

Social Epidemics and the Human Element of Counterinsurgency

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Introduction

Insurgency has historically presented a significant security challenge and will continue to do so into the foreseeable future. Insurgents typically choose to operate from within a population and for this reason it is the human element that has had and will continue to have the most considerable impact on their operations and the operations that counter them. In *The Tipping Point*, bestselling author Malcolm Gladwell combines research from several disciplines to give incredible insight into the unusual and counterintuitive principles of the human element. He does this by exploring social epidemics; occasions where ideas, messages, and behaviors spread like viruses. The principles of social epidemics can be applied to business growth, crime rates, fashion trends, and other social phenomena. Because of the common human element, the concepts are equally applicable in an insurgency setting. It is universally acknowledged that insurgents work to spread their ideas and messages and promote certain behaviors within a population. Those wishing to counter them must do the same. Three principles can be employed in concert to ensure such efforts see results. First, the proper environment must be established and maintained. Second, the manner in which information is presented must be very carefully tuned to the population. And third, the right people must be carefully selected to spread the information. Precise requirements that address the peculiarities of human behavior, none of them obvious or intuitive, are given for each method and explained. This paper will show how these principles relate to counterinsurgency. Each principle will be placed in the context of insurgency and ideas and recommendations will be presented that are immediately relevant to contemporary security challenges.

Insurgency and the Human Element

The US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual broadly defines insurgency as “an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control.”¹ The political nature of an insurgency puts the population, or the human element of the conflict, at the center of the problem. Control is, to a degree, an idea, a concept. Legitimacy is even more so. Both are sought by each side as both insurgents and counterinsurgents work to influence the perceptions of the population. The population then

¹ FM 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency*, Washington, D.C: Headquarters, Department of the Army, and Headquarters, US Marine Corps, December 2006, 1-1.

bases their actions and on these perceptions, at times without even realizing they are doing so. Actions of the population, in turn, bear heavily on the progress and outcome of the conflict.

We can thus view the need to influence and spread ideas, concepts, and perceptions as an important aspect, if not the most important aspect, of counterinsurgency. On the other hand, human nature makes this difficult, complicated, and counterintuitive.

Human nature is important because insurgencies, in particular contemporary insurgencies, are fought from within a population. Insurgents depend on these populations for intelligence, supplies, shelter, recruits, and much more. If the counterinsurgents can deny the insurgents' access to the population, the conflict is partly won. Adding to this, the population, if on the side of the counterinsurgents, will provide them with intelligence on the insurgents who are then exposed and vulnerable to the often superior military capabilities of the counterinsurgent force.

Knowing this, understanding the human element of a situation is absolutely vital, but extremely difficult. The human mind is complex and only careful research and study will allow full understanding. Modern armies practice what they call "effects-based operations," but without a thorough understanding of the human element, it is nearly impossible to predetermine what effects military actions, or any other actions, may have.

Explaining the Human Element

As we slowly drifted into the 21st century, a brilliant author by the name of Malcolm Gladwell wrote a brilliant book titled *The Tipping Point*. The work brought together, in several strokes of genius, research from epidemiology, psychology, sociology, marketing, psychiatry, mathematics, medicine, and other fields that had never been combined in such a way before. The effort released considerable knowledge. It began by recognizing "tipping points," moments in epidemics where the situation changes rapidly and in almost every conceivable way. These tipping points apply not only to epidemics in the medical sense, Gladwell observed, but also in a social sense. This is where he focused his research. He pointed out that social epidemics consist of contagious ideas that move through societies, that their course can be altered in big ways by small details and that when such changes do occur, they do so exponentially and as a result they often happen very fast.²

Gladwell researched certain concepts, most of them counterintuitive, to help explain these characteristics. He learned that human communication has some very interesting principles that come as result of humans themselves being generally volatile and inexplicable.³ These three principles form the heart of his work and provide guidelines that those dealing with social epidemics can use to understand, forecast, and bring about certain outcomes.

The first of these principles deals with the environments in which social epidemics spread. The second deals with the manner in which information relating to the epidemic is presented. The third deals with those that spread the information. Each compiles research that identifies precise

² Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York: Belknap Press; Little, Brown and Company, 2000), 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 258-9.

considerations and minute details that affect the spread of epidemics. These concepts can be employed to drive social change with carefully guided, intelligent action.⁴ The concepts apply to any phenomena occurring within any social group. Gladwell relates the concepts to business growth, crime rates, and fashion trends. Because insurgencies are primarily a social phenomenon as well, the principles apply in similar ways. It is acknowledged that insurgents work to spread their ideas and messages and promote certain behaviors within a population. To counter these activities and to spread ideas of their own, positively affecting the outcome of the situation, counterinsurgents can, and most certainly should, apply the principles of social epidemics.

Restated in terms of a counterinsurgency effort, the three principles provide requirements for success in dealing with the human element. First, counterinsurgents must establish and maintain the proper environment. Second, the manner in which the counterinsurgents present information must be carefully tuned to the target population. Third, the counterinsurgents must select the right people must to spread this information.

Application

It must be noted that the application of the principles of social epidemics does not guarantee success. Many other facets must be addressed for a counterinsurgency effort to be successful. Among other things, the government must gain legitimacy, isolate insurgents from their sources of support, provide support to the threatened government, and develop security forces in the host nation. All of these can be referred to as the macro elements of counterinsurgency and the coordination, funding, and organization of such efforts is essential. Effectiveness when dealing with the human element of the problem, which is what the principles will provide, can be considered as a micro element of counterinsurgency, the tiny details at the day-by-day, person-to-person level of the effort.⁵

Both the macro and the micro elements of the counterinsurgency effort must be present for success. For example, legitimacy of the counterinsurgency effort on the international stage is irrelevant if intervening forces are seen as illegitimate by people at the local level. A competent and well-equipped national police force is much less effective if most officers are despised by the villagers they are meant to serve. On the contrary, a highly effective counterinsurgency at the micro level will be of little use if, for example, certain macro elements like funding for reconstruction or the supply of security forces have not been addressed.

It can be said, however, that the macro elements are more measurable, more logical, and easier to understand than the unobserved and volatile quirks of human communication that make up the micro element of the counterinsurgency effort. It is also true that teams of experts can discuss and plan and organize the macro efforts, but the micro element is carried out by every participant

⁴ Ibid., 259.

⁵ One may suggest that what are referred to here as macro and micro elements are merely strategic and tactical elements, indicating that there is no need for such terms. In fact, macro and micro elements apply at all levels, transcending (and therefore distinct from) the terms used to describe the levels of war. For example, an advisor to a leader of the host-nation government is operating at the strategic level, but is still part of both the macro and micro elements of the counterinsurgency. His interpersonal skills and how he approaches his task are part of the micro elements, whatever resources he brings from his own country are part of the macro element.

of the counterinsurgency that deals with the population, regardless of what expertise they may have.

Much of what has been written on the topic of counterinsurgency deals with the macro elements of the counterinsurgency effort. Again, these elements are most easily measured and understood. Most of the advice available on the topic has come from people that experienced or participated in counterinsurgency efforts and recorded what they perceived as having worked or as having failed. Many of these people, however, have not commented on the day-to-day, person-to-person elements of the effort to the degree of detail that would be necessary to determine if the principles of the social epidemic were or were not being followed. And for good reason, the principles are very precise and highly based on the context of a given situation. Most of what they would dictate would seem to be inconsequential, tiny worthless details that would be easily missed. However, the volatility of the human element dictates that these minute details, when spread exponentially through human networks, may be the deciding factors in the conflict. It is possible that the considerations these authors indicate as having decided the outcome of the conflict were not, in fact, what truly mattered. Such a situation would be quite inconvenient, as we currently base most of our efforts off of such writing as opposed to the application of the fundamentals of human behavior. After all, the fundamental nature of the human being is exactly that, fundamental, and may give better guidance on such matters than the advice of one person or another based of their individual experiences.

To summarize, macro elements, which are easily observed, are well understood and they consume most of the planning effort, most of the resources, and most advice on counterinsurgency is given on their employment. The micro elements are tougher to identify and as a result are not well understood and are not heavily considered in planning or resource allocation. But both are needed for success. The principles of social epidemics allow counterinsurgents to precisely focus their efforts on the key pressure points of the human element, making the counterinsurgency effort more effective on the whole. On the contrary, failing to follow the principles that govern social epidemics will leave the human element to chance, which will most likely result in counterinsurgent failure.

This paper is written to serve as a point of departure. A specific prescription is not provided, but the principles of social epidemics are explained as they relate to counterinsurgency. At times, examples of their possible use are given, although this is difficult to do outside the context of a particular situation. The information will be best applied by practitioners and tuned to whatever situation may be at hand, delivered as precise and intelligent social solutions used to deal with a fundamentally social problem.

Establishing and Maintaining the Proper Environment

The first principle deals with the close relationship between humans and their environments. It must be understood that humans are incredibly tuned into their surroundings, their inner states coming as result of exterior circumstances.⁶ At the same time, this close relationship is often heavily underestimated by all of us.⁷ We believe that the character of an individual is fixed,

⁶ Ibid., 152.

⁷ Ibid.

uniform, and unchanging. And it generally will be, if the environment is also static.⁸ The problem arises when the environment changes rapidly, as they often do during violent conflict, changing the population as well. The application of this is that by changing the environment or changing the context, the behavior of a population can be changed as well. Furthermore, because all of this is inside the framework of social epidemics and because humans are volatile and emotional, small changes to the environment can produce big results.⁹

To explain this principle, the social phenomenon of crime is used as an example of its application. Minor problems in a city, things like graffiti, disorder, and panhandling are invitations to more serious crimes. These minor problems are important components of the environment. Criminals, who are influenced by their environments much like anyone else, believe that they reduce chances of being caught if they operate on streets with minor problems like those mentioned. It is in these areas, areas where citizens don't seem to care, that citizens are less likely to call police to report a crime.¹⁰ The minor problems send a message to would-be criminals and make crime in such areas more likely.¹¹ Tiny features of the environment have a big effect, tipping certain people toward violence, changing their behavior.¹²

This seems odd or exaggerated to most of us because humans often think in terms of inherent traits. We think of people as being fundamentally bad or fundamentally good and forget the importance of context. The scientific term for this tendency is FAE, or fundamental attribution error. By falling prey to this flaw, we misunderstand the situation considerably; we forget the real sources of human behavior.¹³

There are two significant implications that this principle brings to counterinsurgency. First, that the course of the insurgency can be influenced by making small improvements to the environment, whether that environment is a suburban neighborhood or a small country village. This principle would suggest that reconstruction serves not only to win favor with the population, but to alter the environment and in doing so alter the behavior of those within that environment. For example, David Galula, a successful practitioner of counterinsurgency and one of the subject's great minds, wrote of his efforts to persuade villagers in Algeria to whitewash and clean their houses.¹⁴

On this note, this principle suggests that minor projects that show obvious results, things like trash clean-up, painting, arresting for petty crimes, and window repairs, may be much more important than large projects like electrical generation plants, highway construction, and bridges when it comes to reducing violence. Large projects are essential as part of long-term reconstruction plans and improving capacity of the host nation, but may not have the effect of increasing security to the degree that is currently believed.

⁸ Ibid., 163.

⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰ Ibid., 141.

¹¹ Ibid., 143.

¹² Ibid., 166.

¹³ Ibid., 158.

¹⁴ David Galula, *Pacification in Algeria: 1956-1958*, with a new foreword by Bruce Hoffman (RAND Corporation, 1963; reprint, Santa Monica, Calif., 2006), xxiii.

Second, this principle suggests that people counterinsurgents kill or capture and detain as insurgents may not have been or may not be fundamentally criminal or violent. They may, instead, be average people that have been profoundly influenced by extreme situations. For example, if a situation of heavy control and military build-up resembles an occupation, otherwise peaceful people will likely feel that they are being occupied and some may be inclined to resist the occupation.

Understanding the extreme influence that environments can have suggests that although there will always be exceptions, we can reject the notion that all insurgents are ruthless and incorrigible murderers. This, in turn, makes amnesty an option and also opens the door to negotiations and even cooperation with insurgent groups. Events like those that unfolded in Iraq's Al-Anbar province over the last year, where those that were formerly insurgents became valuable partners, would support this suggestion.

On the whole, the profound effects of an individual's environment must be understood and considered by the counterinsurgent force. Human nature dictates that small and seemingly inconsequential changes will produce significant results and also provides us with a new perspective on why people behave in certain ways.

Tuning How Information is Presented

This principle pertains to the format of the information that is being presented. Careful study has indicated that there are certain ways to make a message memorable by tuning tiny aspects of both the message itself and how it is presented.¹⁵ In *The Tipping Point* this is referred to as the "stickiness" factor, an analogy for the improved retention of things that are memorable. In addition to retention, acceptance must also be considered. Experience shows that there is a fine line between an idea being accepted by a social group and an idea being rejected or even answered with hostility. Once again, the differences between a social epidemic that spreads and one that never happens are rather slight.

To explain this principle, examples from marketing, education, and management can be used.¹⁶ Experience from these professions suggests that messages should be kept short, should be in a story-like format, should be structured carefully, and should be personal and practical for the audience. The well-known fact that people forget a majority of what they are exposed to must be considered and somehow countered.¹⁷ Taking these considerations even further, careful tests must be conducted with sample audiences to fine-tune every tiny detail, even if the above advice is taken. The volatile and complicated human mind makes such testing a requirement.

When this principle is applied to a counterinsurgency setting, it suggests why counterinsurgency is extremely difficult. Inherent disadvantages on the counterinsurgent side contrast the inherent advantages of their adversaries. Culture, something which foreign counterinsurgents rarely understand well, is often innate for those they are up against. Information must be presented with all the minute considerations that culture imposes taken into account. Insurgents, almost

¹⁵ Gladwell, 25.

¹⁶ Ibid., 99.

¹⁷ Ibid., 97-118.

always from the area, make such considerations automatically, they just know what messages will be memorable and what will be accepted. Counterinsurgents may make similar attempts, but are ill-equipped in comparison. Language is another closely related factor and a similar contrast applies. Foreign counterinsurgents almost always work through interpreters and translators, an awkward and possibly insulting practice in the eyes of a population that, like any population, prefers their own language to any other. Relying on others for human communication is a practice that can taint every piece of information transmitted.

The principle would also suggest that fallout from accidents and collateral damage may be greater than would otherwise be believed. It seems that counterinsurgents can easily balance losses and gains against one another, feeling that the positive effects of a new irrigation ditch that directs water for farming in a certain village can counteract civilian deaths that may have come as result of overzealous bombing in another. The mind factors the number of people affected in either case and quickly weighs the project against the incident with a seemingly logical balance emerging as a result. Considering “stickiness,” the tragedy of innocent lives lost easily emerges as more memorable and more personal than an irrigation ditch and thus more likely to spread in social epidemic form, influencing perceptions as it travels. With this in mind, there can be no proportional comparison if human nature and the exponential characteristics of human-to-human communication are considered.

Counterinsurgents must realize that every action they undertake, every uniform they wear or piece of equipment they use, the precise wording of every flyer they print and distribute, and every word that is said delivers a message, one that may be different from what is intended. All of these must be assessed, measured, tuned so that the intended effect is achieved. Although difficult for the conventional military mind to imagine, experts and researchers from the fields of advertising and marketing may be incredible combat multipliers when facing insurgency, which, after all, is a war of ideas just as many often proclaim.

Assessing the format of information, it is noted that counterinsurgents usually come from a position of great disadvantage and that collateral damage likely has greater repercussions than we may be initially inclined to believe. On the other hand, careful testing and research, carried out by those that understand the intricacies of the human mind, may help to overcome an otherwise staggering challenge.

Selecting the Right People

The final principle is drawn from the fact that the ideas of social epidemics are spread most effectively by people, special people with unique and rare qualities.¹⁸ Much in the same way that humans are influenced heavily by their environments, humans are also influenced heavily by other humans. For an idea to spread successfully via social epidemic, the correct “messengers,” people with special but barely perceptible personal traits, must be selected to spread it.¹⁹

Three types of special people are defined, all of them valuable to those who seek to initiate social epidemics. The first type is the connector. In general, humans do not actively seek out friends.

¹⁸ Ibid., 34.

¹⁹ Ibid., 152.

Most people associate with people that occupy the same handful of spaces they do, the people that they encounter in the course of their lives.²⁰ A connector is different in two ways. First, a connector spends time in multiple spaces and therefore encounters both a broader range of people and more people overall.²¹ Second, connectors have a special talent when it comes to making friends and acquaintances.²² Connectors can effectively spread ideas to different groups, permitting the branching out and expansion of social epidemics. The second type of special person is the maven. Mavens are information accumulators²³ and seek to help others by providing them with the information they accumulate. Mavens are special because their helpful nature and their genuine concern are extremely effective.²⁴ People are very likely to accept whatever ideas they offer. The third type of special person is the salesman. Salesmen are important when a degree of convincing is required. Salesmen naturally and subtly persuade with the use of enthusiasm, charm, and likeability.²⁵ People may possess a combination of these traits and the traits must also be naturally possessed by the individual, human nature will reject a disingenuous messenger and the message they carry.²⁶

Insurgency and counterinsurgency are, in part, efforts to spread ideas. Locating and then working with the people best at doing so can make such efforts much more effective. People with the specified talents will be present in the population, in the counterinsurgent force, and in the within the insurgent network. Careful study and coordinated efforts should seek to determine who amongst the population possesses such skills. Such people exist in all walks of life and will be present in any insurgency setting. It is likely that their traits will either be working for or against the counterinsurgency effort. An active effort will help ensure the former.

Counterinsurgents should develop evaluation methods and then test their own ranks so as to do the same. Once located, these special people should be the face of the counterinsurgency, placed in those positions with the most person-to-person contact with the population. On the other hand, determining which insurgents will be more difficult for reasons of access. Social network analysis may provide some insight and make certain people higher priority targets than others.

The traits mentioned are a seldom-seldom considered, but powerful combat multiplier. Humans are influenced by other humans and are greatly influenced by a select few. Efforts should, as much as possible, be based on this fundamental truth.

Conclusion

Those wishing to effectively influence the outcome of an insurgency conflict must influence the population and initiate a social epidemic. To do so, counterinsurgents can make subtle changes to the environment, tune the format of any idea presented, and carefully select those that will present the idea. Counterinsurgents typically start out at a disadvantage in all these areas, and must therefore work as recommended to address this shortfall.

²⁰ Ibid., 35-36.

²¹ Ibid., 38.

²² Ibid., 41.

²³ Ibid., 60.

²⁴ Ibid., 66-67.

²⁵ Ibid., 73.

²⁶ Ibid., 83.

Unfortunately, this is seldom done. Few, if any, of the principles are mentioned in counterinsurgency doctrine or used to their potential. Their intricacies are of the type that conventional military professionals would likely fail to notice. The experts usually appointed by military commanders will likely overlook them as well. A commander's advisors rarely pose a solution, either. Such advisors, to include peacekeeping experts, reconstruction experts, political experts, and historical experts are often the very best, but are rarely experts in the fundamentals of human behavior. This study would suggest that this expertise is required to address the micro elements of counterinsurgency.

Fortunately, human nature and its intricacies provide us with numerous opportunities to achieve considerable effects with a minimum of effort. Planners and leaders can seize such opportunities with the principles presented.

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