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The Way to Win a Guerrilla War

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The Way to Win a Guerrilla War

Wednesday, November 29, 2006

By T.X. Hammes, *Washington Post*
Sunday, November 26, 2006

In all the barrels of ink being spilled in the argument over whether the United States can or can't possibly win the war against the insurgency in Iraq, one critical aspect is often overlooked: how the nature of insurgency has changed over the past few decades, and what that means for the counterinsurgent.

Insurgencies are still based on Mao Zedong's fundamental precept that superior political will, properly employed, can defeat greater economic and military power. Because insurgents organize to ensure political rather than military success, an opponent cannot defeat them with military force alone. But complicating our problem today is the fact that insurgencies are no longer the unified, hierarchical organizations that the Chinese, and later the Vietnamese, developed from the 1920s to the 1960s. Rather, they are loose coalitions unified only by the desire to drive out an outside power. All elements of the insurgency know that when the outside power is gone, they will fight a civil war to resolve their differences. Learning to adjust is the key to success in counterinsurgency. Conventional military weakness forces insurgents to be adaptable, so defeating them requires coherent, patient action -- encompassing a range of political, economic, social and military activities -- that can only be executed by a team drawn from all parts of government. You don't outfight the insurgent. You outgovern him.

This was one of the real sources of frustration during my brief tour of duty in Iraq in 2004. The United States had clearly failed to learn from previous insurgencies. We were focused on killing insurgents rather than providing security and governance. Fortunately, we're now showing signs of learning -- thanks to some smart people who are both practitioners and students of counterinsurgency.

Any study of modern insurgency has to start with Mao. The communist leader who defeated China's nationalist forces not only succeeded as an insurgent but also wrote about how he won. "On Guerrilla Warfare" is a how-to guide for insurgent leaders that has been quoted by nearly every insurgent strategist since, including al-Qaeda's. The best translation is by Marine Brig. Gen. Samuel B. Griffith, whose fluency in Chinese and extensive travel in China during its civil war enabled him to provide unique insights into Mao's work.

No American discussion of insurgency could ignore Vietnam. Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap's "People's War, People's Army" is still the basic reference on the North Vietnamese view of the war and an illustration of how warfare continually changes. While Mao was able to confront his opponent on the Chinese mainland, Ho Chi Minh and Giap had to defeat the French and the Americans without ever being able to threaten their home bases. They expanded on Mao's concept by using the media and peace activists to convince the American people that we couldn't win the war. They won not by defeating our armed forces but by breaking our political will.

In the 30 years since the fall of Saigon, insurgency has continued to evolve. For an up-to-date overview, National Defense University professor Bard O'Neill's "Insurgency and Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse," published in 2005, is hard to beat.

Counterinsurgency is a very different animal. Insurgents practice the art of destruction, which is easy; counterinsurgents have the far more difficult task of creating a functioning government. Written in 1964, David Galula's "Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice" is still one of the best books to make this case. Galula, who was a French army officer during World War II and later in Indochina and Algeria, makes it clear that counterinsurgency is not about killing insurgents but about providing security and the

hope for a better future. If a government can't give its people both, the insurgents will overthrow it.

"Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam," by Lt. Col. John Nagl, is a comparison between the British experience in Malaya from 1948 to 1960 and the U.S. experience in Vietnam. The British army, Nagl says, managed to create a "learning institution" that was able to understand the type of war it was in and adjust accordingly. In contrast, the U.S. Army in Vietnam kept trying to apply conventional warfare doctrine to an unconventional war. By the time it finally did adjust, it was too late.

Journal articles offer another rich vein of enlightenment on the conduct of counterinsurgency. In "Best Practices in Counterinsurgency," in the May-June 2005 issue of *Military Review*, Kalev I. Sepp, a former Special Forces officer and now professor at the Naval Postgraduate School, studied 51 recent counterinsurgencies to develop a list of 12 "best practices" common to all successful ones, and nine "worst practices" of the unsuccessful ones. Sadly, in Iraq, the United States scores below 50 percent on the first and above 50 percent on the second.

David Kilcullen's "Counterinsurgency Redux" appears in the current issue of *Survival*. I've found it the best discussion of insurgency's evolution from classical Maoist to the modern transnational, multilateral "coalitions of the willing" that challenge the United States today. "In modern counter-insurgency," Kilcullen writes, "the security force must control a complex 'conflict ecosystem' -- rather than defeating a single specific insurgent adversary." This is a long way from the monolithic organizations Galula fought.

Two important articles are written from the unique perspective of a senior military officer fighting an active counterinsurgency. In "Challenges in Fighting a Global Insurgency," in the summer 2006 issue of *Parameters*, Lt. Gen. David W. Barno, commander of U.S. and Coalition forces in Afghanistan from October 2003 to April 2005, highlights the insurgents' ability to think in terms of 25-year wars. "The Americans may have all the wristwatches," he quotes the Taliban reminding villagers, "but we have all the time." And in his influential "Winning the Peace: The Requirement for Full-Spectrum Operations" in the July-August 2005 *Military Review*, Maj. Gen. Peter Chiarelli describes how his division in Baghdad not only had to conduct combat operations but also train Iraqi security forces, provide essential services, promote Iraqi efforts to establish an effective government and foster economic competition in what had been a controlled economy.

All these sources influenced the new Army/Marine Corps Field Manual 3-24, "Counterinsurgency." Posted on the Internet in draft form, it updates the badly outdated doctrine based on U.S. experiences in the 1960s, offering thought-provoking observations such as "The best weapons for counterinsurgency do not shoot bullets" and "The more force you use, the less effective you are." It's already influencing both how the military is fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan and how it is preparing for future wars.

If you're not inclined to read an Army field manual, three notable movies provide an insight into at least one aspect of counterinsurgency. David Lean's 1962 epic "Lawrence of Arabia," based on T.E. Lawrence's experiences in the Arab World War I uprising against the Turks, illustrates how hard it is for an outsider to understand another culture well enough to advise effectively. The 1966 classic "Battle of Algiers" shows how French brutality lost the war in Algeria. And 1993's "In the Name of the Father" reinforces that message, showing how "aggressive interrogation" techniques came back to haunt the British in their campaign against the Irish Republican Army -- a valuable insight for those trying to win these most difficult of wars.

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