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First in a Series

The War In Iraq: The Nature of Insurgency Warfare

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“This is another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origins—war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins; war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration, instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him It requires in those situations where we must counter it a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training.”

John F. Kennedy

These words were spoken by President Kennedy as he addressed the graduating class at West Point in June, 1962. Then the president spoke of insurgent movements in places like Colombia, Laos and Vietnam. Today, over forty years later, they also sum up the challenge facing the United States military and its allies in Afghanistan and Iraq. If anything, the challenges, and the stakes, are more formidable now.

This paper presents an overview of the nature of insurgency warfare, along with some insights as to how the US military is positioned to wage it in Iraq. Future papers will provide further elaboration on this issue, and on other aspects of the United States' involvement in this conflict.

Executive Summary

- Counterinsurgency warfare is almost always protracted in nature. Those that are not prepared to engage in such warfare over the long haul—perhaps a decade, are unlikely to prevail.
- The center of gravity in counterinsurgency warfare is the target nation's population, not the insurgent forces. In the case where an external power, such as the United States, provides a major portion of the counterinsurgent forces, its own population becomes a center of gravity in the conflict as well.
- Key to defeating an insurgent movement is winning the “hearts and minds” of the local population. The population must be convinced that their personal goals will be better served if the counterinsurgent forces prevail (winning their hearts). Even more important, they must be convinced that the counterinsurgent forces will prevail (winning their minds). This can only be accomplished if the population is provided with a reasonable level of security against insurgent attempts to proselytize, intimidate, coerce or terrorize them. Providing this level of security takes time—which is one reason why insurgencies tend to be protracted, even though insurgent forces are often quite weak compared to the forces fielded by the government.
- Intelligence is crucial to defeating an insurgency. If coalition forces know who the insurgents are and where they are, their ability to bring

military power to bear against them—especially in Phases I and II of an insurgency—is overwhelming.

- The key to gaining good intelligence is to win the hearts and minds of the population. The population is often the best source of information. The key to getting access to this information is to provide the people with a sense of enduring security and a political, economic and social stake in the new regime.
- Intelligence on the insurgents' infrastructure is more important than intelligence on their forces.
- Counterinsurgent forces that focus on engaging and destroying insurgent forces and accord low priority to providing security risk defeat.
- Counterinsurgency requires a unity of effort and command among the military, political, economic and social dimensions of the conflict. Reconstruction efforts in the absence of security will almost certainly fail, as will attempts at political reform.
- The US military is not well oriented to wage counterinsurgency warfare, in terms of its culture, doctrine, force structure, and training infrastructure.

Warfare of the Weak to Defeat the Strong

Since the Cold War's end, the US military has emerged as by far the world's most capable. So profound is its dominance that those seeking to describe it find themselves going back two millennia, to the Roman Legions. As the Gulf Wars of 1991 and 2003 demonstrated, and as was reinforced in the Balkan War of 1999 and the Afghan War of 2001, the US military is so successful in waging conventional war that America's adversaries are, at present, seeking shelter at the extreme ends of the conflict spectrum. At the high end, states like Iran and North Korea are actively pursuing nuclear arsenals. At the lower end, hostile groups such as al Qaeda, the Taliban, remnants of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime, splinter Iraqi Shi'ia elements and similar groups pursue insurgency warfare.

Today the United States actually confronts transnational, theologically based, radical Islamic insurgent movements, rendering the so-called Global War on Terrorism a misnomer. In Afghanistan and Iraq these insurgents are working with local insurgents that comprise elements of the deposed Taliban and Ba'athist regimes, respectively, and other internal groups as well. The insurgents' objectives are quite similar to those of their ancestors. Simply stated, they desire to overthrow regimes they consider illegitimate, seizing power for themselves, and to evict any vestige of foreign influence associated with the existing order.¹

What is insurgency warfare? An insurgency is a protracted, multi-phased struggle, whose objective is to overthrow the existing order. Insurgencies traditionally comprise three phases: first, insurgent agitation and proselytization among the mass populace—the phase of contention; second, overt violence, guerrilla operations, and the establishment of sanctuaries—the equilibrium phase; and third, open warfare between insurgent and government forces designed to topple the existing regime—the counteroffensive phase.

¹ The goals of some, such as al Qaeda, are to establish a pan-Islamic Caliphate throughout the world by working with allied Islamic extremist groups to overthrow regimes deemed “non-Islamic” and expelling Westerners and non-Muslims from Muslim countries.

Specifically, Phase I revolves around founding a political movement and creating cadres by recruiting elements of the population. In Iraq, these movements are ready-made, the product of the US-led military operation to depose Saddam Hussein and his Ba'athist Party. Remnants of that party, which is dominated by Sunni Muslim Arabs, form one insurgent group. Another group centers on Iraq's Shi'ite Muslims, who comprise the majority of the country's population.² Foreign insurgents—typically referred to as terrorists—constitute yet a third group, although they themselves appear to be an agglomeration of independent radical Islamic elements.³ Phase I operations are characterized by efforts to expand the cadres and by acts of terror, such as murder, assassination and sabotage against the regime in power.

In Phase II operations, the insurgents expand their base of support through attacks on government facilities and leaders. Hit-and-run guerrilla assaults against vulnerable regime forces (e.g., convoys) become common. Efforts are made to gain control over certain elements of the population, such as in remote areas where the regime's power is weak or in areas where the regime's forces find it difficult to operate (e.g., urban areas). Guerrilla units are drawn from this expanding base of support. The link between the population and the insurgents is critical. Unless they maintain their access to the population, the insurgents cannot extend their control. Success in Phases I and II enables Phase III operations.

In Phase III the regime finds itself confronting main-force insurgent formations that are willing and able to take on the government's forces in open warfare. However, activities consistent with Phase I and II operations continue as well. The insurgent's goal at this point is to create the impression of irresistible momentum that will eviscerate the morale of the regime's forces and trigger a massive popular uprising, leading to regime collapse.

Today in Afghanistan and Iraq, US and coalition forces are encountering insurgent movements that are engaged in Phase I and Phase II operations.

A Matter of Time

Time is typically an ally of the insurgents. The longer they are able to persist, the greater their chances for success, although success is far from guaranteed. Persistence is especially valuable in the case where the regime relies on the support of external powers to remain viable. Under these circumstances, the insurgents can make a powerful argument to the population, the essence of which is that while foreign troops will some day depart, the insurgents will remain, and therefore must be accommodated.⁴ In these cases, the insurgents, for all their

² It should be noted that Iraqi insurgent movements among its ethnic groups themselves are themselves far from unified.

³ The Iraqi Kurds form a fourth group. At present, however, they have not taken up arms in any significant numbers against the occupying coalition forces. One radical Islamic insurgent movement with origins in the Kurdish region of Iraq, *Ansar al-Islam fi Kurdistan* (Supporters of Islam in Kurdistan), has a membership whose composition is believed to be dominated by Kurds.

⁴ Of course, the insurgents can also use the presence of foreign forces to appeal to the nationalism of the indigenous population. This can serve as a powerful legitimizing force for the insurgents.

It should also be noted that foreign troops may not depart until after the insurgency has been defeated or weakened to the point where indigenous

weakness, take solace in the hope that foreign counterinsurgent forces can abandon the battle field at any time and simply go home. The United States' track record in departing Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Lebanon, Haiti and Somalia after failing to stabilize these countries and defeat hostile insurgent movements may provide additional encouragement to insurgent leaders to persist through difficult times. This situation contrasts sharply with the case in which indigenous counterinsurgent forces predominate. These forces ARE fighting for their own country's future, and cannot simply retire to a distant homeland sanctuary. They no doubt realize that they will be subjected to insurgent acts of retribution should they lose the war.

The Population: The War's Center of Gravity

In conventional warfare, the enemy's military forces are often seen as its center of gravity.⁵ At other times the enemy's center of gravity has been depicted as its seat of power, its capital city, its alliance structure, or its economic infrastructure.

This is not the case in insurgency warfare, where the population is the center of gravity. To eventually control the country, the insurgent must control the people. As Mao Tse-tung noted, "The people are like water and the army is like fish."⁶ It is important to note that popular support does not necessarily imply support for the insurgents' goals. Rather, such support is a measure of the insurgents' ability to *control* the population, whether through their willing cooperation or as the result of insurgent threats, acts of terror, or the physical occupation of their community. In short, the insurgents need only win the "minds" of the population, not its "hearts."

Access and, if possible, control over the population enables insurgents to deny critical intelligence to coalition forces. After all, if the coalition forces know who and where the insurgents are, they have more than enough military capability to engage and defeat them. Insurgent access to the population also enables them to recruit new members to their cause, as well as to obtain (or appropriate) food, medicine and other supplies. It also enables the insurgents to gain critical intelligence concerning the plans and whereabouts of counterinsurgent forces. Correspondingly, the inability of the governments in Kabul and Baghdad to exercise control over their population will sap away at their strength, denying them replacements for the armed forces, making taxes difficult or impossible to collect, and drying up sources of badly needed intelligence. Thus if the insurgents can gain control over the population through fear, popular appeal, or more likely a mixture of both, they stand a good chance of winning.

It is important to note that, owing to the absence of personal security, the vast majority of the population typically remains uncommitted, providing support only when coerced, or when a clear winner emerges. As T.E. Lawrence

government forces can deal with it. If the population comes to believe this, it can be a powerful tool against the insurgents. It is thus important that those foreign governments that have troops deployed to defeat the insurgency and promote stability take strong measures to convince all of their determination to remain in country for however long it takes to win. This ability to "stay on message" has been sorely lacking in the United States' involvement in Iraq, which has been marked by reversals in policy and troop employment that seem driven far more by temporary expediency than by an adaptive, coherent strategy.

⁵ The center of gravity is defined as that asset or set of assets which, when denied to the enemy, results in the loss of his *ability* or *will* to prevail in the conflict.

⁶ Mao Tse-tung (Mao Zedong), *Aspects of China's Anti-Japanese Struggle* (Bombay, India: n.p. 1948.), p. 48.

("Lawrence of Arabia") noted, "rebellions can be made by two percent active in a striking force, and 98 percent passively sympathetic."⁷ The reason for this passivity among the population is that, so long as their security is at risk, individuals that take sides in an insurgency expose themselves to retribution. In Iraq, this is particularly true for those who oppose the insurgency. The inability of coalition and hastily trained indigenous Iraqi security forces to provide security for the population makes any open support of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) a highly risky proposition.

Insurgent control of the population explains why an insurgent movement can expand as a whole even while heavy casualties are inflicted on its guerrilla units. Consequently, the population's security should be the top priority of the coalition forces.

While time, access to the population, and irregular warfare tactics are important elements of any insurgent movement, they rest on two essential elements that make up the foundation of insurgency warfare: a popular cause and an ineffective domestic security apparatus. The former provides the insurgent leadership with the means to attract a cadre of followers and, ideally, mass support.⁸ It is helpful if the insurgents can devise a cause that the government cannot espouse without risking loss of power (e.g., nationalism in the case where foreign support for the government is essential). The absence of local law enforcement allows the insurgents to progress through Phase I, when they are at their weakest. This latter condition has clearly existed in both Afghanistan and Iraq.⁹

The ability of insurgents to obtain sanctuary and to have the support of an external power can be critical to their prospects for success or failure. For example, during the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese Communists were able to utilize the sanctuaries of North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia to rest and refit their forces. They also obtained much of their equipment and munitions from external powers, particularly the Soviet Union and China.

Finally, there is an important distinction to be made between insurgent movements that are being countered principally by indigenous government forces, and those that primarily confront the forces of an external power. The latter, of course, is the situation in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the former country, US/NATO forces predominate; while in Iraq, US/Coalition forces shoulder most of the burden. This is important because it becomes possible for the insurgents to win in a different way—by draining the will of the foreign powers to the point where they abandon an infant regime before it is capable of standing on its own and defending itself. In a democracy such as the United States, this translates to eroding popular support for the war.

⁷ Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 9.

⁸ In Afghanistan and in Iraq the popular cause of nationalism and evicting the "infidels" is supplemented by a long tradition of violent struggle for power. Thus an insurgent group's accumulation of military capability goes beyond defeating coalition forces. It also serves to provide the means to successfully defeat fellow insurgent groups and seize power once the current regime is toppled.

⁹ This is not to say there are no differences in the Afghan and Iraqi insurgencies. For example, the Afghan insurgency is a rural-based insurgency, while Iraq's is urban-based. The Iraqi insurgency is more intense. Additionally, there is a recognized government in Afghanistan, whereas one has yet to be established in Iraq.

The insurgents cannot hope to defeat US military forces in open battle (i.e., by moving to Phase III of the insurgency). American forces cannot be militarily forced out of these countries. However, the insurgents are pursuing an indirect approach. Even though they are far weaker than the forces opposing them, they rely on the active cooperation or passive acceptance of the vast majority of the indigenous population to sustain them. By so doing, they hope to convince the American public and its leaders that the war is not worth the cost in blood and treasure. Thus the conflict revolves around winning the hearts and minds of both the Iraqi people and those of the American people as well.

Defeating an Insurgency

While the United States does not confront a unified, coherent enemy in either Afghanistan or Iraq, insurgent elements do seem to be pursuing traditional insurgent strategies and tactics.¹⁰ The insurgents are clearly too weak to challenge coalition forces openly, and consequently appear to be targeting both the Iraqi population and public opinion in the coalition states.¹¹ On the other hand, the counterinsurgent forces suffer from a discrimination problem—they cannot easily distinguish insurgents from the general population. Defeating them requires time, both to provide counterinsurgent forces with an understanding of the environment in which the insurgent forces are operating, and to win the hearts and minds of the population, which will produce the intelligence needed to distinguish the enemy from noncombatants.

In fact, most insurgent movements fail to achieve their goal of regime change. A government that can pre-empt the insurgents' cause (or provide a more attractive platform), and which can craft and execute a plan to restore security to the population, even if such a plan takes years to execute, stands an excellent chance of winning the war.

The key to defeating an insurgency is to attack it at the source of its strength: the population. If the counterinsurgent forces can deny the insurgents access to the people, they become like fish out of water, denied sources of manpower and information. The insurgents' problem is further compounded if the people feel secure enough from retribution to provide counterinsurgent forces with intelligence on insurgent movements and the identities of cadre members. The prospects for gaining such intelligence are further advanced if the counterinsurgent forces have won the people's "hearts," by offering them the prospect of a better way of life if the insurgents are defeated, in addition to having won their "minds" by providing personal security.

Should counterinsurgent forces instead focus their principal efforts on destroying insurgent forces, as is more typical of conventional warfare, and accord population security a lower priority, they will play into the insurgents' hands. Insurgent casualties suffered under these circumstances will rarely prove decisive, for several reasons. First, so long as the insurgents maintain access to the population, they can rarely be compelled to fight. Thus they can meter their casualties to keep them at tolerable levels, and replenish their losses by recruiting

¹⁰ The insurgent movements do, however, seem unified in desiring the end of US presence and influence in their country.

¹¹ Although the linkage between the perpetrators and insurgent forces is far from clear, Spain was coerced into withdrawing its forces from Iraq as a consequence of a terrorist train bombing in Madrid. The point here is that Spanish troops were not evicted from Iraq by insurgent forces; rather, they were withdrawn because the Spanish electorate, in the wake of the Madrid bombings, voted in a government committed to ending Spain's participation in the conflict.

from the population. It is only when the insurgents become truly isolated from the population that the real attrition of their forces can take place.

In establishing security for the population, priority in intelligence efforts should focus first and foremost on the insurgent infrastructure, not insurgent forces. By rooting out the insurgent cadres that live among the people, insurgent forces lose their eyes and ears, and coercing the population becomes much more difficult. Moreover, the local inhabitants are likely to feel more secure if the principal threat to their security lies outside their town than if it exists among them. At present, the Iraqi insurgents are principally operating inside urban areas. Getting them out and keeping them out will require a protracted investment in providing security and enabling reconstruction. In this respect, the recent arrangements reached with Sunni and Shiite insurgents in Fallujah and Najaf, respectively, that allow residual forces to operate in those cities, as opposed to government security forces, represents a setback for the United States' counterinsurgency campaign.

It bears repeating that security for the people is the *sine qua non* for winning their hearts and minds. Once a sufficient level of security is established, civic action, public works and other forms of reconstruction can proceed within acceptable levels of risk.¹² Local elections can be held, and those who assume office need not fear for their lives. Local security forces can be established to protect their community's stake in a future that promises economic gain and access to the political power.¹³ Indeed, the political, economic and social elements of the counterinsurgency campaign must be well integrated with the military dimension. There must be a unity of effort and a unity of command. For example, civic action, or reconstruction, in the absence of security merely increases the potential resources available to insurgent forces, or provides easy targets for insurgent acts of sabotage.¹⁴

Developing a secure environment in which reconstruction can take place takes time. The reason for this is that the population's support is conditional on the government's ability to demonstrate convincingly that it has both the means and the will to persevere. This critical factor has been lacking in the United States' strategy for dealing with the insurgents. Despite professions that America will

¹² Actions of this type are designed to pre-empt the insurgents' cause by demonstrating to the people that their lives will be better if the counterinsurgents prevail, and that the people will ultimately decide their own fate, first through local elections, and then, as more areas of the country become secure, regional and national elections. This takes considerable time to bring about, and are one reason why defeating an insurgent movement tend to be a protracted enterprise.

¹³ These paramilitary forces should be drawn from the inhabitants of the area, and trained in counterinsurgency operations such as small-unit patrolling, night operations, and ambush. As with progress in various forms of civic action, this training process takes considerable time, far more than the time allotted for by coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. While the United States has understandably tried to replace US troops with Iraqi security forces, the fact is that training indigenous security forces takes time. Hence Washington's dilemma: it needs to reduce its troop strength to reduce the strain on its forces and to provide security with an Iraqi Face; yet that security can only be provided by well-trained forces, which will take considerable time to accomplish.

¹⁴ Note that this does not imply perfect security. A town or village can weather an occasional insurgent attack, even if some loss of life is involved, far better than they can endure a string of assassinations that demonstrate the insurgents are living among them. The former implies a relatively high degree of security, while in the latter case security is effectively non-existent.

“stay the course” in Iraq, the population has, in fact, been subjected to a series of course changes by the US Government that provide a very weak foundation upon which to win hearts and minds.

Getting Back in the Business of Stability Operations

The reorienting of conventional forces to deal with insurgents is a challenging process, involving as it does not only the restructuring of ground forces to deal with a very different conflict environment, but cultural and doctrinal change as well. Counterinsurgency is a light infantryman’s war, yet the bulk today’s US Army and Marine forces are not comprised of these kinds of forces. Making things more difficult still, their doctrine, particularly in the Army’s case, accords little emphasis to counterinsurgency, courtesy of the “Vietnam Syndrome” that purged such training from the military in the wake of its traumatic experience in Vietnam three decades ago.¹⁵

Compounding the US military’s challenge is its training infrastructure, which although widely considered to be the world’s best and a “core competency,” is focused almost entirely on preparing US forces for the conventional warfare in which they excel, but which is generally irrelevant for current conditions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Nevertheless, a substantial portion of US and coalition ground forces must be reorganized if they are to wage counterinsurgency warfare effectively. Special Forces also have an important role to play. Among their principal missions, Special Forces are tasked with training indigenous forces to enable internal defense and development (IDAD). They are also highly capable of conducting “ground-mobile” operations, and patrolling intensively and stealthily in and around the populated areas that are being secured, so as to keep insurgents off-guard and separated from the population. Reliance on such means of transport as helicopters and armored vehicles should be kept to a minimum, save for rapid reaction forces responding to an insurgent attack.

While it is a relatively easy task to drive insurgent forces away from a given area, it is far more difficult for counterinsurgent forces to work hand-in-hand with

¹⁵ In the wake of the United States’ experience in fighting communist insurgents in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s, there emerged a strong desire among the American people, their political leaders, and the military itself to avoid involvement in such conflicts in the future. The phrase “No More Vietnams” proved a comfortable fit for the American people and its military. Even before US involvement in Vietnam ended, President Nixon set forth the Nixon Doctrine, which called for the United States to support friendly regional powers opposing insurgent forces, but not to plan on deploying US combat troops to assist them.

With the 1980s came the Weinberger and Powell Doctrines. They essentially advocated applying overwhelming US force to defeat the enemy promptly, and to facilitate rapid US disengagement. When the Marine Corps barracks in Beirut was attacked, the US quickly withdrew its forces from Lebanon. Where US advisors were involved in counterinsurgency operations, as in El Salvador, strict limits were placed on their numbers. The pattern persisted through the 1990s. When US troops were dispatched to conduct peacekeeping operations in Haiti, Somalia and the Balkans, there were demands for “exit strategies,” lest American forces become bogged down in a Vietnam-like quagmire. Again, following the “Blackhawk Down” engagement in Mogadishu, US forces were soon withdrawn from Somalia.

local police and paramilitary forces over a prolonged period to establish a strong sense of security in a community and eliminate residual insurgent elements, such as its cadres and local political infrastructure. Yet this is exactly what must be done. If sufficient coalition forces are not available to secure the entire country — as in the case in Afghanistan and Iraq— then initial efforts at providing security should focus on the key elements of national infrastructure (e.g., the capital city, critical resources such as oil), and on areas where the population’s “hearts” are effectively won, but where security is lacking. Once local forces are capable of providing security, coalition forces can expand their security operations by moving into additional areas, while several coalition rapid-reaction forces are established to support local security forces in the event they are attacked.

Some First Steps

Although beyond the scope of this assessment, a brief discussion of strategy is in order. While US objectives in Iraq are relatively clear, and the means the US is bringing to bear to achieve these objectives are also well understood, Washington’s strategy—the way in which means are applied to achieve the ends desired—remains a mystery to many. If the center of gravity in an insurgency is the indigenous population, and if the key to controlling this key is to provide the security that will enable reconstruction and a democratic political process, then the United States and its coalition partners must adopt a counterinsurgency strategy that reflects these realities.

This means placing top priority on communicating to friend and foe alike that the United States is in this war for the long haul. It also means taking steps to provide an enduring level of security to key infrastructure and the population. Since available manpower is not sufficient to secure the entire country simultaneously, priorities will have to be established. Those areas that cannot be pacified in the short term must be monitored. If, as has occurred recently in Fallujah and Najaf, insurgents concentrate in large numbers, coalition reaction forces can be sent to defeat them. The United States must face the fact that security will only be established gradually, over a protracted period.

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