

PERSUASION AND COERCION IN COUNTERINSURGENCY WARFARE

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IT IS EVIDENT,” remarked Secretary of War Elihu Root at the end of the Philippine War, “that the insurrection has been brought to an end both by making a war distressing and hopeless on the one hand and by making peace attractive.”¹ Root’s appraisal holds true for much of the U.S. Army’s experience in waging irregular wars. Nevertheless, there remains much confusion over the roles that persuasion and coercion play in rebellions and other internal conflicts. Having recently concluded the second in a two-volume study on the U.S. Army’s experience in waging counterinsurgency warfare, I’d like to explore the relationship between force and politics by examining three conflicts that the United States Army was involved in during the 19th and 20th centuries: the War of the Rebellion (the U.S. Civil War, 1861-1865), the Philippine War (1899-1902), and the Vietnam War (1954-1975).

The War of the Rebellion

President Abraham Lincoln understood the importance of political factors when he set out to defeat the Southern rebellion against the U.S. government. During the early stages of the conflict, he charted a moderate course, both to pave the way for reconciliation and to mollify opinion in the Border States. He avoided attacking the South’s “peculiar institution” (slavery), offered amnesty, commuted sentences, released civilian prisoners, and tried to restore normal civil life to occupied areas as soon as possible. Most of his commanders embraced these policies, and when they did not, he rebuked or removed them.

Lincoln’s moderation failed to persuade Southerners to lay down their arms, however, and over time the president accepted sterner measures to control and, if necessary, to punish rebellious civilians. He suspended habeas corpus and imposed loyalty oaths, while his commanders relocated people, levied fines, and confiscated property.

Major General William T. Sherman epitomized this less tolerant approach. Believing that the government was “not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people,” Sherman decided that it “must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war.”² He therefore directed that “in districts and neighborhoods where the army is unmolested, no destruction of property should be permitted; but should guerrillas or bush whackers molest our march, or should the inhabitants . . . otherwise manifest local hostility,

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ENGRAVING: Sherman’s march to the sea, 1868. (Alexander Hay Ritchie, engraver; Felix Octavius Carr Darley, artist; Library of Congress)

then army commanders should order and enforce a devastation more or less relentless, according to the measure of hostility.”²³ Devastation, not indiscriminate but directed at the disloyal, was meant to weaken the rebels’ ability to fight as well as their will to do so.

The growing use of collective punitive measures did not mean that Lincoln had abandoned moderation. In 1863, for example, he unveiled a generous process through which rebellious states could rejoin the Union. He likewise signed General Orders 100, *Instructions for the Government of the Armies of the United States in the Field*, which reminded Soldiers that “the ultimate object of all modern war is a renewed state of peace,” and that “men who take up arms against one another in public war do not cease on this account to be moral beings, responsible to one another and to God.”²⁴ The document admonished Soldiers to respect the personal and property rights of civilians as well as their social customs and religious beliefs. It likewise forbade wanton destruction, looting, cruelty, and torture. Nevertheless, benevolence was not a one-way street, and should the citizenry spurn the hand of reconciliation, General Orders 100 permitted commanders to take stern measures. Among the punishments it prescribed for civilians who aided the enemy were fines, expulsion, relocation, imprisonment, and death. The orders also authorized commanders to use calculated and proportional retaliation; to deny quarter for those who gave none; and to dispense summary punishments to guerrillas, spies, and traitors.

Throughout the remainder of the rebellion, Lincoln continued to wield inducements in one hand and punishments in the other. He diminished chances for peace, however, after he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Although the proclamation helped solidify support in the North and abroad, it alienated Southerners by demonstrating that the U.S. government meant to destroy the foundation of Southern socioeconomic life. With little room for compromise after that point, the war truly became, if it had not always been, what William H. Seward called an “irrepressible conflict.” Ultimately, force of arms, not political inducements, would determine the outcome of the most serious internal conflict in American history. Politics would continue to play an important supporting role, however, for by adhering to moderate policies as



General William T. Sherman on horseback at Federal Fort No. 7, Atlanta, GA, 1864.

Library of Congress

much as possible, the government helped reconcile Southerners to their defeat in 1865.

Such was not the case when after the war Congress launched an ill-conceived effort to revolutionize Southern society. The government’s attempt to “reconstruct” the South alienated the majority of the region’s white population. Even Sherman, the apostle of coercion and violence during the rebellion, conceded afterwards that “no matter what change we may desire in the feelings and thoughts of the people [in the] South, we cannot accomplish it by force.”²⁵ Bayonets could compel compliance, but they could not change a culture. As the government and public grew tired of wading through the tar pit of Southern politics and withdrew federal troops, one “reconstructed” state government after another fell to a combination of political maneuver, intimidation, and terror. The nation thus emerged from its civil war reunited and slave-free, but encumbered by a persistent culture of racism that would keep the African-American population in social subordination for another hundred years.

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The Philippine War

Thirty years after the demise of Reconstruction, President William McKinley confronted an insurgency when the Philippine Islands refused to accept American sovereignty at the end of the Spanish-American War. Aware of Filipino suspicions about U.S. intentions, McKinley promised the Filipino people a “benevolent assimilation,” instructing the commander in the islands, Major General Elwell S. Otis, to make every effort to “win the confidence, respect, and admiration of the inhabitants.”⁶ Otis complied, but as in the Civil War, the desire of regional leaders for independence proved irreconcilable with the U.S. government’s determination to assert colonial authority. Violence was the inevitable result.

During the ensuing conflict, the United States used political means extensively. It negotiated with Filipino leaders, offered generous terms of amnesty, and established civilian governments, first at the town and later at the provincial and “national” levels. It built and staffed schools, engaged in public works, and imposed other progressive measures designed to improve government institutions. Throughout the archipelago, officers directed their troops to be on good behavior and to respect cultural norms so as not to alienate the man on the street. Brigadier General J. Franklin Bell summarized U.S. policy when he reminded his subordinates that—

Government by force alone cannot be satisfactory to Americans. It is desirable that a government be established in time which is based upon the will of the governed. This can be accomplished satisfactorily only by obtaining and retaining the good will of the people Our policy heretofore was calculated to prevent the birth of undying resentment and hatred. This policy has earned for us the respect and approval of a large majority of the more intelligent and influential portion of the community. We cannot lose their support by now adopting such measures as may be necessary to suppress the irreconcilable and disorderly.⁷



Battle of Quingua, Philippine Islands, 1899.

This approach helped to win acceptance of American rule and to fragment the insurgency—so much so that some areas offered very little resistance. Persuasion and benevolence were not, however, able to end the war by themselves. Part of the reason was that initiatives cherished by Americans, such as introducing more democratic institutions or modern sanitary practices, either had little impact on the common man or violated cultural norms. A more sinister factor was the insurgents’ use of terror to keep people in line, for as Brigadier General Samuel S. Sumner admitted, “Nothing that we can offer in the way of peace or prosperity weighs against their fear of assassination which is prosecuted with relentless vigor against anyone giving aid or information to the government.”⁸

Finally, there existed a hard core of rebels determined to continue to fight until compelled to give in. Unless the Army could bring these elements to heel, pacification would be uneven at best and impossible at worst. Thus, military actions to defeat the enemy in battle, police activities to protect the people from intimidation and to punish those guilty of criminal behavior, and coercive measures to cut the insurgents off from their sources of support and to control the behavior of the population proved as essential as they had during the Civil War. When the Filipino insurgency dragged on, the U.S. Army did what it had done during the War of the Rebellion: it resorted to increasingly stern measures.

General Bell's actions reflected the change in policy. Acting on the premise underlying General Orders 100 that "a short and severe war creates, in the aggregate, less loss and suffering than a benevolent war indefinitely prolonged," Bell's troops herded people into detention camps, imposed fines, and burnt freely so as to keep "the minds of the people in such a state of anxiety and apprehension that living under such conditions will soon become unbearable."⁹ The results were sometimes unpleasant. Excesses occurred, but Bell's approach proved decisive in breaking the back of the insurgency. Moreover, just as in the Civil War, once the enemy was no longer willing to endure the suffering the conflict engendered, America's benevolent policies played an important role by helping the insurgents accept their defeat.

The Army thus won the war in the Philippines by following both the precepts of General Orders 100 and the example of General Sherman, enticing some insurgents into surrender while beating others into submission.

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Doctrinal Interlude

Nearly half a century would pass after the conclusion of the Philippine War before the U.S. Army published formal doctrine for waging counterinsurgency warfare. The issuance of Field Manual (FM) 31-20, *Operations Against Guerrilla Forces*, in February of 1951 marked an important milestone, but one that flowed logically from General Orders 100 of 1863. On the one hand, the manual alerted its readers to the fact that guerrillas depended on civilians for their survival; consequently, it called for counterinsurgents to develop a comprehensive politico-military plan. As the manual explained, the plan needed to incorporate "a detailed analysis of a country, the national characteristics, and the customs, belief, cares, hopes, and desires of the

people." This was because "political, administrative, economic, and military policies, intelligently conceived, wisely executed, and supported by appropriate propaganda, will minimize the possibility of a mass resistance movement." In contrast, "an ill conceived and poorly executed over-all plan may turn the populace against an occupying force."¹⁰ The manual likewise counseled that—

The isolation of guerrilla forces from the civilian populace may be greatly influenced by the treatment given the civilians. In all areas there are people who want peace and quiet. Friendly and cooperative elements of the populace are carefully cultivated. The news of good treatment spreads rapidly and is an important factor in establishing trust and friendly relations between the civilian population and our military forces. The populace is encouraged to band together to resist extortion and threats from the guerrillas, and cooperative elements are protected. Law and order are established and strictly enforced. Peacefulness is further stimulated by encouraging the people to resume their normal pursuits. Idleness and unemployment are dangerous. Restrictions imposed on the movement of civilians are wisely and carefully applied. Religious freedom is assured. The basic essentials of food, shelter, and clothing are provided. Tyrannical action by either our forces or the local government is prohibited.¹¹

Persuasion and political considerations thus factored large in the Army's new doctrine, but as in the past, so too did coercion. Therefore the manual stated that—

In areas where the civilian population is hostile to our aims and where they stubbornly resist pacification, stern administrative measures and aggressive military action are used to establish control. Firm and impartial treatment from the outset will tend to minimize the belligerency of the populace. These measures are closely coordinated with aggressive military action to isolate the guerrillas from the civilian population and allied support and then destroy them.¹²

The FM further echoed General Orders 100 in permitting government forces to take strong actions

against insurgents and their civilian supporters. Among these measures were restrictions in the movement of people and goods, the taking of hostages, and infliction of punishments and reprisals, although the manual cautioned that security forces should be careful to target only the guilty.¹³ Subsequent manuals toned down the punitive language while emphasizing the importance of positive programs to win the hearts and minds of a restive populace. Nevertheless, persuasion and coercion remained inextricably linked in U.S. doctrine since, in the words of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Economic and political progress are dependent upon reasonable internal security, and internal security cannot be permanently effective without complementing non-military action.”¹⁴ During the 1960s, the Army made extensive efforts to inculcate this dual doctrine through education and training programs at every level.

The Vietnam War

This was the state of affairs when the U.S. Army entered the Vietnam War. The new conflict differed in several key respects from the Philippine War and the War of the Rebellion. First, the two earlier insurrections had for the most part been conservative independence movements in which the rebels wanted to preserve rather than change their societies. The war in Vietnam, however, incorporated aspects of a revolutionary class struggle. This, combined with the highly organized and conspiratorial nature of the Communist Party, made it impossible to find acceptable solutions through reform or compromise.

A second difference was that the conflict was not just internal; it was an international war in which South Vietnam’s indigenous opposition was organized, controlled, supplied, and reinforced by a foreign power bent not on redressing social grievances but on conquering the South and absorbing it into its territory. The “insurgency” was essentially manufactured by the North and, over time, it was increasingly waged by regular North Vietnamese soldiers. Consequently, even complete success in redressing the internal causes of unrest could not guarantee either peace or the survival of South Vietnam.

A final key difference between the Vietnam War and the two earlier conflicts was that it occurred not on U.S. territory but in a sovereign foreign country

whose weak, corrupt, and often recalcitrant government the United States could sometimes influence but never control. Something that is difficult under the best of circumstances—formulating and executing an integrated politico-military effort—became a Herculean task.

From the start of America’s involvement in Vietnam, U.S. Soldiers preached political action as a key ingredient in the counterinsurgency effort. For example, in 1954, Army Chief of Staff General Matthew B. Ridgway recommended that a precondition for giving military assistance to Vietnam should be the existence of “a reasonably strong, stable, civil government in control,” because “it is hopeless to expect a U.S. military training mission to achieve success unless the nation concerned is able to effectively perform governmental functions.”¹⁵ The following year, the senior U.S. military representative in South Vietnam, Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams, cautioned Vietnam’s leaders that “military operations alone are not sufficient for success,” and that military actions must be conducted “in harmony with . . . political, psychological, and economic policies.”¹⁶ Every top U.S. commander in Vietnam after Williams reiterated this advice. Together with U.S. diplomatic personnel, American Soldiers also pressed the Vietnamese to make socioeconomic, political, and administrative reforms to strengthen the government’s standing with the population and to undermine support for the insurgents. These principles, however, proved easier to understand than to execute, given the complexities of American bureaucracy, Vietnamese politics, and the enemy’s political and military strength. Meanwhile, the United States took what unilateral actions it could, pouring millions of dollars into a wide variety of aid and development programs and performing innumerable civic actions, from providing free medical care to building schools and digging wells.

As in previous wars, these actions had positive effects, but they could not win the conflict. Poor conception, flawed execution, bureaucratic wrangling, resource shortages, and various other political impediments contributed to the disappointing result. Just as important, however, was the fact that the United States had formed unrealistic expectations about what political action could achieve given the conditions in Vietnam. In the words of one 1966 Army report—

Socio-economic programs must be closely tied to the pace of the security effort. Attempts to win allegiance from the population or to induce from it a willingness to bear arms against Viet Cong harassment by the distribution of commodities or services without reasonable assurance of continued physical security are invitations to failure. An early U.S. assistance concept espoused socio-economic good works which, by themselves and preceding security, were expected to galvanize the peasant into making a military commitment against the Viet Cong. Programs executed under this concept were dramatically unsuccessful: bags of bulgur wheat have never been known to kill an insurgent.¹⁷

Americans rediscovered in Vietnam what their forbearers had learned in the War of the Rebellion and the Philippine War, and what Army doctrine had foretold—that political and military measures were equally necessary and that they had to be carefully coordinated to have a positive effect. Furthermore, until the security forces could protect people from insurgent intimidation and control, little of significance could be expected from political programs designed to wean the population from the insurgency. Should the government gain the upper hand militarily, demonstrations of benevolence could indeed persuade guerrillas to surrender and civilians to openly side with the apparent victors. As in the American South and the Philippines, therefore, successful applications of military force and restrictive measures would be essential for success. Given that by 1966 the enemy had approximately a quarter of a million troops, guerrillas, and cadre in and around South Vietnam, allied forces faced the daunting task of keeping the enemy in check while providing the sort of security necessary to persuade people either to support the government or to stop aiding the enemy.

Military victories over enemy forces in 1968 finally gave the allies the opportunity they needed to make headway on pacification. Aided by

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a revitalized effort on the part of the South Vietnamese government, an improved system of politico-military coordination through the recently created office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development (CORDS), and a major military and paramilitary buildup fueled by importing vast quantities of additional war materiel, the allies were able to make significant gains in spreading their influence over the countryside. Programs of persuasion, development, and political mobilization played a role, but as a National Security Council study group concluded in 1970, public “support tends to *follow* rather than lead control. Most rural people have no strong commitment to either side, and they accept the governance of whichever side appears to be winning.”¹⁸ (Emphasis added.)



“We have achieved our project, now let’s join hands to maintain it and protect it,” reads a sign erected by villagers after government forces cleared communist insurgents from their area (in Vietnam, 1970).

Photograph VA001161, 1970, Douglas Pike Photograph Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University

While political progress was both desirable and necessary to solidify the government's gains, the group acknowledged that improvement had come only after "the allies were able clearly to gain the upper hand in the main force war, destroying, dispersing, or pushing back the enemy main force units."¹⁹ This was no surprise to CORDS, which devoted the lion's share of its personnel, activities, and funds to security and intelligence efforts to protect and control the population rather than to socioeconomic betterment programs. Population resettlement and police measures to restrict the movement of people and goods likewise contributed to weakening the Viet Cong.

The South Vietnamese government would have been far stronger had it been able to win the support of its people more through persuasion than by coercion, but political, social, and security conditions in the country made such an achievement problematic. Still, enough progress occurred that the South could have survived the insurgency had it not been for North Vietnam's immutable determination to conquer the South. Given the North's attitude, South Vietnam was always going to live or die by the sword. Even if it had been entirely successful in winning the support of its people, South Vietnam could only have survived if it had had sufficient military power of its own or the direct military backing of the United States. Without these, it fell easily to North Vietnam in 1975.

Carrots and Sticks

This brief review of America's experience in waging internal conflicts has demonstrated that the U.S. government and its Army have always used a combination of positive and negative measures to suppress rebellions. Much to the frustration of theorist and practitioner alike, history has shown that there is no simple formula for combining these two essential yet volatile ingredients. Rather, counterinsurgency warfare has proved to be more alchemy than science, with each situation requiring a different proportion of ingredients, depending upon the social, political, cultural, and military nature of the conflict.

This truth notwithstanding, individuals writing about counterinsurgency warfare most emphasize the unusual degree to which political considerations permeate what in conventional conflicts would be

purely administrative, technical, or military decisions. This is understandable, but it can become counterproductive when taken to extremes. All too often, people reduce counterinsurgency's complex nature to slogans declaring that political considerations are primary, that nation building is a viable war-winning strategy, and that the only road to victory is to win the "hearts and minds" of a population. As with many clichés, these promote one truth at the expense of another.

There are several reasons why such slogans tend to obscure more than they illuminate. To begin with, simplistic catch phrases do not convey the reality that some political differences are irreconcilable—which, of course, may be why the parties to a dispute have resorted to arms in the first place. Neither do such phrases help policymakers navigate the labyrinth of political considerations incumbent in any internal conflict. Just as political and military concerns will sometimes clash, so too will choices have to be made between competing political imperatives.

Slogans such as "winning hearts and minds" can also lead to a misapprehension that counterinsurgencies are popularity contests. Sometimes unpopular actions such as the Army's relocation of civilians during the Philippine War may be necessary. In the same way, worthy actions such as the liberation of a previously repressed class may fan the flames of resistance among a nation's traditional elite, while promoting democratic reforms, as the United States did in Vietnam, can backfire by increasing instability.

Moreover, clichés meant to illuminate the importance of politics can build unrealistic expectations within the American public that only serve to thwart the government's ability to resolve insurgencies successfully. There is a tendency on the part of many Americans, for example, to believe that economic capitalism and political democracy are sure remedies for resolving internal conflicts. This belief, a reflection of our culture, has always been present, but it gained particular virulence in the 1960s when nation building and counterinsurgency theorist Walt W. Rostow postulated that a thirst for a more prosperous life had created a "revolution of rising expectations" that was driving people to rebel in less prosperous areas of the world.²⁰ Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker reflected this philosophy

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when he told South Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky that “people are drifting toward communism because they are poor. If you give the people everything they want—television sets, automobiles, and so on—none of them will go over to communism.”²¹ The rhetoric proved naïve. Economics and materialism were not as deterministic as many had thought, and even Rostow eventually admitted that “as for the linkage between economic development and the emergence of stable political democracies, we may, in retrospect, have been a bit too hopeful.”²²

Unrealistic expectations about the power of material changes have been matched on the political front. As historian Daniel Boorstin warned in 1953, “If we rely on the ‘philosophy of American democracy’ as a weapon in the world-wide struggle, we are relying on a weapon which may prove to be a dud.” This was because democratic institutions “always grow out-of-doors in a particular climate and cannot be carried about in a flower pot.”²³ Experience has demonstrated the truth of Boorstin’s observation, for time and again, U.S. nation builders have seen transplanted American institutions wither in the infertile soils and inhospitable climates of foreign countries. Counterinsurgency and nation building theorists have all too often ignored this reality and have fallen into the culturally insensitive trap of trying to radically transform foreign societies—a task that is extremely difficult under the best of circumstances, if it is possible at all. Such a tack can also alienate the very country we are trying to help, as occurred often in Vietnam. U.S. leaders should have heeded diplomat George Kennan, who had observed in 1954 that “even benevolence, when addressed to a foreign people, represents a form of intervention into their internal affairs, and always receives, at best, a divided reception.”²⁴

In all three of the wars discussed in this article, the U.S. government underestimated the challenges

posed by the rebellions and overestimated the impact that moderate policies and persuasive actions would have in quelling them. Initial optimism eventually gave way to disenchantment on the part of the American public and a more sober calculus on the part of the Nation’s Soldiers and statesmen. These and other experiences led counterinsurgency author and Vietnam veteran Lieutenant Colonel Boyd T. Bashore to observe somberly in 1968 that success in internal wars “seems most often to have been effectively accomplished by an all-out police-military effort and not by pushing freedom like a wet noodle from the top down into the countryside. . . . The people of a nation under attack must accept discipline and put off or give up many of the rights and privileges that we may hold dear in our democracy. This fact of life, as unpalatable as it may seem, must be fully understood. A counterinsurgency doctrine that does not recognize the primacy of the military forces in providing security is doomed to failure.”²⁵

The reality, of course, is that politics and force are inextricably linked in a dynamic, symbiotic relationship, and *both* are necessary to win. The great challenge is to find the right blend for a particular situation—a formulation that may well be different from that used at another time or place, even during the same conflict. Slogans like “politics are primary” are useful if they remind us that, in counterinsurgency as in all forms of war, military means must be subordinated to political ends, and that political and persuasive arts play a vital role in waging and resolving internal conflicts. They are less useful if they lead us into the mistaken belief that political considerations must trump military and security concerns at every turn, that coercion is necessarily antithetical to success, or that we must significantly rework a struggling society into one that is a mirror image of our own.

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Nearly a century ago, in writing about his experiences in the Philippines and Cuba, Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Bullard reminded his fellow officers that pacification “is not mere force; it is a judicious mixture of force and persuasion, of severity and moderation . . . and this complexity is what makes pacification difficult.”²⁶ Benevolent policies designed to win “the consent of the governed” were essential, he wrote. Repression alone was incom-

patible with the American character. Yet coercive and forceful measures were equally necessary, for “without them there is no pacification.” Although we may wish it otherwise, the fact of the matter, Bullard observed, was that “when peoples have really differed, persuasion has prevailed only when backed by adequate strength to enforce.”²⁷ Bullard’s reminder does not make the counterinsurgency enigma any easier to solve, but we ignore it at our peril. **MR**

NOTES

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