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THEORY AND PRACTICE OF INSURGENCY AND COUNTERINSURGENCY

A lecture delivered
at the Naval War College
on 28 May 1962

by

Professor Albert Somit

INTRODUCTION

Those who arrived at the auditorium early noticed that the classification of this lecture was suddenly changed from SECRET to UNCLASSIFIED. I have always wanted to give a SECRET lecture and, since I really will say nothing today that is not a matter of common knowledge, I feel we could reasonably have kept the SECRET classification.

In any event, the major question is—‘What aspects of counterinsurgency shall I talk about?’ As you know, there will be a number of distinguished military authorities following me as speakers. Because of this, I will not deal with the *military* aspects of counterinsurgency, since this can be much more ably dealt with by others.

After some cogitation, I decided to attempt three objectives: The first was to see if we could impose some order on this vast number and variety of insurgencies about which you will be told and about which you will presumably be reading. This is the problem of classification and ordering of data. The classifications I will use may not be exactly the same classification as those which you will get from the other speakers or in the literature, since each person classifies according to the problem with which he is concerned.

The second thing I will try to do will be to put insurgency in its proper historical perspective. The rationale of this special course is that the type of insurgency we see today is so different and unique from previous types of insurgency and constitutes such a serious threat that a fresh outlook as well as special training will be needed if we are effectively to cope with it. This, I would say, is the administration’s viewpoint and the justification for what we are doing here today. However, there are those who say that insurgency is really nothing new, that it is simply a new name for an age-old phenomenon. According to this view,

no new techniques or approaches are either needed or desirable. These are two opposing viewpoints and, after surveying the arguments pro and con, I will take my position courageously between these two and argue that both sides are partially correct, both partially in error.

The third thing I will attempt is perhaps the most hazardous and may evoke the most disagreement. I am going to try to suggest certain generalizations or 'laws' which seem to be operative in insurgencies and in revolutions. That is, laws bearing upon the nature, likelihood, and probable success or failure of insurgencies. To the extent that these generalizations are valid they suggest the direction of measures to be undertaken in programs, or at least the measures to be considered. The study of revolutions has engrossed social scientists since the French Revolution and the nature of insurgency and revolution has been the subject of recurrent analysis. But I should emphasize that generalizations in social science are subject to serious reservation. Such generalizations apply to *groups* of phenomena rather than to *individual* phenomena. They would apply, therefore to revolutions taken collectively, rather than to a specific instance. There are also an uncomfortable number of exceptions to every generalization. Third, the 'laws' are generally rather than precisely stated. Thus, one must be quite cautious in applying them to specific situations.

With this warning, we can look at some of these generalizations. I might add here that they have been measurably modified by our experience since World War II. If you examine the earlier literature you will see many of the statements and evaluations stated have been vitiated by subsequent developments.

Underlying much of my remarks will be a general thesis. It is this: The United States faces extraordinarily difficult problems in dealing with insurgencies in, say, Vietnam and Laos in that it is an *indirect* object of these insurgencies. Though aimed at the United States, these insurgencies are not conducted against the United States, but rather against the 'native' governments. We operate at one remove. And because we operate at one remove, we face difficulties and problems which are almost unique in the history of counterinsurgency. This is a theme to which I will later return.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF INSURGENCY

Let me begin by very briefly identifying what I will call the 'behavioral traits' of insurgencies. When we have an insurgency, what characteristics does it show? I will deal with two sets of characteristics: Those *traditionally* shown by insurgent and revolutionary movements; and those *new* characteristics observable in post-World War II insurgencies.

Let me start with the traditional traits: Insurgencies have, as a common characteristic, guerrilla war. In the Spanish, 'guerrilla' means 'a little war' but this is not an affectionate diminutive. Guerrilla war is 'little' only in geography. It is a small war but it is *total* war, and it has all the very unpleasant aspects of total war. In guerrilla warfare the 'laws of war' are suspended. (The concept that war is something to be conducted according to fixed rules may have disappeared with World War II.) In guerrilla war, you get a 'no-holds barred' struggle. The distinction between combatant and noncombatant disappears; the distinction between civilian and military breaks down; and there is a resort to terror, torture, and violence which exemplifies human behavior at its worst. This is what is meant by the aphorism that guerrilla war is total war on a limited scale.

Another characteristic of insurgency is the disproportion in strength between the insurgents and the regime that is being challenged. This is a crucial element in the theory of insurgency and one with which the military experts will deal. To put it briefly, the insurgents are much weaker than the government they fight; otherwise they would not be *insurgents*.

The last characteristic I want to mention here is that insurgency has traditionally had a domestic origin and has been directed at a political or an economic objective. Politically, as we shall see, they entailed efforts either to oust foreign rulers or to accomplish specific political goals. The usual economic objectives were land reform or tax reform. The main point is that until 1945 insurgencies tended to seek the one or the other.

For the most part the foregoing characteristics are present in contemporary insurgencies, but a number of new elements have been added. Because of these newer features insurgency poses a different problem today from which we have previously known. The insurgent in Laos, or in Vietnam, has a reasonably secure base in a neighboring country. He gets a steady flow of supplies, materiel, weapons and perhaps even men. If necessary he can retreat behind the border and come up at some other point. He has access to competent political and military advisors. He

does not have to learn by his own errors and can profit from the experience of other insurgencies. Even more important, present day insurgency has an international aspect to it. The insurgent is not fighting simply by himself, but as part of a general, international effort. If things go too badly for him, he can expect that the 'heat' will be turned on somewhere else, and our attention and efforts distracted or diverted. It is here that we have one of the most unique aspects of contemporary insurgency. Traditionally, insurgency has been a national problem aimed at a given government. Today it is part of a world-wide struggle, and pressure is increased or relaxed as dictated by the strategy of this struggle.

Finally, the contemporary insurgent can employ two very powerful doctrines, two very powerful ideologies—nationalism and communism—in eliciting popular support. Compared to the more limited ideological appeal of the older forms of insurgency, this is a significant advance.

These attributes, or characteristics, create new and serious problems for the government directly threatened, in that these governments must employ limited national resources and talents against an insurgent movement able to draw upon an international pool of talent, ability, and strategy. Clearly, this can be a gross mismatch, a heavyweight versus lightweight situation. For the United States a major problem arises in that, though almost directly challenged, we are not able to move directly, but can only function through the established—though often shaky—government. Since the insurgency is not against the United States itself, we are never in a position here to react directly. In addition, we are faced with the danger of indefinite and expanding commitment to a type of warfare for which we are not yet really well prepared.

It is because of these new characteristics and the resulting problems, that we hear today the argument that insurgency has taken on a new dimension and that we must change—or at least modify—our approaches to it. As we have seen, contemporary insurgency embodies both old and new elements and you will have to decide for yourself whether it is simply something old under a new name or whether it is something new which demands a new form of reaction.

TYPES OF INSURGENCY

Next, it may be useful to examine the various *types* of insurgency, since the task of classification often facilitates that of deriving tentative generalizations. As all insurgencies have much the same characteristics, they differ primarily according to their *objectives*. I would suggest a threefold classification on this basis. The three types of insurgent efforts would be:

1. As a means of carrying on war between sovereign states;
2. As employed by a colonial or subject people attempting to overthrow their masters;
3. As a means of carrying out a domestic or internal revolution.

First, insurgent operations as an aspect of traditional warfare. This will occur in two quite different situations. Insurgent and/or guerrilla efforts are sometimes used as an adjunct to conventional operations. Thus, in the Civil War, both sides employed guerrilla forces. Earlier, you will remember, the French used Indian guerrillas against the British on this continent in the 18th century. Numerous other examples will undoubtedly occur to you. Traditionally, however, the professional soldier does not like to engage in guerrilla war. There are two reasons for this aversion. Guerrilla warfare is a dirty business and the military have always had a very high sense of ethics as to how warfare should be conducted. There is also an opposition based on expediency, the contention being that guerrillas cost more in the long run (because of their irresponsibility) than they are worth. Thus, though Clausewitz discusses guerrilla warfare, he suggests that this is to be used only as a last resort.

Here we come to the second variant of guerrilla warfare employed as an aspect of what I have called, with no intentional irony, normal war between states. When the military situation gets so bad that you cannot meet your opponent head-on, of necessity there is a resort to guerrilla warfare. In fact, we date modern guerrilla warfare from the Peninsular Campaign conducted by the Spanish against Napoleon. Perhaps better known are the guerrilla insurgent operations conducted by the Greeks, the Yugoslavs, the French, and the Russians against the Germans in World War II. And, I am sure, you remember that Hitler threatened to organize the 'Werewolves' and to conduct guerrilla warfare from the mountains of Bavaria if his armies were beaten in the field.

This type of guerrilla warfare is not one with which the United States is particularly concerned. We are not faced with it today, though conceivably it may be encountered after a nuclear exchange as a form of 'broken-back' war. However, I mention this type of insurgency to simply identify it and to differentiate it from the two other types of guerrilla warfare and insurgency that do concern us today.

One of these is the insurgency conducted by a subject people against a colonial master, sometimes called a *nationalist* insurgency. Of this we have many, many examples: Boers versus the British; the Irish versus the British (the Irish Republican Army reportedly ended its efforts only a

few months ago); the Israelis versus the British; and the Cypriot Greeks versus the British (as you can see, the British have a distinguished colonial record). Other examples would include the Burmese versus the Japs (they next turned against the British); the Arabs versus the Turks; and the long history of Ukrainian insurgencies against their Soviet masters. Currently we are vividly aware of the nationalist uprisings in Southeast Asia against the French, the Algerian nationalist uprisings, and the Katangan insurgency in the Congo.

We have encountered in the last decade a phenomenon which we might call a nationalist *counterpart insurgency*. I use this term to refer to the French secret army in Algeria fighting *both* against its own government and against the insurgent Algerian nationalists. This is insurgency compounded upon itself and, if insurgency and guerrilla wars are by definition brutal and bloody, there seems to be no limit to the depths to which this sort of fighting can descend when you get this double involvement. Nationalist insurgencies are probably not going to bother the United States greatly in the foreseeable future. The places where they may occur I think, may readily be identified; conceivably in the Portuguese possessions; conceivably in the Union of South Africa, if the blacks decide to turn upon the government; conceivably in Tibet. But, if the nationalist insurgency does not appear to threaten us at the moment, we do not seem to be able to employ it in our own behalf. The areas in which a 'throw the foreigner out' effort might be popular would, of course, be Hungary and the other Iron Curtain countries. Although our government does not seem prepared to encourage this type of nationalist insurgency at present, conceivably something of this sort may be possible at some future time.

The third and last of the three types of insurgency is the one which is giving us our present full measure of trouble. This form is usually called a 'revolutionary' insurgency although we should make at least a mental distinction between a 'rebellion' and a 'revolution.' A rebellion seeks merely to seize and to exercise governmental power; a revolution to remodel the entire social structure. Communist insurgencies, if we take them at their face value, are revolutionary efforts, rather than a form of rebellion.

Both revolution and rebellion aim at a seizure of internal power and both have three possible courses of action open to them.

(1) Power can be seized by a coup d'état. This is the way Napoleon seized power; the way Mussolini seized power; the way the Bolsheviks seized power; and, one could argue, the way in which Hitler finally came to power in Germany. The coup d'état is most familiar to us in Latin America and in the Middle East. One clique strikes at another clique;

one group is in, the other is out. In this situation the armed forces remain essentially passive—that is, they give passive consent to what is going on.

(2) The second revolutionary path is that entailing a full-scale civil war. Here, the armed forces are divided in their loyalties and play an active and, in all probability, a decisive part in the struggle. The Spanish revolution in the 1930's and the struggle in China in the mid-forties are our most recent examples.

(3) The third mode of seizing power is, of course, an insurrection or insurgent movement. The other two alternatives can be attempted only when one has substantial strength. Lacking this strength, one resorts to insurrection and to guerrilla war. Insurgent operations are thus an open admission of weakness. Mao Tse-tung himself testifies to this and it is basic to his four 'principles' of guerrilla warfare: These are (1) Enemy advances—we retreat. (2) Enemy halts—we harass. (3) Enemy tires—we attack. (4) Enemy retreats—we pursue. Obviously these principles derive from weakness, and insurgency is the course of the weak. Consequently, insurgency is simply a transitional stage in which one weakens the enemy to the point of being able eventually to defeat him via full-scale military operations.

Contemporary insurgent movements in Asia represent a transformation of the second type of insurgency, (nationalist), into the third, (revolutionary). With almost no exceptions, they began as nationalist movements, aimed at the ruling colonial power. But, when independence was achieved, control of the Government went to a relatively conservative element rather than to the Communist nationalists. And as a consequence, the Communists 'advanced' from a struggle directed against the foreigner under the slogan of 'liberation' to a struggle against their countries' newly established independent government under the slogan of 'social revolution.' Accordingly, the borderline between the second and the third categories of insurgency is a very blurred one. They are going to continue their efforts to seize power, and it is the official policy of the Soviet Union to encourage and assist them in their struggle. The Soviet position has been stated quite clearly by Khrushchev: 'The Communist Party of the Soviet Union regards it as its internationalist duty to assist the peoples who have set out to win and strengthen their national independence, all peoples who are fighting for the complete abolition of the colonial system.' That Communist line, as you know, is that new, independent (non-Communist) governments in Asia and Africa are 'colonial' governments because the men who run them are 'tools' of the West. And, if they are colonial governments, then these peoples have not as yet achieved true national liberation and independence. By definition, they will not

achieve 'liberation' until they have a Communist government. A real difficulty here is not whether Mr. Khrushchev is right or wrong but the fact that we have been maneuvered into using his language. If Khrushchev and the Communists are in favor of 'national liberation,' we are put in the unhappy position of opposing 'liberation' as long as we accede to their terminology. The same thing I think is equally true with the phrase 'counter-insurgency.' It is an unfortunate term. Men tend to react positively to insurgency—it suggests a struggle for freedom. Serious thought should be given to the problem of developing a terminology which is less embarrassing to us and, I should add, more truly descriptive of the situation.

THE 'LAWS' OF INSURGENCY AND COUNTERINSURGENCY

Representing as it does a major instrumentality of Communist foreign policy, it is this last type of insurgency—the 'revolutionary' variant—from which I will attempt to draw some generalizations.

What have we learned about insurgency? What guidance can we derive as to our own policy in dealing with it?

a. *Economic Conditions and Revolution.* One of the first things that students of revolution have tried to ascertain is the nature of the relationship between economic conditions and the incidence of revolution. Here Marx has again won one of those curious victories. As a philosophy—Marxism has been rather well demolished. But individual aspects of Marxist doctrine still color our thinking and most of us still view revolution as stemming primarily from economic causes. That is, when things get really bad, when people are starving, they will revolt. Marx suggested this in his famous phrase—"Workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains!" Actually this is not when revolution usually comes. In the majority of instances, revolution does not come at the bottom of economic conditions but rather as things are getting better. Consequently, it may be argued that revolution is not so much a consequence of economic deprivation as of economic frustration. If it were a consequence of deprivation, the time of greatest economic hardship should be the point at which the outbreak occurs. But revolutions actually tend to take place during an economic upswing. The crucial point here, however, is that while economic conditions may be getting better they are not getting better fast enough for enough people. Revolution thus springs from the frustration of expectation. Poverty, at least the sort of poverty which gives rise to revolutionary movements, is thus more a state of mind to be exploited by a skillful propagandist than an objective condition.

We might draw certain moral object lessons from this. If economic disappointment and frustration are the sparks that might set fire to revolution, we may be giving unwitting encouragement to it by exposing colonial peoples to Western standards of living. Unless they can reasonably hope to bring their own conditions closer to this standard, a dangerous feeling of popular frustration may develop. Most specifically, there is the danger that Western economic help given to these countries may create a very dangerous time-period for us. Economic aid is provided, economic conditions get a little better, but the country is still short of what the literature refers to as the 'take-off' point, that point at which things will materially improve. If this improvement does not occur rapidly enough, if the benefits are not widely distributed through the nation, if the people do not experience the benefits they have come to expect, Western economic help may be a factor contributing to revolutionary sentiment rather than a means of countering it.

b. *Role of the Masses.* So much for the relationship between economic conditions and revolutions. What is the role of the masses in a revolution? So much emphasis has been placed in recent weeks upon the importance of winning the support of the people that we might profitably devote a minute or two to an examination of the question.

What is the relationship between popular feeling and the success or failure of a revolutionary effort? Well, in a *coup d'état* practically none. In a *coup d'état*, what the masses think is relatively unimportant. As long as the instruments of organized power (the police and the Army) are on your side, the state can be seized with relatively little concern for public feeling. Similarly, in a civil war the outcome is essentially a matter of military strength, and popular sentiment is not likely to be the decisive factor.

There can be no question, however, that in insurgency the masses play a more significant and conclusive role than in the other two types of revolution. Most students agree that in insurgency and guerrilla warfare success or failure depends upon what I will call the 'friendly neutrality' of the population. Here we have, of course, Mao's famous aphorism that 'the people are like water and guerrilla troops are like the fish who live in it. A fish out of water cannot live.' The 'water' provides nourishment, concealment, intelligence and a means of communication for the guerrilla.

I would say that an even more accurate assessment is given by another great guerrilla strategist, Lawrence of Arabia, who led a successful insurgency against the Turks. 'A rebellion,' he observed, 'must have a friendly population, not actively friendly but sympathetic to the point of not betraying rebel movements to the enemy. Rebellions can be made by 2 percent active in a striking force and 98 percent actively sympathetic.'

I think here Lawrence is correct in his view of what can reasonably be expected from the masses. As most students of revolutionary efforts will agree, the majority of people will try to stay out of things. Why? According to Machiavelli, the reason is quite simple: 'This is said to be said in general of men. That they are ungraceful, fickle, false, and cowardly.' (Of course Machiavelli did not know Americans and his conclusions undoubtedly reflect this.) Quite apart from this solicitude for their own health is the brutal fact that in the 'undeveloped' countries political consciousness is limited to a relatively small number of individuals and the great masses tend to be primarily concerned with the daily task of earning enough to keep body and soul together.

But, while we should not overestimate the commitment of the masses, passive popular sympathy is still of urgent importance to the guerrilla, and this passive sympathy poses a major problem for the 'legitimate' government trying to cope with insurgency. The government must find some means to deprive the insurgents of even passive help. It is extremely difficult to accomplish this by terror, since the guerrillas are probably more effective at terror than is the government, and there is always the danger of driving the population into the hands of the insurgents. The policy attempted has to be a combination of military strength, a program of social reform—because there usually are real grievances which the insurgents can exploit—and the willingness to carry out these reforms.

In short, it is important to state and to implement a positive political program as a means of winning popular support, or at least of denying that support, even though it may be largely passive, to the rebels. At the same time we should not overestimate the political commitment of the population, particularly in an area which has no well-established political consciousness or tradition.

c. Role of Revolutionary Leadership. Time precludes more than a very brief comment here as to the relative ability of guerrilla leaders and that of those against whom they are pitted. Those in formal power operate under grave handicaps and limitations inherent in their position. They tend to be committed to the status quo and extremely reluctant to engage in the forceful and energetic steps which counterinsurgency requires. Contrast this with the position of the insurgent leadership which has the advantages of an ideological fervor and a psychological drive not always manifested by representatives of the established order.

d. Post-1945 Lessons.

What can we learn by combining what we knew about insurgency and revolutions prior to 1945 with that which we have seen since then?

I think the first lesson we should draw is the danger of trying to base our own policy today on tactics which worked in Malaya and in the Philippines. Much of the literature argues these are the models we should emulate. But there is an important difference—one that I have already stressed. In Malaya and in the Philippines the threatened government itself effectively opposed the insurgents. The Malayan government (the British) stepped in and moved energetically. The Philippine government eventually found a man who was willing to move in and to take the steps necessary to deal with the HUK movement.

We, the United States, cannot do this because the insurgency is not being fought against us. Consequently we lack *direct* political control over the situation. Only last week we again found it necessary to rebuke the Laotian government for failing to act on our advice. Here is the difficulty of our position: We must fight insurgency through an instrumentality which is something less than completely co-operative. For this reason we cannot hope to employ exactly the same tactics that were effective against insurgencies elsewhere, under different conditions. We lack the ability to say, 'This is what will be done.'

Other lessons, and here I must move rapidly against the clock, are as follows: The folly of agreeing to a truce in activities against an insurgent group, unless such a truce is clearly to our own advantage. We should have learned by now that insurgents will honor a truce or cease-fire agreement only as long as it is to their interest to do so and will promptly violate it when it is to their advantage.

I think the same doubts can be raised about the two other devices which have been employed by the West in trying to deal with insurgencies. One is the idea of territorial partition. Our naive assumption is that, having won a partial victory, the insurgents will be satisfied with what they have been given. Unfortunately, as we can see in Vietnam, partitions serve simply to provide a legal base of operations for the next expansion. The policy of trying to set up a 'neutral' government, as we are seeking to do in Laos, is also one where we have been singing a number of times. The neutral government invariably turns out not to be so neutral; the Communists have been given entree to legal power—and the next series of events can be predicted with sad accuracy.

I concede that I have done more in the way of raising problems than of providing solutions or panaceas. But you must remember that my job today was the task of indicating what has happened in the past, putting this in historical perspective, and of leaving the answers to the experts who will follow. In this respect, I am something like the first of the spirits in Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. I serve as the spirit of insurgency

past; we will later hear from the spirits of insurgency present and insurgency future. Together with you, I will listen with you with great interest to see what they come up with in the line of solutions.

However, I will say this: I would be very much surprised if their solutions differ too much in their general tenor from what has been, from Machiavelli down to the present time, probably the single most useful political maxim. It is the one, I think, which all governments should keep constantly in mind—'Do unto your enemy what he would do unto you, but do it first!'

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