

# COUNTERINSURGENCY

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# Introduction

## Understanding Insurgency and Counterinsurgency

An “insurgency,” according to the current U.S. military field manual on the subject, is “an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict.... Stated another way, an insurgency is an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control.”<sup>1</sup> The same field manual defines “counterinsurgency” as the “military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency.”<sup>2</sup> “Counterinsurgency,” therefore, is an umbrella term that describes the complete range of measures that governments take to defeat insurgencies. These measures may be political, administrative, military, economic, psychological, or informational, and are almost always used in combination.

Importantly, the precise approach any particular government takes to defeat an insurgency depends very much on the character of that government, making counterinsurgency, at its heart, a form of opposed or contested governance, albeit a hideously violent one. Insurgencies, like cancers, exist in thousands of forms, and there are dozens of techniques to treat them, hundreds of different populations in which they occur, and several major schools of thought on how best to deal with them. The idea that there is one single “silver bullet” panacea for insurgency is therefore as unrealistic as the idea of a universal cure for cancer.

Indeed, if you cut the qualifying adjectives out of the field manual's definition of counterinsurgency, you are left only with "actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency." This truncated definition shows that there is no template, no single set of techniques, for countering insurgencies. Counterinsurgency is, simply, whatever governments do to defeat rebellions. Thus, the character of any particular conflict is impossible to understand without reference to three defining factors: the nature of the insurgency being countered, the nature of the government being supported, and the environment—especially the human environment—in which the conflict takes place.

### **THE STRUGGLE TO ADAPT**

In all war, but particularly in counterinsurgency, this environment is in flux. All sides engage in an extremely rapid, complex, and continuous process of competitive adaptation. Insurgents and terrorists evolve rapidly in response to countermeasures, so that what works once may not work again, and insights that are valid for one area or one period may not apply elsewhere. In many insurgency environments, rapid, large-scale social change may also be occurring: mass population movement, ethnic or sectarian "cleansing," flight of refugees and displaced persons, social revolution, or even genocide may be occurring alongside the guerrilla conflict itself. Thus, the imperative is to understand each environment, in real time, in detail, in its own terms, in ways that would be understood by the locals—and not by analogy with some other conflict, some earlier war, or some universal template or standardized rule-set.

This means that the whole art of counterinsurgency is to develop specific measures, tailored to the environment, to suppress a particular insurgency and strengthen the resilience of a particular threatened society and government. And these measures must be developed quickly enough to deal with an insurgency that is itself evolving, in time to maintain the confidence of a domestic and international public. Thus counterinsurgency is at heart an adaptation battle: a struggle to rapidly develop and learn new techniques and apply them in a fast-moving, high-threat environment, bringing them to bear before the enemy can evolve in response, and rapidly changing them as the environment shifts.

This makes organizational learning and adaptation critical success factors. David Morris, a writer and former Marine, had this to say about institutional knowledge and organizational learning during the war in Iraq:

On the wall of the quarters I shared with a Marine lieutenant in Ramadi there was a large metal wipeboard and every morning before I went out into the city on patrol I would study it. The lieutenant had inherited it from the previous occupant and covering its every square inch was the collected wisdom of the Occupation, written in a fragmented, aphoristic style. . . . It was mid-2006 now and a lot of the truisms on the board either were outdated or had been reversed by events. Lessons had been learned, some too late. . . . I thought about all the aphorisms written on the board. In theory, each lesson represented a life. In order to know that driving on dirt roads in Ramadi was dangerous, you had to have an IED (improvised explosive device) go off in your face. Before you started draping camouflage netting over the gunner's turret atop a Humvee, you had to lose a gunner to a sniper. In order to learn the lesson, you had to lose somebody.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, if this book has a central theme, it is that our knowledge of counterinsurgency is never static, always evolving. This is partly because we can never know more than a tiny amount about the complex environment in which we operate, partly because of the observer effect whereby our attempts to understand and deal with that environment inevitably alter it, and partly because the environment changes so rapidly that even if we *could* know it fully, our knowledge would be a mere snapshot that would be immediately out of date.

### **The Two Fundamentals: Local Solutions, Respect for Noncombatants**

Despite the ground-level complexity, at a higher level of abstraction, some fundamentals do seem to apply throughout this type of warfare. These fundamentals are few—I count only two—and they are very simple to express but extremely difficult to act upon. The first is to understand in detail what drives the conflict in any given area or with any given population group. This implies the need to constantly update that

understanding as the environment shifts, to develop solid partnerships with reliable local allies, to design, in concert with those allies, locally tailored measures to target the drivers that sustain the conflict and thus to break the cycle of violence.

The second is to act with respect for local people, putting the well-being of noncombatant civilians ahead of any other consideration, even—in fact, especially—ahead of killing the enemy. Convincing threatened populations that we are the winning side, developing genuine partnerships with them, demonstrating that we can protect them from the guerrillas and that their best interests are served by cooperating with us is the critical path in counterinsurgency, because insurgents cannot operate without the support—active, passive, or enforced—of the local population.

Even if we are killing the insurgents effectively, if our approach also frightens and harms the local population, or makes people feel unsafe, then there is next to no chance that we will gain their support. If we want people to partner with us, put their weapons down, and return to unarmed political dialogue rather than work out their issues through violence, then we must make them feel safe enough to do so, and we must convince them they have more to gain by talking than by fighting. Consequently, violence against noncombatant civilians by security forces, whether intentional or accidental, is almost always entirely counterproductive. Besides being simply the right thing to do, protecting and defending local noncombatant civilians is a critical component of making them feel safe, and is thus one of the keys to operational success.

But make no mistake: counterinsurgency is war, and war is inherently violent. Killing the enemy is, and always will be, a key part of guerrilla warfare. Some insurgents at the irreconcilable extremes simply cannot be co-opted or won over; they must be hunted down, killed, or captured, and this is necessarily a ruthless process conducted with the utmost energy that the laws of war permit. In Iraq and Afghanistan since 9/11, we have experienced major success against terrorists and insurgent groups through a rapid twenty-four-hour cycle of intelligence-led strikes, described as “counternetwork operations,” that focuses on the middle tier of planners, facilitators, and operators rather than on the most senior leaders. This cycle, known as “Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Assess” (F3EA) has proven highly successful in taking networks apart, and convincing senior enemy figures that they simply cannot achieve

their objectives by continued fighting.<sup>4</sup> This approach fuses operations and intelligence and, though costly and resource intensive, can generate a lethal momentum that causes insurgent networks to collapse catastrophically.

But successful counterinsurgents also discriminate with extreme precision between reconcilables and irreconcilables, combatants and non-combatants. They kill only those active, irreconcilable combatants who must be killed or captured, and where possible they avoid making more insurgents in the process. They protect those people (often the majority) who simply want to survive the conflict, and they make it as easy as possible to leave or oppose the insurgency, and as hard as possible to stay in or support it. Scrupulously moral conduct, alongside political legitimacy and respect for the rule of law, are thus operational imperatives: they enable victory, and in their absence no amount of killing—not even genocidal brutality, as in the case of Nazi antipartisan warfare, described below—can avert defeat.

### **Counterinsurgency Mirrors the State**

Some armchair chicken hawks (none with experience of actual warfare in any form, let alone against real guerrillas) have argued that, contrary to recent evidence, you can indeed kill your way out of an insurgency, and have even suggested that an intensely brutal and violent approach is the quickest and best way to suppress an insurgency. Two favorite examples are the Romans and the Nazis, who supposedly ignored the “politically correct” notions of modern counterinsurgency and applied mass brutality with great success.

Unfortunately for this way of thinking, the facts simply do not support it. As the historian Ben Shepherd has shown in his recent study of Wehrmacht security divisions on the Eastern Front, German commanders faced resistance warfare and partisan warfare along with a widespread popular uprising in large parts of the occupied East. Many commanders recognized the need to protect, win over, and cooperate with the population and to treat them with respect and consideration in order to reduce support for the insurgents. As Shepherd demonstrates through an exhaustive study of regimental and division-level operations by the 221st Security Division of Army Group Center, “numerous Eastern Army figures already [in 1941] saw the potential for support in a tentatively pro-German population. They also saw the need for a more

sensible, measured prosecution of occupation and security policy in order to exploit it.”<sup>5</sup> This led some units all of the time, and most units some of the time, to engage in population-security, hearts-and-minds, and civic-action operations that would be familiar to any modern counterinsurgent. Colonel Reinhard Gehlen wrote that “if the population rejects the partisans and lends its full support to the struggle against them, no partisan problem will exist”<sup>6</sup>—a classic statement of population-centric counterinsurgency theory.

According to most historical studies, far from helping win the anti-partisan campaign, brutality and violence against local populations was a key reason for the German defeat. Although local commanders had a sound understanding of the operational techniques of counterinsurgency, their efforts were constantly undermined at the level of policy and strategy by the exploitative, rapacious, and genocidal nature of the Nazi state. Not only did the extermination policies pursued by SS battalions and special troops continuously undermine the efforts of local commanders to cultivate relationships with the population but also, as Shepherd shows, “the effectiveness of all these efforts was blunted by the fact that they never posed a fundamental challenge to ruthless economic interests [which led the Germans to despoil the East, leaving the population starving and destroying the economy] or to racist preconceptions of the population [which contributed to mass murder of noncombatants]... the ruthless, ideological, and exploitative dynamic of Nazi occupation policy in the east, then, proved an implacable obstacle” to effective counterinsurgency.<sup>7</sup> In Walter Laqueur’s words, “the partisan leaders... would have found it much more difficult to attract recruits had the Germans treated the population decently, but this would have been quite incompatible... with the character of the Nazi leaders, their doctrine, and their aims.”<sup>8</sup>

Some might argue that Nazi measures were, on the contrary, highly effective in achieving short-term operational aims, whatever their immoral basis and whatever the ultimate outcome of the war, which the Germans lost of course in large part through the failure of their conquest and occupation of the East. For example, Mark Mazower’s recent study of German imperium in the East, *Hitler’s Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe*, emphasizes the long-term influence of German occupation policies, and the fact that many occupied populations mounted little resistance until the Germans were clearly beaten, only then turning against the withdraw-



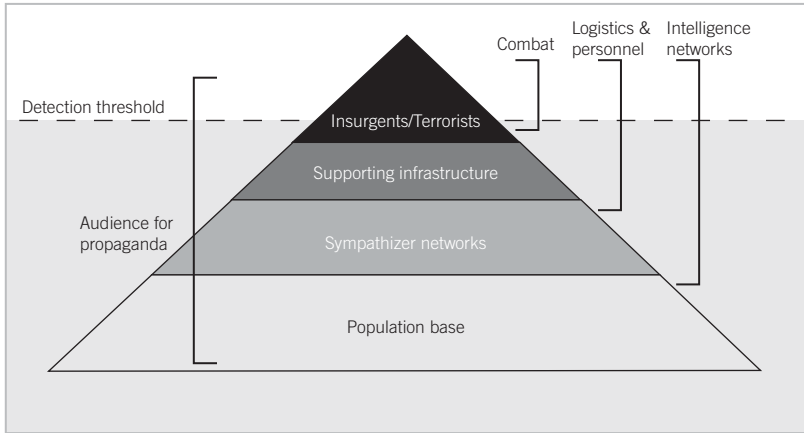
ing Wehrmacht.<sup>9</sup> Still, it seems clear that whatever its commanders' technical skill in counter guerrilla operations, the Nazi state never seriously sought to gain the support of occupied populations, nor could it do so without changing its own fundamental nature. Robert M. Citino, a distinguished military historian of the German army and author of *The German Way of War* (2005) and *Death of the Wehrmacht* (2007), concurs with this judgment.<sup>10</sup>

The Romans, also, are a more complicated case than caricature would suggest. Roman commanders were indeed capable of ruthless violence against enemy populations, and they were extremely harsh toward mutineers and rebels, to deter others. Roman commanders used violence in a targeted and politically calculated way, however, to support broader objectives, and the peaceful inclusion of conquered peoples into the empire, wherever possible, was a key objective. Roman law; Roman roads; administrative systems, taxation and revenue systems; a set of carefully constructed measures to Latinize subject peoples; and the extensive use of local allies and auxiliaries were all favorite Roman techniques, emphasizing the nonmilitary and nonlethal elements of the empire's security system. Importantly, as well as being largely nonlethal, this system for much of its existence was a system of inclusive security, whereby opponents could gain entry to Roman prosperity and order by adopting certain behavioral norms and subscribing to Roman authority.

Thus, not only is the "kill them all" approach to counterinsurgency demonstrably counterproductive, but it turns out that the examples often favorably cited by its advocates—examples of the Romans and the Nazis—do not hold up under close scrutiny. All successful counterinsurgents have been willing and able to kill the enemy, often with great ruthlessness. But all have clearly distinguished that enemy from the population in which it hides, have applied violence as precisely and carefully as possible, have acted scrupulously within the law, and have emphasized measures to protect and win over the population.

The reason for this is simple, and it derives from two very distinctive features of insurgent movements: that they rely on local populations, and that while guerrillas are fluid, populations are fixed.

The center of gravity of an insurgent movement—the source of power from which it derives its morale, its physical strength, its freedom of action, and its will to act—is its connectivity with the local population in a given area.<sup>11</sup> Insurgents tend to ride and manipulate a social wave



**FIG I.1** Surface and Subsurface Elements of an Insurgency

of grievances, often legitimate ones, and they draw their fighting power from their connection to a mass base. This mass base is largely undetectable to counterinsurgents, since it lies below the surface and engages in no armed activity (see fig. I.1).

Insurgents need the people to act in certain ways (sympathy, acquiescence, silence, reaction to provocation, or fully active support) in order to survive and further their strategy. Unless the population acts in these ways, insurgent networks tend to wither because they cannot move freely within the population, gather resources (money, recruits), or conduct their operations. Insurgents do not necessarily need the active support of the population: they can get by on intimidation and passive acquiescence for a time, as long as they have an external (perhaps global) source of support and as long as the government does not cut off their access to the population. But without access to a mass base, an insurgent movement suffocates, so cutting the insurgent off from the population is a critical task in counterinsurgency.

Doing this by attacking the insurgents directly, however, is fraught with difficulty because guerrilla forces are fluid. As Roger Trinquier points out, “we attack an enemy who is invisible, fluid, uncatchable.”<sup>12</sup> Unlike conventional military forces, which are tied to fixed installations, lines of communication, and key points (cities, vulnerable economic assets or

utilities, government offices, and so on) that must be defended, a guerrilla force has no permanent installations it needs to defend, and can always run away to fight another day. T. E. Lawrence expressed this neatly from the insurgent's point of view:

[The area threatened by the Arab Revolt was] perhaps 140,000 square miles. How would the Turks defend all that—no doubt by a trench line across the bottom, if the Arabs were an army attacking with banners displayed... but suppose they were an influence, a thing invulnerable, intangible, without front or back, drifting about like a gas? Armies were like plants, immobile as a whole, firm-rooted, nourished through long stems to the head. The Arabs might be a vapour, blowing where they listed... The Turks would need 600,000 men to meet the combined ill wills of all the local Arab people. They had 100,000 men available. It seemed that the assets in this sphere were with the Arabs, and climate, railways, deserts, technical weapons could also be attached to their interests.<sup>13</sup>

Like any opponent in any war, an insurgent enemy needs to be pinned against an immovable object and “fixed” in order to be destroyed. As both Lawrence and Trinquier point out, insurgent enemies are extraordinarily difficult to fix because of their lack of reliance on fixed positions or strongpoints. This means that enemy-focused strategy, which seeks to attack the guerrilla forces directly, risks dissipating effort in chasing insurgent groups all over the countryside, an activity that can be extremely demanding and requires enormous numbers of troops and other resources. Counterinsurgents who adopt this approach risk chasing their tails and so exhausting themselves, while doing enormous damage to the noncombatant civilian population, alienating the people and thus further strengthening their support for insurgency. This, indeed, is precisely the trap we fell into in Iraq in 2003–4, and in Afghanistan until much more recently. Being fluid, the insurgents could control their loss rate and therefore could never be eradicated by purely enemy-centric means: they could just go to ground and wait us out.

But even though insurgents have no permanent *physical* strongpoints, no physical “decisive terrain” in military terms, they do have a fixed point they must defend: their need to maintain connectivity with the population. This is not a physical piece of real estate, but in

functional—or rather, *political*—terms, it fulfils the same purpose as decisive terrain, and it therefore provides an immovable object against which we can maneuver to pin the enemy. Because the insurgent network needs the population to act in certain ways in order to survive, we can asphyxiate the network by cutting the insurgents off from the people. And they cannot simply “go quiet” to avoid that threat. They must either emerge into the open, where we can destroy them using superior numbers and firepower, or stay quiet, accept permanent marginalization from their former population base, and suffocate. This puts the insurgents on the horns of a lethal dilemma.

And the population, unlike insurgents who are extremely difficult to find, is both fixed and easily identifiable, because people are tied to their homes, businesses, farms, tribal areas, relatives, traditional landholdings, and so on. This opens up an alternative method of operating, because protecting the population and cutting its connectivity with the insurgent movement is doable, even though destroying the enemy is not. We can drive the insurgents away from the population, and then introduce local security forces, protective measures, governance reforms, and economic and political development, all designed to break the connection between the insurgents and the population, undermine the insurgents’ mass base, and thereby “hardwire” the enemy out of the environment—excluding them permanently and preventing their return.

Again, in practice, this population-centric approach often involves as much fighting, if not more, than an enemy-centric approach, because putting in place effective population protection forces the enemy to come to us, so that we fight the guerrillas on our terms, not on theirs. Ironically, an effective population-centric strategy usually results in far greater losses to the enemy—in terms of insurgents killed, wounded, captured, surrendered, or defected—than does a superficially more aggressive enemy-centric approach.

### **Counterinsurgency Mirrors the State**

The broader point, however, is that counterinsurgency mirrors the state: any state’s approach to counterinsurgency depends to a large extent on the nature of that state, and the word “counterinsurgency” can mean entirely different things depending on the character of the government

involved. Oppressive governments tend to enact brutal measures against rebellions, and military dictatorships tend to favor paternalistic or reactionary martial law policies, while liberal-democratic states tend to be quick—often too quick—to hand over control to locally elected civilians in a bid to return to “normalcy.” To see this, one need only compare the extremely brutal approach taken by Syria’s president Hafez al-Assad in crushing the Hama rebellion in 1980 or by Saddam Hussein in massacring Kurdish civilians at Halabja in 1989 with British policy in Northern Ireland—characterized by civil primacy, a focus on policing, intelligence and special operations forces, and restrained military operations under a rule-of-law framework derived from temporary emergency regulations. Different states counter insurgencies differently, and just as in any other area of government policy, the nature of a state determines to a large extent the methods it chooses.

It also follows that there is a difference between the behaviors a given government is likely to adopt when countering an insurgency in its own territory (“domestic” counterinsurgency) and the behaviors that government may adopt while intervening in another country, or in one of its own overseas territories or colonies (“expeditionary” or third-country counterinsurgency). As the counterinsurgency expert Erin Simpson has shown, the theory that democracies are less effective than autocracies in maintaining long-term counterinsurgency efforts is unsupported by the facts. Rather, the evidence she cites suggests that both democracies and autocracies do poorly when operating overseas, while both do better when operating in home territory.<sup>14</sup>

There seem to be two main reasons for this. First, the challenge of understanding someone else’s country, securing it, and building viable local allies is vastly greater than operating on home ground in one’s own country. Compare the difficulty for, say, the New York Police Department in policing New York City with the difficulties Iraqis would face were Iraq to invade the United States and attempt the same thing. Quite apart from the logistical and political challenges of expeditionary warfare, or the adaptation challenge for soldiers suddenly engaged in unfamiliar policing tasks, the sheer difficulty in understanding such an alien environment, and convincing enough locals to support the effort, poses immense problems—even before adding any organized opposition into the mix. Coalition forces faced the same daunting problems in securing Baghdad that Iraqis would have faced in New York, along with a determined and

ruthless adversary in the complex Iraqi insurgent network, as well as the political and operational problems of coalition warfare. No wonder we had a few problems.

Second, counterinsurgency, like all forms of war, is fought with an eye on postconflict power structures, with each side seeking to maximize its long-term interests as the country emerges from violence. As the British strategist and general J. F. C. Fuller remarked, channeling Saint Augustine, the object of war is not victory but a better peace<sup>15</sup>—“better” in the sense of being more secure, prosperous, or advantageous for any given side. All sides in the conflict are fighting not just to win but to own the peace, and in counterinsurgency, an expeditionary force fights at a critical disadvantage because everybody—allies and opponents alike—knows it will leave once the fighting ends, making it by definition an unreliable long-term or postconflict ally. This gives the insurgents a “longevity advantage”; unlike expeditionary counterinsurgents, they are local and indigenous, they *will* be present after the war ends, and once again everybody knows this. The insurgents can threaten the local population with lethal consequences for cooperating with the counterinsurgents, and unless an external intervener makes extremely strenuous efforts to establish viable long-term alliances with legitimate indigenous partners—who, like the insurgents, will remain once the war ends—then it is extremely difficult to overcome this inherent insurgent advantage.

Further, in a third-country counterinsurgency there are at least two states, and at least two governments, involved: the government of the host nation in whose territory the campaign is being conducted and the intervening government providing assistance (sought or unsought) to that government. And since, as we have seen, counterinsurgency mirrors the state, in building or reinforcing a host nation-state to fight an insurgency, it therefore becomes essential for counterinsurgency strategists to ask themselves certain key questions about the nature of the local state. These include:

What kind of state are we trying to build or assist?

How compatible is the local government’s character with our own?

What kinds of states have proven viable in the past, in this country and with this population?

What evidence is there that the kind of state we are trying to build will be viable here?

The fact that we, as an international community, failed to effectively ask or answer these questions at the beginning of our interventions in Iraq or Afghanistan may explain many of our subsequent problems. As these wars have continued over much of the past decade, however, civilian and military practitioners in the field have learned or relearned a great deal about effective counterinsurgency. My hope is that this brief selection of work on counterinsurgency will help that learning process.