



SMALL WARS

JOURNAL

Better Understanding How Small Wars End

By [Mike Few](#)

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One driving assumption of [Field Manual 3-24: Counterinsurgency](#) states,

General Chang Ting-chen of Mao Zedong's central committee once stated that revolutionary war was 80 percent political action and only 20 percent military. Such an assertion is arguable and certainly depends on the insurgency's stage of development; it does, however, capture the fact that political factors have primacy in COIN. At the beginning of a COIN operation, military actions may appear predominant as security forces conduct operations to secure the populace and kill or capture insurgents; however, political objectives must guide the military's approach.

This 80/20 model assumes that all actions are equivalent in effect, intensity, and outcome. This assumption has led to a conventional wisdom that suggests small wars must be solved politically and not militarily; however, recent research and empirical study is challenging this notion suggesting that most post-World War II conflicts end when the state's security forces effectively suppress the insurgency. In [Things Fall Apart: The Endgame Dynamics of Internal Wars](#), academics from the Defense Analysis department at the Naval Postgraduate School and the Operations Research Department at the United States Military Academy conclude,

All internal wars come to an end, even if -- from the vantage point of the combatants and those who are caught in the crossfire -- they sometimes seem to go on forever. The subject of just how these conflicts end is an important one. There have been almost 300 internal wars initiated since 1945. At this writing 250 of these have come and gone. The human and material costs of these conflicts have been incalculable, much greater than the combined costs of the inter-state wars fought over the same period. Despite the cost and frequency of internal wars, however, we still do not have a close understanding of how they are resolved. What research has been conducted on this subject has focused almost exclusively on the subject of negotiated outcomes. Very little attention, by contrast, has addressed the complementary question of how organized internal conflicts end in the absence of a meaningful negotiated settlement, which is to say, how they are concluded on the battlefield. More than 80% of these wars, it turns out, were resolved by force. This stands in contrast to inter-state conflicts since 1945 which, according to one recent estimate, have had a better than 50% chance of ending in a negotiated compromise.

Read more at [Third World Quarterly](#).

About the Author



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Michael Few is a retired military officer who served multiple combat tours to Iraq including the Thunder Runs and The Surge, and he currently serves as the editor of Small Wars Journal. He is a graduate of the United States Military Academy and studied small wars at the Defense Analysis Department at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA

Available online at : <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/better-understanding-how-small-wars-end>

Links:

{1} <http://smallwarsjournal.com/author/mike-few>

{2} <http://www.math.usma.edu/people/horton/EndGame.pdf>

{3} <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a771160834~frm=titlelink>

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