

Strategic Principles of Counterinsurgency

Robert C. Jones

Currently there are many voices speaking at once, all competing for attention as to their unique perspective as to what is causing the current unrest in the world. Far too much focus is placed on the tactic of “terrorism,” and many are far too quick to simply label those who apply that tactic as “terrorists.” While certainly this characterization is true, it is not particularly helpful. Instead, I believe it is best to look at the purpose for a man’s actions rather than his actions themselves in order to best judge, and thereby label him. Most that we are so quick to label as terrorists are actually insurgents. Bin Laden, however, is no insurgent. Mr. Bin Laden is in fact a terrorist. He is using his Al Qaeda network to wage a regional unconventional warfare campaign to leverage many nationalist insurgent movements that lay within Muslim populaces in states where those populaces are experiencing poor governance, from the Philippines in the East, to England in the West.

Some who speak on this topic have expertise born of years of engagement at the tactical level, and their perspective reflects that experience. Others who speak have little to no direct experience, but have read and studied the problem in great detail based upon the experience of others. The principles I offer below are my own, and are born of (and limited by) my own experience and studies. They are intended to be neither too tactical, nor too theoretical. They are intended instead to provide what I like to call “pure strategy.” These are not insights that are deemed strategic based upon the level of command to which they apply; but are instead intended to be strategic in that they offer fundamental truths on the nature of insurgency that can be applied at every level of command. Hopefully these can guide squad leaders and presidents alike, and help them all to be a little more successful in their endeavors.

The Populace

The populace is the center of gravity for both the insurgent and the counterinsurgent.

Both the governance and the insurgent arise from the same populace to compete for sovereignty. To attack the insurgent is to attack the populace, and only addresses a symptom of the greater problem.

Every populace has both the duty and the right to rise up in insurgency when governance fails, and those failures cannot be resolved through legitimate means (U.S. Declaration of Independence).

Insurgency is fundamental to man's nature. While poor governance is always viewed through the eyes of each unique populace, virtually every man will become an insurgent when he cannot feed, clothe, shelter, and secure his family, and when he has no hope for a better future. Hope is directly linked to the powerful human emotions of pride and respect, and must not be underestimated. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is instructive for the counterinsurgent, and often it is failure high in the hierarchy that sparks insurgency.

The segment of the populace that one must focus on is the one that supports the insurgent. Design programs to address their concerns, and do not simply rely on the "loyal" segment of the populace to help suppress the rebelling segment. (Brits in U.S.; U.S. in Viet Nam and Afghanistan did it wrong; U.S. in Civil Rights movement did it right).

Governance

Classic insurgency occurs when governance fails, so the primary objective of an effective counterinsurgency is to understand and address that failure.

To serve ones populace is not to appease them; it is no more, and no less than to fulfill the duty of government. Appeasement is when a government neglects its duties to its own populace in favor of the government of another.

Every populace and every form of governance is at some stage of insurgency and counterinsurgency at all times. Most are in "Phase Zero," which represents the normal state between the governed, and those who govern. Every civil servant is a counterinsurgent every day, and needs to embrace that role.

The military should only be brought into the counterinsurgency effort when the civil governance's failure becomes so great that it requires resources or capabilities unique to the military in order to continue its efforts of returning effective governance to the populace.

The civil governance should never surrender leadership of the counterinsurgency effort to the military.

Ideology

Ideology is a critical requirement of every insurgency; however, if somehow neutralized by the counterinsurgent, it is almost always replaceable by a new ideology, allowing the insurgency to continue so long as the conditions of poor governance exist.

Effective insurgent ideology is any theme that rallies the populace to challenge the governance, and that the governance is also either unable or unwilling to co-opt.

The same communications tools that drive globalization render ineffective counterinsurgency techniques centered on isolation of dissatisfied populaces, and the direct defeat of insurgent organizations.

Leadership

Insurgent leadership is even more easily replaced than insurgent ideology is. Any campaign targeting either leadership or ideology must recognize this fact, and serve only a supporting role to the larger counterinsurgency effort.

Intervention (Foreign Internal Defense)

When assisting another state with their insurgency, the principles still apply. To merely reinforce the failed governance in reestablishing the status quo will make the intervening state a target of the insurgency and likely expand the popular base of the movement within that populace and to similar populaces elsewhere. Even if “successful,” to reestablish the status quo does no more than reset the conditions of failure.

Colonel Robert Jones is a former Regular Army officer who served in West Germany during the final years of the Cold War, and commanded a Special Forces Detachment embedded with the Egyptian Army during the first Gulf War. On 9/11 Colonel Jones was a citizen soldier, serving as a Deputy District Attorney in Portland, Oregon. Returning to active service in May of 2002, Colonel Jones has served in a wide range of Special Operations staff positions at the Army, MACOM, and GCC level. He served over four years at Special Operations Command, Pacific where he led several key directorates, to include the Director of Plans and Strategy, and the Director of Operations. He is currently the Chief of Strategic Studies, Strategy Division at US Special Operations Command. He received his Juris Doctorate from Willamette University in 1995, and his Masters in Strategic Studies from the U.S. Army War College in 2006.

The views expressed in this paper are the author's personal judgments. They do not represent the policy of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, or U.S. Special Operations Command.

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