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Philippine Counterinsurgency Strategy: Then and Now

by Mike Fowler

Shortly after the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898, an insurgency campaign began against the US occupational force in the Philippines. In less than four years, the counterinsurgents were able to claim victory as the last of the major insurgent leaders surrendered. As of 2010, an entirely different insurgency campaign in the Philippines dragged into its fifth decade. This analysis provides fresh insights into effective counterinsurgency strategy while offering a heavy dose of caution to the transferability of lessons learned from one counterinsurgency to the next. While this study confirms many key factors of a successful counterinsurgency strategy, the findings of this study also indicate that lessons cannot be universally applied in all counterinsurgencies due to wide variations in insurgent strategy.

This study is a comparative analysis of two periods of major insurgency in the Philippines: 1899-1902 and 1969-2009. The analysis compares both insurgent and counterinsurgent strategies between and within the two periods. Although there is no “recipe” or checklist that will ensure a successful insurgency or counterinsurgency, there is significant overlap among the best practices recommended by both academics and the military.¹ From this overlap, this study employs five factors to analyze insurgency and six factors to analyze counterinsurgency.

Of the five key factors for insurgency, arguably the most important is the insurgents’ primary objective. The primary objective varied widely among the insurgencies from social and political revolution to local autonomy and independence. Knowing the objective is an important part to understanding how to defeat the enemy or negotiate a path to victory. Second, the insurgencies’ tactics were an important contribution. While several relied upon guerrilla warfare, some dabbled with conventional operations usually with disastrous consequences. Third, the insurgency’s level of external support influences the groups’ ability to secure weapons, supplies, and funds.. In the case of the Philippines, insurgencies received only limited supplies, weapons, funds, and ammunition from foreign partners. Although Philippine insurgencies generally lacked foreign support, several were able to create a safe haven sanctuary, the fourth factor. A safe haven is a critical portion of ensuring insurgency survivability and longevity. Without it, the overwhelming conventional firepower of the state will generally win out. Finally, the study analyzed each insurgency’s efforts to attempt to gain the support of the

¹ Walter Laqueur *Guerrilla Warfare*, Paul Melshen, Course on Low Intensity Conflict, Joint Forces Staff College, October 2005, F.G. Hoffman, “Best Practices in Countering Insurgencies,” *Marine Corps Gazette* (Oct 2007), 42-48, Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America : A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992). For qualitative studies, see RAND, *Money in the Bank: Lessons Learned from past Counterinsurgency (COIN) Operations* (RAND, 2007), 69-76 or Kalev I Sepp, “Best Practices in Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review* (Oct 2006), 8-12.

population. Support of the population provides insurgents a key logistics hub and intelligence network.

This study used six factors to analyze counterinsurgency strategies in the Philippines. Gaining the support of the population is just as important to the counterinsurgent as to the insurgent. The support of the population both denies logistics to the enemy while extending the counterinsurgents human intelligence network. Second, just as it is important for an insurgent to have an enemy sanctuary, counterinsurgency strategy requires the elimination of a safe haven. Third, separating the insurgents from the population both provides security to the population while denying resupply of the insurgents. Fourth, victory can come through negotiation. A willingness to concede something less than total annihilation of rebel forces is a common trait among successful insurgencies. Fifth, capture of key leaders is often important to breaking an insurgency. Many insurgencies revolve around charismatic figures that depend upon allegiance based on the leader's personality. Without the personality, the cause can flounder. Finally, targeting the enemy's logistics is a common method of forcing insurgents to capitulate.

Each of the factors above was subjectively analyzed based on historical data. The study is organized into three main parts. The first section analyzes the strategies employed during the 1899-1902 Philippine War. The second section covers 1969-2009. The final section compares the various strategies and summarizes with some insights for the counterinsurgent strategist.

1899-1902 Philippine War

As part of the December 10, 1898 Treaty of Paris that ended the Spanish-American War, Spain ceded control of the Philippines to the United States. However, a group of economic elites led by Emilio Aguinaldo had already declared the independence of the Philippines. Realizing that the United States had no intention of providing immediate self-rule to the Philippines, two months after the Treaty of Paris, Aguinaldo rekindled the flame of rebellion that had begun under Spanish colonial rule.

1899-1902: The Philippine Insurgent Strategy

The rebels' initial intent was to regain the ephemeral political structure that was created in the declaration of independence. The rebels were not fighting for freedom or the equality of man. The designed political structure placed those who had become wealthy under the Spanish into positions of political power. The rebellion was not a mass nationalist uprising, but instead was an attempt by economic elites to extend their political status to rule the country.²

The rebel army did not have a coherent military strategy. In fact, the lack of rebel communication and transportation capabilities resulted in four loosely connected theaters of operation: northwest Luzon, central-eastern Luzon, Batangas (south Luzon), and southeast Luzon.³ Two of the four operations were complete failures. Rebel operations in the Fourth District, central-eastern Luzon, lacked support of the local population. The rebels' use of terrorist tactics only further alienated them from the population. In the far southeast portion of Luzon (the Third District), the rebels evacuated from the towns into the mountains, which essentially severed the troops from their primary logistics and intelligence network.

² Glenn Anthony May, *Battle for Batangas* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1993), 70.

³ Brian McAllister Linn, *The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, 1899-1902* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

In Northwest Luzon, Aguinaldo began a military campaign using conventional warfare. In retrospect, this was a strategic error. While Aguinaldo understood the need for protracted war, he did not fully employ guerrilla tactics. The Filipino rebels were not prepared for conventional battles due to their “inferior weapons, insufficient ammunition, poor marksmanship, lack of cavalry and naval power—all of these contributed to the Filipino’s failures in set-piece battles.”⁴ Unable to match US conventional forces, the conventional campaign quickly faltered and Aguinaldo was captured.

The only sustained rebel operation was in Southern Luzon in an area known as Batangas. There, Miguel Malvar led a guerrilla campaign in the rugged countryside. The Filipino rebels had mixed success in their attempts at guerrilla tactics. While they were effective at evading battle, the rebels’ ability to inflict casualties upon the American troops was very limited. In Batangas, the rebels established a robust internal support structure that provided logistics and intelligence. But, the lack of external financial support limited their supply of weapons, ammunition, and training.

Malvar’s forces were initially effective in evading battle due to the rugged and forested terrain in Batangas and their ability to blend in with the population. The mountains and jungles provided only a sanctuary from US troops, though only temporarily. Further, their ability to hide in barrios was only as good as the support of the local population.

While Batangas provided the Malvar with a successful, if temporary, defense, he lacked an offensive punch. Most hit-and-run attacks and ambushes ended poorly for the rebels and tended to inflict few casualties on the Americans. Inadequate weapons and training that made them inept at conventional warfare left them equally challenged at ambushes and raids. Limited ammunition meant that live-fire training was extremely rare. Although the insurgents did enjoy the occasional victory such as the raid at Balangiga, successes were too few to have an impact on the outcome of the theater operations. In an attempt to increase his victories, in December 1901, Malvar launched his version of the Tet Offensive, launching a broad, general conventional offensive against US bases. Unfortunately for Malvar, the tactical military defeat⁵ had no corresponding strategic media victory.

The rebels’ limited efficacy was not totally the fault of the troops, training and equipment. The rebels had a weak organization, a poor propaganda campaign, and were slow to abandon their strategic vision that alienated most of the population. Good leadership was lacking throughout the command structure. Malvar’s staff was built on personalities and social relationships, not organizational competence.⁶ This led to incompetent field commanders and a disjointed propaganda campaign.

Strategy was a “catch 22” for the rebels. The original strategic vision only rewarded the elites. There was virtually no ideological enticement for the masses. However, expanding the vision to include the lower classes would alienate the elites which had the badly needed resources to supply the troops.

The rebels’ initial propaganda campaign against the Americans was ineffective due to its focus on false information. Scare tactics of continued Spanish-style oppression and American anti-Catholicism were quickly found to be untrue. As the war progressed into guerrilla tactics,

⁴ May, 126.

⁵ Similar to Tet, initial tactical successes by the Filipinos were quickly reversed. For more details, see May, 249.

⁶ May, 168.

the rebels' propaganda campaign was linked to its efforts to secure logistics from the locals. At the onset of the conflict, food and money was provided by the elites (partially via war taxes on the lower classes). As the war progressed, defeat on the battlefield dried up support for the rebels. As the chances for rebel victory faded, many elites found it more advantageous to support the United States in order to ensure their prominent status post-conflict.⁷ This changed the balance of the support equation in favor of the lower class. Malvar's charisma and manifestos were able to create an inclusive strategic vision based on anti-colonialism.

This local support provided Malvar's troops with intelligence and logistics bases, but a lack of foreign support left the rebels with little money and no access to weapons or ammunition. Access to arms came primarily through capture. However, the rebels' limited tactical effectiveness translated to few gains in weaponry.

Although passionate about their cause, the rebel groups had only a limited capability to wage a guerrilla campaign. The initial focus on conventional combat depleted badly needed manpower, territory, and resources. Flush with failure after failure, the struggling insurgency was forced to change its strategic objectives in order to gain the support of the local population and its critical logistics network. Within less than a year, the insurgents had devolved from a national uprising into a local rebellion that was easily contained. Though easily contained, eliminating the local rebellion entirely proved to be a far more difficult task.

1899-1902 Counterinsurgency Strategy

The United States approached the Philippine War with a combination of coercion and incentives not unlike contemporary counterinsurgency strategy.⁸ Civic actions and diplomatic actions were used simultaneously, although not in a coordinated fashion, with military force. While US forces excelled in the conventional role and performed admirably in counter-guerrilla tactics, the overall US counterinsurgency strategy was a disjointed success. Although civic actions might have been instrumental in keeping the insurgency from spreading outside of Batangas, US forces were unable to win the support of the local population within Batangas. This not only eliminated a key intelligence network, but required brutal measures to be used to separate the insurgents from their logistics bases in the local villages. In the end, military action raised the costs of continued insurgent activity while diplomatic action provided lucrative benefits to ending the war.

The success of US civic actions to win the support of the population during the Philippine War is debatable. US attempts at education & political reform as well as economic development were incremental and had not produced tangible results in time to affect the outcome of the Philippine War.⁹ The Taft Commission, which became the core of US civic actions, began legislating in September 1900. US efforts to establish schools, local governments, hospitals, roads, sanitation, and communications served as an indication of the US's commitment to the islands and signaled a dramatic change from Spanish rule. US civic projects brought security, water, food, sanitation, public health, and government reform to the 400,000 people in Manila. It is plausible that the provision of security and basic needs helped keep this key economic and

⁷ May, 203.

⁸ Arguably, the incentives were more likely a perceived responsibility to develop the Philippines based on the "White Man's Burden" than any conscious thought of winning the hearts and minds.

⁹ For a detailed analysis of US attempted development of the Philippines in the early 1900s, see Glenn Anthony May, *Social Engineering in the Philippines* (London and Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).

political center on the fringes of the rebellion, denying the rebels a key logistics base. While these civic actions may have won the support of areas that were ambivalent or uncommitted to rebellion, there is little evidence that these civic actions helped win local support in the heart of the insurgency in Batangas where local support was the lynchpin to rebel logistics and intelligence.

Intelligence was a mixed bag for US troops during the Philippine War. Indigenous forces, known as the Scouts, provided good intelligence during the conventional campaign in the north resulting in successful captures of top leaders such as Emilio Aguinaldo and Mariano Trias. But, US troops' intelligence in Batangas was lacking in part due to limited support from the local population. Lacking a local network, units relied upon interrogations and torture for their intelligence. Although this technique provided some valuable tactical intelligence in the short term, it also received widespread negative publicity in the US.¹⁰ Additionally, torture was unable to fill the intelligence gaps there were necessary for strategic victory. Perhaps the most telling indicator of the quality of intelligence was US troops' failure to capture Malvar. Another intelligence misstep led to US forces attempts to target the rebels' finances by harassing elites in the concentration camps. While this might have been a useful technique in 1899, by the time that it was implemented, support for the rebels had largely already migrated from the elites to the lower class making this tactic not only fruitless, but counterproductive for long-term relations.¹¹

US forces overcame their lack of local support through perseverance and methods of desperation which eventually denied the enemy a geographic sanctuary and separated the insurgents from the population. US efforts at hunting down the rebels were frustratingly slow, but eventually proved successful.¹² Although scouting operations were hampered by lack of intelligence on enemy positions, their mere presence forced the rebels to remain in hiding, keeping them separate from the population and preventing resupply from the barrios. Further, US forces burned barrios found (or suspected) to support the enemy. But, these successes in separating the insurgent from the population were only temporary. In order to permanently remove the insurgents' ability to resupply, US forces used drastic measures.

Concentration camps were established to separate the insurgents from the population.¹³ Everything outside of the camps became a combination of a free-fire zone and scorched earth. US forces had essentially occupied all potential logistics bases and destroyed all possibilities for foraging. However, the camps were not good for winning the support of the locals or for political support for the mission in the US. The camps created negative publicity from a high death rate due to a malaria epidemic that was exacerbated by the crowded conditions.¹⁴

On the diplomatic front, the United States signaled that it was willing to accept something less than total victory. The Bates Treaty of 1899 kept the Muslim Moros out of the war.¹⁵ The treaty essentially provided temporary autonomy to the Moros which allowed the United States to focus its forces in Luzon. The Philippines Commission under William Howard Taft was established to create an effective Philippine government. Regardless of its

¹⁰ Fortunately for the counterinsurgents, a combination of a short war, lack of local media exposure, and low expectations for human rights resulted in torture having a negligible impact on the hearts and minds of the Filipino population.

¹¹ May, 262.

¹² May, 227-231.

¹³ RAND, 14.

¹⁴ May, 265.

¹⁵ The Bates Treaty of 1899 between the US and the Sultan of Jolo can be accessed at <http://www.msc.edu.ph/centennial/ba990820.html>.

effectiveness, the commission was a signal to the Filipinos that the US intended to provide more autonomy than the Spanish had. Finally, the 1900 US presidential election provided a significant psychological blow to the Filipinos that were hoping for an anti-imperialist victory. McKinley's re-election represented a long-term (at least another four years) US commitment to the Philippine War convincing many Filipinos that victory wasn't possible.¹⁶ Ironically, in the end, the US granted the rebels their initial strategic objective. By collaborating with the Americans, the elites were rewarded with political power in the Philippines. The resulting civilian government under the Americans looked very similar to the independent 1898 Aguinaldo government.

Eventually, the US strategy was a success. Although the senior enemy leadership in Batangas was neither killed nor captured, US troops were able to cut off insurgents from their resources and logistics support. Concentration camps prevented the population from providing logistics. The scorched earth campaign destroyed the rebel's potential food supply. As the rebels ran out of money and food, they surrendered.¹⁷ The success of the US counterinsurgency strategy should not be exaggerated. The rebels' ineffective raids and inopportune conventional attacks contributed more to the rebel defeat than the US campaign.¹⁸ Plus, current counterinsurgencies should not be too quick to emulate this strategy. Tactics, such as torture, scorched earth, and internment brought short term benefits. But, due to the short nature of the war, the public opinion backlash did not surface until after the war was over. One hundred years later, brutal tactics quickly lead to losses in local support, US public opinion, and international relations which would drastically reduce the usefulness of these options.

21st Century Insurgency Strategy in the Philippines

The century following the Philippine War was turbulent for the Philippines. Economic and ethnic discontent fermented under American rule. Independence after World War II did not bring the Philippines peace. The last fifty years have been peppered with a variety of insurgencies.

The contemporary insurgency in the Philippines is actually multiple independent insurgencies. Most insurgent groups in the Philippines can be loosely grouped into three main categories: communist, ethno-nationalist, and Islamist. The communists, though they now have political representation via the Communist People's Party, continue to use guerrilla tactics to foment revolution via their military arm, the New People's Army (NPA). The original ethno-nationalist party, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), was placated by the creation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. The Islamist insurgency is led by two MNLF splinter groups, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Abu Sayyaf Group, the latter of which has links to Al Qaeda affiliate Jemah Islamiah.

The Communist Insurgency

Beginning in 1969, the NPA used the Maoist strategy of Protracted War, a strategic defense but a tactical offense, in order to replace the existing government of the Philippines with

¹⁶ May, 202.

¹⁷ Reynaldo C. Ileto, *Vestiges of War*, eds. Angel Velasco Shaw and Luis H. Francia (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 17.

¹⁸ Glenn A. May, *A Past Recovered* (Manila: New Day Publishers, 1987), 157 as quoted in Brian McAllister Linn, *The Philippine War* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 322.

a communist state.¹⁹ As classical Maoists, the NPA generally avoided battle, primarily conducting raids and ambushes, and concentrating their limited forces to create a tactical numerical advantage.

There is little evidence to suggest that the NPA received significant external support from a foreign power. Even at the height of the Cold War, the NPA had little support. Significant divergence in communist ideology limited Soviet interest in the NPA. Filipino communist ideology was focused entirely upon agrarian reform and lacked the revolt of the industrial workers which Karl Marx argued was necessary to evolve to a communist society.

To garner the support of the population, the NPA used both a national propaganda campaign and a tactical subversion of individual barrios (villages). A significant level of effort went into creating a friendly barrio that could be used as an NPA logistics base, intelligence network, and manpower pool.²⁰ Before entering a barrio openly, the NPA sent a small assessment team to determine the barrio's issues and identify potential allies and enemies. Based upon the assessment, the NPA team developed a tailored propaganda and civil affairs program. The propaganda campaign usually centered on the barrio's problems with the government. During the 1970s and 1980s, the government's uneven distribution of resources, lack of rural services, brutal repression, and the lopsided dominance of economic elites made finding problems with the government relatively easy.²¹ Civil affairs projects included digging wells and building rapport with the locals by helping with daily chores.

At the national level, the CPP used a broad propaganda campaign that emphasized the economic inequalities in the Philippines with messages that were anti-fuedal, anti-imperialist, anti-fascist, and anti-capitalist.²² The CPP's main theme was agrarian reform and the domination of politics and the economy by select elite. However, rumors of corruption and communist leaders enjoying the benefits of capitalism with luxury cars and plush downtown Manila apartments degraded the legitimacy of the communists and their claims to run a "better" government.²³

The Ethno-Nationalist Insurgency

While the communist insurgency has a broad geographic scope, the ethno-nationalist insurgency was limited to Mindanao and the nearby islands. The ethno-nationalist insurgency fought to create an independent Moro state in Mindanao. Although Muslim Mindanao had a history of resisting the Christian invader, the contemporary ethno-nationalist insurgency gathered steam in 1968 when a special all-Muslim Army elite unit based in Luzon balked at fighting fellow Muslim Moros in the contested Malaysian Sabah. For their mutiny, the majority of the unit was executed in what came to be known as the Jabidah Massacre. Of course, discontent had fermented for years in Mindanao. The Moros had long felt that the Christian government politically and economically discriminated against the Moro south. Throughout much of the twentieth century, the Philippine government encouraged Christians to migrate to Mindanao, creating a perception that the Christians were "stealing" Moro lands. Mindanao was historically

¹⁹ Victor Corpus, *Silent War* (Quezon City, Philippines: Corpus Enterprises, 1989), 27.

²⁰ For detailed notes on establishing base areas in barrios see Corpus, 39-50.

²¹ Corpus, 185.

²² Communist People's Party, "Philippine Society and Revolution," available from: http://www.philippinerevolution.net/cgi-bin/cpp/pdocs.pl?id=lrp_e;page=01; accessed on 27 Nov., 2007.

²³ Corpus, 12-15.

under-developed and under-resourced due in part to its difficult terrain of mountains and dense forests as well as its remoteness from the capital in Manila. Since World War II, the Muslim area of Mindanao has consistently ranked as one of the poorest regions in the Philippines. At many times, its per capita GDP was half that of the second poorest region.²⁴ The massacre was the catalyst that sparked the creation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Open rebellion in Mindanao began in 1971 after Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law.

The MNLF primarily limited its operations to guerrilla tactics. The insurgents used the mountainous terrain to avoid large force-on-force conventional conflicts against the Philippine Armed Forces. The MNLF predominantly stuck to raids and ambushes in which its forces had a tactical numerical advantage. The MNLF generally avoided civilian targets, instead focusing on the military and police. Due to limited civilian casualties, the ethnic discrimination of the government, and the repressive policies of Ferdinand Marcos, the MNLF enjoyed significant popular support within its area of operations.

After several years of fighting, the MNLF agreed to a ceasefire in 1976 in exchange for local autonomy. Some members, disgruntled by the MNLF's conciliatory stance, created the splinter group Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 1977. This splintering of the ethno-nationalist insurgency marked the rise of the contemporary Islamist insurgency in the Philippines.

The Islamist Insurgency

The MILF became a far more conservative organization, demanding not only independence, but an Islamist state. Beyond that, the MILF was virtually the same as the MNLF, using the same strategy and tactics and still lacking significant external support. The MILF does not enjoy the same level of popular support as the MNLF. The MILF vision has no room for Catholics who have a significant presence in Mindanao. Over the decades, several ceasefires were brokered and then broken by one side or the other.

The Islamist insurgency underwent a drastic change in 1990 with the establishment of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), an organization with links to Al Qaeda affiliate Jeemah Islamiah. Like the MILF, the ASG also wanted to establish an Islamic state. Beyond that common strategic objective, ASG is an anomaly among Philippine insurgent groups. It used an entirely different set of tactics, had a significant level of external financial support, and very little support of the population. Plus, ASG is not really a single, cohesive group but a conglomeration of groups varying from criminal elements to radical Islamic groups.²⁵

ASG's tactics are unique among Philippine insurgent groups. Instead of relying upon the mountains and jungle to evade government forces, ASG used speed boats, moving between islands and countries along the southwestern archipelago that bridges Mindanao to Indonesia. Instead of attacking police and military targets, the ASG primarily attacked civilians, especially tourists, using bombings, kidnappings, and executions. This strategy was highly successful in the short term, providing ASG international attention and funding. However, ASG's tactics did little to further their cause towards their strategic objective. The strategy alienated the local population and motivated the government to launch a large offensive to wipe out the ASG.

²⁴ 2008 *Statistics Yearbook*, Republic of the Philippines: Manila, 3–56.

²⁵ Banlaoi, 14-15. These groups vary from criminal elements to radical Islamic groups.

Further, the growing prevalence of ASG's use of for-profit attacks suggests that ASG may have evolved (or perhaps devolved) from an insurgent group into an organized criminal group.

ASG's limited, but significant, external support provides a sanctuary system to evade Philippine forces. ASG's connections to JI permit them to use bases in Indonesia which they travel to using speed boats. Some elements of ASG have also been able to find sanctuary at MILF bases. This provides a "catch 22" for the counterinsurgents. If the military attacks the ASG forces at MILF bases, they run the risk of widening the conflict to the MILF. If they do not attack, they enable a safe haven for ASG forces. Diplomatic pressure on the MILF leadership to prevent cooperation with ASG may be ineffective if support is being provided unofficially by hard-core elements of the MILF.

21st Century Counterinsurgency Strategy in the Philippines

This study examines the Philippine counterinsurgency strategy against the three major insurgencies in two phases. The first phase of the counterinsurgency was during the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos from 1969-1986. The second phase began in 1986 and remained ongoing through 2010.

The Marcos counterinsurgency strategy was anchored upon martial law. In August 1971, the Liberal Party (a major opposition party) held a campaign rally in the Plaza Miranda. NPA soldiers tossed several grenades into the crowd causing several casualties. Apparently, Marcos did not feel that this incident alone provided enough justification for martial law, likely because some believe that Marcos was behind the attack. The next month, Marcos had the military fake communist attacks upon the defense minister's car and the Manila power grid in order to justify his declaration of martial law.

Protecting the civilian population was not a major facet of the Marcos counterinsurgency. Throughout the 1980s, the Philippines relied upon search and destroy missions. These conventional operations were counterproductive. Philippine search and destroy missions often sacrificed surprise in exchange for overwhelming superiority. Insurgents were often able to evade these conflicts and choose engagements that were more in their favor.²⁶ These missions often entailed harassment of the local population in an attempt to gain intelligence on insurgent locations. In some cases, these heavy-handed tactics alienated the population and increased the local support for the insurgency.

Although Marcos did a poor job of winning the support of the population or seriously degrading the capabilities of the insurgents, Marcos was highly successful at negotiating in order to reduce the number of fronts on which to fight. In 1976, Marcos convinced the MNLF to accept a ceasefire in exchange for local autonomy. Over the next decade, Marcos was able to largely constrain the MNLF by bribing local leaders with seats on the newly created autonomous legislature.

Counterinsurgency in the Philippines entered a new, more successful phase in 1986 with the deposing of Marcos. With an increased focus on diplomatic solutions, the new counterinsurgency strategy continued offensive operations while evolving to a concept of civilian protection. Throughout the 1980s, successful government operations, the growth of local anti-communist paramilitary groups, and an internal CPP mole-hunt purge decimated local

²⁶ See Corpus.

NPA cells. Popular support for the NPA was further hurt by the Aquino administration's promise for land reform.

An important aspect of the Philippines' successful counterinsurgency strategy was their willingness to negotiate with insurgent parties. Shortly after taking power, President Aquino drafted a ceasefire with the MNLF promising autonomy in exchange for a renouncement to independence. Leftist parties were allowed to participate in politics, causing a split within the CPP.²⁷ The 1996 truce with the MNLF and the 2001 truce with the MILF permitted the Philippines to concentrate their counterinsurgency focus on a narrow geographic region against ASG. Since 2001, the Philippines focused its military efforts on ASG while pursuing diplomatic efforts to contain the MILF and NPA.

To counter the ASG, the Philippines worked to deny insurgents support of the local population on an island-by-island basis. In cooperation with US civil affairs teams, the Philippines launched major counterinsurgency efforts on the ASG stronghold islands of Basilan and Jolo. While the army established "security at the village level,"²⁸ US civil affairs teams built new, or improved existing, schools, wells, roads, bridges, and piers.²⁹ Short-term medical, dental, and veterinary treatment teams addressed the immediate medical needs of the community. These short and long term projects served several purposes. Not only did they provide some badly needed basic services, these projects helped to win over the support of the population while improving the local economic infrastructure and providing increased mobility to counterinsurgency forces. Leveraging the rapport developed with the local population during these civic projects, counterinsurgent forces were able to, at least temporarily, gather intelligence on local ASG movements and activity.

The Philippines also employed its offensive counterinsurgency operations very effectively. Attacks on ASG killed several leaders and forced their continual retreat from Basilan to Jolo to Mindanao and back to Jolo.³⁰ Although the rugged mountains, jungle terrain, and remote villages provided some limited sanctuary to the ASG, counterinsurgent efforts to win the support of the population dried up the logistical support base for the insurgents.³¹ The Philippines coordinated its counterinsurgency efforts with Malaysia and Indonesia in order to prevent ASG from using international borders as sanctuaries. The Philippine military was successful in its counter-ASG operations with only minimal assistance from US advisors, demonstrating an increased counter-insurgency capacity and enhancing the government's legitimacy.

The only potential blemish in the counterinsurgency campaign was the lack of integration of civilian development projects with the military strategy. There is no single Philippine civilian counterinsurgency authority.³² The Philippines is responsible for offensive operations. The Department of Agrarian Reform is in charge of land redistribution (a major complaint of the communist insurgents). The Department of Public Works and Highways is responsible for infrastructure which is valuable for providing goodwill, military mobility, and economic

²⁷ Clifton Sherrill, "Promoting Democracy: Results of Democratization Efforts in the Philippines," *Asian Affairs, an American Review* (Winter 2006), 219.

²⁸ Gregory Wilson, "Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation: OEF-Philippines and the Indirect Approach," in *Military Review* (Nov/Dec 2006), 7.

²⁹ Cheryl A. Walley, "Civil Affairs: A Weapon of Peace on Basilan Island," *Special Warfare* (Sep 2004), 31.

³⁰ OxResearch, "Philippines: Army Moves to Consolidate Jolo Success," (Oxford: Feb. 16, 2007), 1.

³¹ Wilson, 8.

³² Antonio I. Sepnet, "The Communist Insurgency in the Philippines" (Master's Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2004), 55.

development. There does not appear to be a coordinated counterinsurgency strategy across the government departments.

The Philippines seems on the verge of victory of its counterinsurgency campaign. The communists are involved in the political process which should slowly erode their willingness to fight. The government has truces with the MNLF and MILF. Abu Sayyaf was essentially crushed during recent military operations, though small elements continue to remain a threat.

The Conflicts in a Comparative Perspective

Comparison of Philippine insurgencies past and present is not a simple comparison of two cases. Both periods involved multiple regional insurgencies. From a comparative perspective, the 1899-1902 Philippine War involved two distinct insurgencies: one led by Aguinaldo in northwest Luzon and the other led by Malvar in Batangas. The current insurgency involves three ideologically distinct insurgencies: communist, Moro nationalist, and Islamist.

Although there are some similarities, no two Philippine insurgencies employed the same strategy (see Table 1). Although several of the insurgencies employed similar tactics, the primary political objective, the ability to obtain a safe-haven sanctuary, and emphasis placed on gaining the support of the local population varied greatly. The two most similar insurgent strategies are the Malvar and Communist insurgencies. Both emphasized the mobilization of the poor, rural barangays as the cornerstone for guerrilla warfare in an effort to overthrow the governing power.

	Alguinaldo Insurgency	Malvar Insurgency	Communist Insurgency	Moro Insurgency	Islamist Insurgency
Primary Objective	Establish Oligarchy of economic elite	Departure of Occupying Army	Overthrow of Government	Independence of Moro Region	Establishment of Islamic Caliphate
Tactics	Conventional	Guerrilla	Guerrilla	Guerrilla	Terrorist / Profit-Based
External Support	No	No	No	No	Yes
Type of safe haven sanctuary	None	Mountainous Terrain	Rural areas	Rural areas	Island-hopping
Emphasis on gaining support of population	Not a Priority	Major line of operation	Major line of operation	Ideology polarized local support	Ideology polarized local support

Table 1: A Comparison of Key Philippine Insurgency Strategies

From the counterinsurgent perspective, both the American and the Philippine strategies evolved over time. The American strategy that brought victory over Aguinaldo's forces did not bring victory in Batangas against Malvar. As the conflict dragged on, US forces modified the strategy, eventually starving the insurgents into submission. Arguably, diplomacy was a contributing factor to victory. The Filipinos were granted de facto self-rule under US protection.

Philippine counterinsurgency strategy evolved in a different manner. Like the initial US counterinsurgency strategy, the Philippine Army of the 1970s focused on conventional tactics and search-and-destroy missions. As the wars dragged on, diplomacy became a key factor in reducing the violence. Offers of autonomy split the Moro national insurgency while inclusion in the democratic political process split the communist insurgency. Throughout this period there was much talk about land reform, but serious efforts to win the support of the rural population were limited until the early 2000s. Only the Islamist counterinsurgency made serious attempts to gain the support of the population, in part because the area of operations was relatively small, allowing the counterinsurgents to focus their limited civil affairs assets.

	COIN vs. Alguinaldo	COIN vs. Malvar	COIN vs. Communist	COIN vs. Moro	COIN vs. Islamist
Emphasis on gaining support of population	No	No	No	No	Yes
Eliminated enemy sanctuary	N/A	No	No	No	No
Separated insurgents from population	No	Yes	No	No	No
Success through Negotiation	Partial	No	Yes	Yes	No
Capture of Leaders Broke Insurgency	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Targeted enemy logistics	No	Yes	No	No	No

Table 2: A Comparison of Key Philippine Counterinsurgency Strategies

The government’s ability to deny insurgents the support of the population in communist and Moro areas is limited. Some argue that the Philippines remained a fractious society where “loyalty to the family, faction, or friend often takes precedence over loyalty to the state.”³³ Regional disparities in ethnicity, religion, language, development, and government services complicated the potential for gaining the support of the population.

Additionally, advances in technology and transportation have complicated the government’s ability to eliminate insurgent sanctuaries. Malvar’s troops could only find sanctuary in the mountains. Islamist insurgents, though, could quickly move between islands and countries using speed boats.

Conclusions

Practitioners of modern warfare should not be too quick to apply the so-called lessons of the Philippine War to the insurgencies of the present. The US victory in the Philippine War was as much a failure of the insurgency strategy as it was the success of the counterinsurgency strategy. In one district, the rebels squandered what little popular support they had by using terrorist tactics against the locals. Another district made local support impossible by evacuating the towns. Aguinardo’s district was defeated partially due to a commitment to conventional

³³ MacDonald, 302.

tactics. Aguinaldo's revolution did not have an ideology that could rally the local population. Aguinaldo wanted to create an oligarchy that benefited the elite landowners; hardly a political goal to motivate the masses. Aguinaldo's anti-imperialist message was initially effective. The United States provided far more services, facilities, and self-rule than the Spanish had, dispelling rebel claims that the Americans were oppressive, anti-Catholic, and imperialistic in the colonial sense. US discussions on self-governance and establishment of local governments using indigenous peoples lessened the image of the United States as an imperial oppressor.

Without the support of the local population, and the corresponding logistical and intelligence network, the insurgency was doomed to failure. The short lived insurgent success in Batangas was not enough to carry the entire war. While able to gain widespread support from the locals, Malvar's operations were geographically constrained to a relatively small area in the Philippines greatly simplifying the counterinsurgency problem. Even with local support, the rebels lacked military competence. The insurgents had very few tactical successes due to their lack of training, ammunition, and good tactical commanders. Successful surprise attacks and ambushes rarely resulted in a tactical insurgent victory.

The US military was essentially assured tactical victory which led to the capture of several key insurgent leaders. But, the strategic victory seems more accidental. The insurgency essentially imploded due to its lack of support. The United States had never intended to make the Philippines a colony. The eventual understanding of this among the locals let the air out of Aguinaldo's anti-imperialist ideology. Throughout much of Luzon, US civic actions projects helped demonstrate goodwill and a desire to develop the Philippines instead of plundering its resources. But, this was not the case in Batangas. Brutal tactics and internment brought short-term results that did not win the support of the local population. Instead, the insurgents were bled dry by their lack of external resources and the interruption in the flow of internal resources by the counterinsurgents.

While some of the brutal tactics used in the Philippine War may have contributed to tactical victories, the costs of those tactics were still being paid by the United States one hundred years later. Even though the United States and the Philippines have cordial state relations, residual distrust remained. For instance, during the 1899 war, combat operations under General Wood and General Pershing resulted in many civilian casualties on Jolo. Due to the continuing residual distrust, it was politically difficult for US forces to assist in defeating the ASG, limiting US forces to an advisory and training role. Additionally, Filipinos remain sensitive to US permanent military bases due to its seemingly imperialist overtones.³⁴

Civic actions are now a concerted effort to win over support of the local population. However, it remains to be seen whether or not the impact of these civic actions are sustainable. While there are areas of good governance in the Philippines, pockets of Mafia-style political bosses at the local level make it unlikely that all of the civic action projects will be maintained over the long term.³⁵ Winning the support of the locals cannot be viewed in an objective, quantitative method that counts number of wells drilled and number of vaccinations provided. While these civic action projects appeared to win over the locals, such support is fleeting, and only time will tell if the local support can be maintained. Fortunately, continued

³⁴ Larry Niksch, "Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-U.S. Anti-Terrorism Cooperation, (Congressional Research Service: 2007), 17.

³⁵ Alfred McCoy, *An Anarchy of Families: State and Family in the Philippines* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1993).

counterinsurgent victories on the battlefield against ASG should contribute to limiting resurgence in support.

For the most part, the later twentieth century insurgencies avoided the strategic errors of the Aguinaldo rebellion. Each of the insurgencies has developed its own local support apparatus, although to varying degrees of success. Each has shown competence in guerrilla tactics aided by the ready availability of transportation, weapons, ammo, and training on the global market.

Support of the local population, tactical military competence, and the ability to concentrate military forces on a small geographic area were the linchpins for successful counterinsurgency in the Philippines. The majority of the Philippine success against the NPA, MNLF, and MILF came not on the battlefield but in negotiations. Diplomatic activities with the insurgents not only enhanced security, if only temporarily, but enabled the military to concentrate its forces on countering the ASG.

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