entities seeking to maximize their survivability and influence. The counterinsurgent’s task may no longer be to defeat the insurgent, but rather to impose order (to the degree possible) on an unstable and chaotic environment.

In modern counterinsurgency a common diagnosis of the problem, and enablers for collaboration, may matter more than formal unity of effort across multiple agencies.

A key principle of classical counterinsurgency is unity of effort — unified control of all elements of power, vertically from local to national level, and horizontally between districts. Even this is a watered-down version of the military’s preferred “unity of command”. But today, international aid organizations, global media, non-government organizations, and religious leaders are critical for success, but outside the counterinsurgent’s control. Many of these entities will not accept direction, but can deny success unless collaboration is achieved. Since command requires control, “unity of effort” (let alone “unity of command”) may be unworkable in this environment. Luckily, international relief organizations have developed collaboration and information-sharing tools, designed to build a common diagnosis of “complex emergencies”, enabling collaboration in precisely this situation.⁹² A similar approach may work for modern counterinsurgency.

Modern counterinsurgency may be 100% political — comprehensive media coverage making even the most straightforward combat action a “political warfare” engagement.

General Sir Gerald Templer famously asserted that “the shooting side of this business is only 25 per cent of the trouble”⁹³, while Galula described counterinsurgency as “80% political, 20% military”⁹⁴. This certainly remains relevant to modern counterinsurgency in the sense that non-military elements of national power remain decisive, though less well resourced than military elements. But it could be misinterpreted as implying that some issues remain outside political leaders’ purview and subject to conventional norms of combat. In modern counterinsurgencies, this may not be so. Given pervasive media presence and near-instantaneous propaganda exploitation of all combat action, counterinsurgency may now be 100% political. Commanders, even at the lowest tactical level in the most straightforward combat action, may need to conceive of their task as a form of “political warfare” in which perception and political outcomes matter more than battlefield success. Counterinsurgency specialists already understand this, but broadening it to conventional units and “big army” commanders would be a true paradigm shift.

In modern counterinsurgency, “victory” may not be final — “permanent containment” may be needed to prevent defeated insurgents transforming into terrorist groups.

Classical counterinsurgency defines victory as military defeat of the insurgents, destruction of their political organization, and their marginalization from the population.⁹⁵ Typically, destruction of insurgent remnants takes decades, but once permanently marginalized they are no longer considered a threat.⁹⁶ Yet this may no

longer apply to modern counterinsurgency, in which cell-based organizations, bomb-based tactics, global communications and improved lethality make it easy for marginalized insurgent movements to transform themselves into terrorist groups. Pursuing classically-defined victory over insurgents, particularly those linked to AQ, may simply create a series of virtually-linked, near-invisible “rump” terrorist movements in previous insurgent theaters. Since terrorists do not require a mass base, this may perpetuate rather than ending the broader conflict. In modern counterinsurgency, victory may need to be re-defined as the disarming and reintegration of insurgents into society, combined with popular support for permanent, institutionalized anti-terrorist measures that contain the risk of terrorist cells emerging from the former insurgent movement.

In modern counterinsurgency, secret intelligence may matter less than situational awareness based on unclassified but difficult-to-access information.

A final observation is that today’s intelligence paradigm, which emphasizes the acquisition of secret intelligence from foreign governments, may be ill-suited to modern counterinsurgency. Secret intelligence is often less relevant than information which is not classified by any government, but is located in denied areas. Feedback on the effect of operations on public perception may be critical. Human intelligence and tactical signals intelligence are clearly crucial, and additional effort in these areas would be valuable. But in modern counterinsurgency, where there is no single insurgent network to be penetrated but rather a cultural and demographic jungle of population groups to be navigated, “basic intelligence” — detailed knowledge of physical, human, cultural and informational terrain, based on a combination of open source research and “denied area ethnography” — will be even more critical.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that today’s insurgencies differ significantly from those of the 1960s. Insurgents may not be seeking to overthrow the state, may have no coherent strategy or may pursue a faith-based approach difficult to counter with traditional methods. There may be numerous competing insurgencies in one theater, meaning that the counterinsurgent must control the overall environment rather than defeat a specific enemy. The actions of individuals and the propaganda effect of a subjective “single narrative” may far outweigh practical progress, rendering counterinsurgency even more non-linear and unpredictable than before. The counterinsurgent, not the insurgent, may initiate the conflict and represent the forces of revolutionary change. The economic relationship between insurgent and population may be diametrically opposed to classical theory. And insurgent tactics, based on exploiting the propaganda effects of urban bombing, may invalidate some classical tactics and render others, like patrolling, counterproductive under some circumstances. Thus, field evidence suggests, classical theory is necessary but not sufficient for success against contemporary insurgencies.

All this is, at present, just a tentative set of field observations, many of which will inevitably prove incorrect. Nevertheless, they should give us pause in seeking to “cut and paste” classical 1960s counterinsurgency. The last word belongs to Bernard Fall, who learned resistance warfare in the French underground, mastered counterinsurgency during the 1950s in Indochina, and reinvented it during the American effort in Vietnam, before being killed near Hue in 1967:

There are no easy shortcuts to solving the problems of revolutionary war. In fact, I would like to close with one last thought, which applies, of course, to

everything that is done in the armed forces, but particularly to revolutionary war:
*If it works, it is obsolete.*⁹⁷

¹ William Rosenau, “Subversion and Terrorism: Understanding and Countering the Threat” in *The MIPT Terrorism Annual 2006*, Oklahoma City, National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, 2006, pp. 53-34.

² See the extensive media reporting surrounding the publication of the U.S. military’s new counterinsurgency doctrine in 2005-2006 for numerous examples of this attitude.

³ See David Kilcullen, “Countering Global Insurgency” in *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol 28 No. 4, pp. 597-617, August 2005.

⁴ The dates given take in the period from the beginning of the Greek Civil War in 1944 to the end of the Rhodesian Civil War in 1982, and include all the wars of de-colonization associated with the end of European empires after the Second World War, and the contemporaneous nationalist, separatist and Communist-inspired insurgencies.

⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, FM3-24/FMFM3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, Final Draft, 16 June 2006, para 1-61, available online at <http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24fd.pdf>

⁶ See David Kilcullen, *Political Consequences of Military Operations in Indonesia 1945-99*, unpublished Doctoral dissertation, University of New South Wales, 2000. See also David J. Kilcullen, ”

⁷ The author was an advisor with Indonesian forces in 1994-95, commanded an infantry company on counterinsurgency operations in East Timor in 1999-2000, was operations officer of the Peace Monitoring Group in Bougainville during the final stages of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army insurgency in 1998, served as a counterterrorism advisor to an Arabian Gulf state in 2004 and has worked with police, paramilitary and military forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia and elsewhere since 9/11.

⁸ The Australian *Joint Services Glossary* defines counter-insurgency as ‘those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological and civic actions undertaken by a government to defeat a subversive insurgency’. The equivalent British and United States publications use the identical definition, except for the absence of the word ‘subversive’.

⁹ For a discussion of the concept of “counter-warfare”, see Loup Francart and Jean-Jacques Patry, “Mastering Violence: An Option for Operational Military Strategy,” *Naval War College Review* 53, no. 3 (Summer 2000), pp. 144–184.

¹⁰ This definition follows that put forward by Gordon H. McCormick, who suggests that “an insurgency is a struggle for power (over a political space) between a state (or occupying power) and one or more organized, popularly based internal challengers”. (McCormick, “Things Fall Apart: The ‘Endgame Dynamics of Internal Wars”, RAND, draft paper, forthcoming, p. 2). But, to take into account the transnational nature of several contemporary insurgencies, I have replaced McCormick’s notion of a single state entity facing an internal challenger with the broader concept of a state *or group of states* confronting one or more (internal or external) *non-state* challengers.

¹¹ McCormick, *op. cit.*

¹² C.E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, 3rd Edition, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1996 (first published 1896, 3rd edition originally published 1906).

¹³ Department of the Navy, United States Marine Corps, NAVMC 2890, *Reprint of USMC Small Wars Manual 1940*, Washington, 1987.

¹⁴ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Pall Mall, London, 1964, p. 3

¹⁵ Robert Thompson, *Revolutionary War in World Strategy 1945-1969*, Taplinger, N.Y., 1970 p. 20-21.

¹⁶ For examples of this pattern in resistance warfare see Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History*, 2 Vols, Doubleday, NY, 1975; Ian F.W. Becket, *The Roots of Counter-Insurgency: Armies and Guerrilla Warfare 1900-1945*, Blandford Publishers, London, 1988; Walter Laqueur, *Guerrilla*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1977 and Alexander Orlov, *Handbook of Intelligence and Guerrilla Warfare*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1963.

¹⁷ Discussion with Mahsud informant, Northwest Frontier Province, June 2006. The informant noted that each Mahsud family has contributed one fighter to the anti-government insurgency in order “to protect their traditional ways” while Waziri tribesmen have joined the fight in a less organized but more fanatical manner. These patterns of behavior are highly consistent with the cultural characteristics of these tribes. See Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans*, St Martin’s Press, London, 1958 pp. 390-413, and Akbar S. Ahmed, *Resistance and Control in Pakistan*, Revised edition, Routledge, London, 2004 pp. 11-29.

- ¹⁸ For a discussion of these effects in relation to Indonesia, see David J. Kilcullen, “Globalisation and the Development of Indonesian Counterinsurgency Tactics” in *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 44–64, March 2006.
- ¹⁹ See Thompson, *op. cit. passim* and Galula, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-41.
- ²⁰ See “Al Qaeda takes media jihad online” at <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=14500>
- ²¹ Audrey K. Cronin, “Cyber-Mobilization: The New *Levée en Masse*”, in *Parameters*, Summer 2006, p 77.
- ²² *Ibid* p. 85.
- ²³ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, revised edition, Columbia University Press, N.Y. 2006, pp. 45-53.
- ²⁴ See Kilcullen, “Countering Global Insurgency” for a more detailed discussion of these issues.
- ²⁵ See U.S. Joint Publication 1-02 which defines insurgency within a single-state, single-insurgent paradigm, as “an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through use of subversion and armed conflict”.
- ²⁶ Kilcullen, “Countering Global Insurgency”, 2005. See also David W. Barno, “Challenges in Fighting a Global Insurgency” in *Parameters*, Summer 2006, pp. 15-29.
- ²⁷ “English translation of Ayman al-Zawahiri’s letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi”, *The Weekly Standard*, 12 October 2005, online at www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/006/203gpuul.asp, accessed August 2006.
- ²⁸ For example, see the transfer of letters between Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (noted below), and other correspondence between AQ leadership in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and insurgents in Iraq and Southeast Asia.
- ²⁹ AFPS, “IED Components Moving Across Iraq-Iran Border, General Says”, 17 Mar 2006
- ³⁰ Interview with Pakistan government official, North-West Frontier Province, Pakistan, June 2006.
- ³¹ For example, in July 2006 Shiite militias in Iraq conducted operations in sympathy with Hizballah fighters engaged in conflict with Israel, while in 2005 AQ in Iraq conducted a hotel bombing in Amman, possibly in an attempt to disrupt support for coalition forces in Jordan.
- ³² See materials captured in the possession of Jema’ah Islamiyah (JI) operative Dr Azahari in November 2005, and the so-called “Camp Hudaibiya manual” used by JI and ASG insurgents in the Philippines, which drew on AQ source materials produced in South Asia.
- ³³ CIA analyst, unclassified personal communication, July 2006.
- ³⁴ Galula, *ibid* p. 3.
- ³⁵ See Thompson, *op. cit.* for a discussion of the differences between “rebellion” and “revolutionary warfare” in this context.
- ³⁶ I am grateful to Rob Smith for this insight.
- ³⁷ Anthony Cordesman, *The Iraq War and Lessons for Counterinsurgency*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington D.C., March 2006, pp. 3-4.
- ³⁸ Interview with former senior officer of British Intelligence, Kabul, July 2006.
- ³⁹ Jeffrey Record and W. Andrew Terrill, *Iraq and Vietnam: Differences, Similarities and Insights*, Carlisle, PA, Strategic Studies Institute, May 2004, p. 2
- ⁴⁰ Partly, this lack of counter-government simply reflects the insurgents’ desire to fall back on tribal governance systems (pre-classical) or the focoist (post-classical) nature of the insurgency in Iraq. But these concepts have little traction in the “watered-down” version of classical counterinsurgency adopted by some modern commanders. (Rob Smith, personal communication, September 2006).
- ⁴¹ See Pamela Constable, “In Tribal Pakistan, a Tide of Militancy”, *Washington Post*, 20 June 2006, p. A11 and “Waziristan: a new strategy”, *Dawn*, 24 June 2006, p.7
- ⁴² Attempts by the Shi’a Badr Organization to control the population in Basra governorate, and by Sunni insurgents in Fallujah and Tal Afar to intimidate local leaders into supporting insurgent objectives, are examples of limited attempts to create a counter-government, but these lacked the sophistication and elaborate administrative structures favored by many classical insurgent movements.
- ⁴³ Joel S. Migdal (1988) identifies four key capabilities of the state, including “the capacities to *penetrate* society, *regulate* social relationships, *extract* resources, and *appropriate* or use resources in determined ways”. (quoted in William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2002, p. 13).
- ⁴⁴ Maley, *op. cit.*, see particularly pp. 108-126 and 218 ff.
- ⁴⁵ See Bard E. O’Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare*, Brassey’s, Washington, 1990, p. 95 for a discussion of this concept in classical counterinsurgency.
- ⁴⁶ See David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Pall Mall, London, 1964 for the classic exposition of this viewpoint.
- ⁴⁷ Personal observation, Taji, January 2006 and discussions with U.S. military intelligence officers, Baghdad and Kuwait, January-February 2006.

- ⁴⁸ U.S. Department of the Army, *Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam*, 1966, online at http://www.carrscompendiums.com/ccSEA/Documents/AD0377743_TOC.html
- ⁴⁹ Lewis Sorley, "To Change a War: General Harold K. Johnson and the PROVN Study" in *Parameters*, Spring 1998, pp. 93-109.
- ⁵⁰ Sir Robert Thompson, *Revolutionary War in World Strategy 1945-1969*, Taplinger, N.Y., 1970, p. 25
- ⁵¹ HQ Malaya Command, *The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya*, 2nd Edn, Kuala Lumpur, 1954, especially Chapter II p. 10 and Chapter III pp 1-5.
- ⁵² Bernard Fall, "The Theory and Practice of Counterinsurgency" in *Naval War College Review*, April 1965
- ⁵³ U.S. Department of Defense, FM3-24/FMFM3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, Final Draft, 16 June 2006, para 1-61, available online at <http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24fd.pdf>
- ⁵⁴ CNN, "Transcript of bin Laden's October Interview", 5 Feb 2002, online at <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/south/02/05/binladen.transcript/index.html>
- ⁵⁵ I am indebted to Dr. Gordon McCormick of the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey and to Colonel Derek Harvey for insights into the "small world, scale-free" aspects of insurgent social networks and the enduring influence of the pre-war Iraqi oligarchy on the current Iraqi insurgency.
- ⁵⁶ See McCormick, *op. cit.* for comments on this discourse.
- ⁵⁷ For a good example of this perspective, see Bernard Fall, "The Theory and Practice of Counterinsurgency" in *Naval War College Review*, April 1965.
- ⁵⁸ Cordesman, *op. cit.* p. 3
- ⁵⁹ See General Charles C. Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War" in *Marines Magazine*, January 1999.
- ⁶⁰ See Associated Press, "Lynndie England Convicted in Abu Ghraib Trial", *USA Today* 26 September 2005, available online at http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-09-26-england_x.htm
- ⁶¹ The Marine was subsequently judged to have acted in self-defense; see Jamie McIntyre, "Marine cleared in videotaped shooting", 5 May 2005, at <http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/05/05/falluja.marine/index.html>
- ⁶² Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, Penguin Press, New York, 2006, pp. 330-335.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.* pp 341-43.
- ⁶⁴ George Packer, *The Assassin's Gate: America in Iraq*, Farrar, Strous and Giroux, New York, 2005, p. 297-98
- ⁶⁵ For a detailed discussion of civil-military tensions in classical counterinsurgency see H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies that Led to Vietnam*, Harper Perennial, New York 1998.
- ⁶⁶ Rob Smith, personal communication, September 2006.
- ⁶⁷ See Bruce Hoffman, *op. cit.* pp. 197-228.
- ⁶⁸ Personal communication, Central Intelligence Agency officer, Baghdad, February 2006.
- ⁶⁹ See collected videos at the SITE institute, www.siteinstitute.org for examples.
- ⁷⁰ Personal observation, Baghdad and Taji, January 2006 and Khost, Afghanistan, June 2006.
- ⁷¹ See H.Q. Malaya Command, *Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya*, p. II-10.
- ⁷² Mao's *Problems of Strategy in Guerrilla Warfare* (May 1938) is the most detailed exposition of this argument.
- ⁷³ For example Mike Forces, Regional Forces, Popular Forces and main force ARVN in Vietnam, and Special Operations Volunteer Force, Malayan Scouts (SAS), Police Jungle Squads and Police Anti-Terrorist Field Force in Malaya are examples of this "force-mirroring" approach. (See Kilcullen, *op. cit.* 2000 for a detailed description of this element of classical counterinsurgency).
- ⁷⁴ See Louis Beam, "Leaderless Resistance" in *The Seditonist*, Issue 12, February 1992, online at <http://www.louisbeam.com/leaderless.htm> Beam, a right-wing extremist leader in the United States, proposed an organizational method for revolutionary movements that has since been employed by movements as diverse as Iraqi insurgents, European Islamist movements and the Earth Liberation Front (see <http://www.earthliberationfront.com/main.shtml> for a description).
- ⁷⁵ See Martin Dillon, *The Dirty War*, Routledge, London, 1999 for a description of the Active Service Unit and specialized cell-based methodology applied by the IRA to its much smaller movement of a few hundred active members only.
- ⁷⁶ Personal communication, allied intelligence officer, Kabul, June 2006. See also Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca N.Y. 2006 for a comprehensive description of Iraqi insurgent methods.
- ⁷⁷ HQ Malaya Command, *op. cit.* p. III-2.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁹ Interview with Australian military officer in an operational headquarters in Baghdad, November 2004.

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- ⁸⁰ Australian intelligence officer, Baghdad, August 2004.
- ⁸¹ See Packer, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 251 ff.
- ⁸² Thompson, *ibid.* p.21.
- ⁸³ Cordesman, *ibid* and interview with Multinational Force Iraq intelligence officer, January 2006.
- ⁸⁴ Ricks, *op. cit.* p.
- ⁸⁵ Personal observation, Baghdad, Taji and Basra, February 2006.
- ⁸⁶ Interview with Pakistan Government civilian official, Khyber Agency, June 2006.
- ⁸⁷ Interview with senior Iraqi Government national security official, Green Zone, Baghdad, January 2006.
- ⁸⁸ McCormick, *ibid.*
- ⁸⁹ Dillon, *ibid.*
- ⁹⁰ Personal communication, private security detail commander, Baghdad, January 2006.
- ⁹¹ Personal observation, Taji, February 2006 and discussions with Special Forces officer, November 2004.
- ⁹² See examples relating to Afghanistan at <http://www.acbar.org/index.php>, the website of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, and <http://www.adf.gov.af/>, website of the Afghan Development Forum. Both are interactive web portals where independent aid and relief agencies can share information, develop collaborative approaches, pool resources, deconflict activities and self-synchronize effects — all without belonging to a single overarching command structure.
- ⁹³ Quoted in Simon C. Smith, “General Templer and Counter-Insurgency in Malaya: Hearts and Minds, Intelligence, and Propaganda” in *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.16, No.3 (Autumn 2001), p.65
- ⁹⁴ Galula, *op. cit.* p.89.
- ⁹⁵ Galula, *op. cit.* p 77.
- ⁹⁶ For example, the Malayan Emergency ended in 1960, but MCP leader Chin Peng and the last band of guerrillas surrendered only in 1989.
- ⁹⁷ Fall, *op. cit.*