

Unlearning Counterinsurgency*

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Once again insurgency and counterinsurgency have become issues of great importance to the U.S. military, particularly the Army. This is not a new phenomenon, but the latest manifestation of an old cycle. Several times in the past the Army has mastered counterinsurgency, only to see attention wane when the strategic significance of insurgency subsided, thus forcing it to re-learn the skill when a new threat emerged. Now we must do this again.

Today, insurgency has returned as a major strategic issue for the United States. In today's global security environment, sustained, large-scale conventional war between states is unlikely, at least in the short term. But the conditions that generate internal conflict—discontent arising from globalization, the failure of economic development to keep pace with expectations; the collapse of traditional political, economic, and social orders; widespread anger and resentment; environmental decay; population pressure; the pervasiveness of weak regimes; the growth of transnational organized crime; and, the widespread availability of arms—persist. As a result, insurgency has become both common and strategically significant.

This poses a direct threat to American security. In today's world, stability within states affects others. Interconnectedness, the permeability of states, the globalization of economies, the transparency arising from information technology, and the intermixing of people around the world give every conflict wider repercussions. Internal conflicts create refugee flows which destabilize neighboring states. They often spawn organized crime, as rebels turn to smuggling to raise capital and acquire weaponry. As the images of internal war are broadcast or emailed around the world, awareness rises and, with it, demands for action or intervention. And internal conflicts and the weak states or areas outside government control which they create often serve as breeding grounds for terrorism.

Insurgency is difficult for the United States because of the protracted and ambiguous nature of the conflict. Rapid decisive operations—an American forte—seldom work. Long-term involvement with extensive interagency activity and partner cooperation is the norm. Since the military battlespace is not decisive, ultimate success requires that the U.S. military play a supporting role to other government agencies and, more importantly, to the partner governments and their security forces. Unfortunately, the U.S. national security organization

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is not optimized for counterinsurgency support. Even though the military often is effective at the combat component of counterinsurgency, other government agencies are less so in the political, economic, psychological, and intelligence realms. But because insurgency is a holistic threat, counterinsurgency must be integrated and holistic. Ultimately, a nation is only as good at counterinsurgency support as its weakest link, not its strongest.

The American military, the Department of Defense, and other government agencies thus are grappling with the renewed insurgency threat. They are developing strategies, operational concepts, and new doctrine. Insurgency and counterinsurgency are being integrated into the curriculum of the military professional educational system, Joint and Service wargames, and training programs. Luckily, a foundation of expertise is available. While few of the Army's junior leaders have studied insurgency in depth, many uniformed and civilian senior leaders as well as supporting contractors and other civilian employees have experience gained in Vietnam, El Salvador, or some other counterinsurgency theater. This is both a blessing and curse.

Because Vietnam was such a seminal event in American history and in the lives of those who lead and shape the Army, the tendency is to extrapolate general conclusions of insurgency from that conflict. In doctrine and other forms of official thinking, the organization, strategy, and methods of the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese allies are treated as if they compose a general model of all insurgencies. For instance, characteristics of the Vietnamese insurgency—that it sought the revolutionary seizure of power, that it was built on a revolutionary cadre and an extensive political underground movement, that it combined semi-conventional military activities with guerrilla war and terrorism—are viewed as if they are features of *all* insurgencies.

In reality, the Vietnamese insurgency was specific, shaped by its particular historical, political, and cultural context. Some elements of it are common to all insurgencies, others are not. Insurgency is mutating. Modern insurgents tend to adopt looser, networked structures rather than hierarchical ones. Because they cannot count on state sponsors, they undertake criminal activity or ally themselves with global organized crime. The form of available sanctuary, the nature of allies and partners, and the ideological framework of insurgency all are changing.

It is not yet clear which of these mutations are most important. Much does remain constant—insurgency remains complex, grinding, dirty, and violent, mired in multiple levels of ambiguity and dragged out for an extended period of time. But we cannot simply dust off our 20th century notion and apply it to 21st century insurgency. We must, in part, unlearn what we know. With the opening of the mind that this provides, our strategic thinkers can counter the new forms of this old challenge.