

The Insurgency Threat and Ways to Defeat It



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Although the threat of nuclear war has concerned many people since the end of World War II, it has been the low-intensity insurgent war dominating the world scene. Some counterinsurgency operations have been successful while others have not. What factors should be considered when making decisions on assistance to threatened countries?

The past 30 years have seen a dramatic increase in the number and sophistication of insurgencies around the world. Insurgent warfare has become a complete, self-contained military art where many of the rules of conventional

Insurgent warfare is not new. The Chinese studied it 2,500 years ago (Sun Tzu's writings). The English were confronted with it by the Scots, Irish and Americans, and the Spanish used it against Napoleon Bonaparte.

Insurgency warfare has developed for several reasons. The most obvious is the enormous cost of conventional conflict today. One fighter aircraft costs what a squadron did in World War II and requires the same amount of equipment, fuel and personnel. A modern tank is a veritable arsenal of complex communications, sensor and weapons systems, powered by a heavily automated modu-

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Warfare are distorted or not applicable. An insurgency consists of any organized attempt by a group of people to use force against an established nation or government either to break up the nation, overthrow the government or otherwise significantly change the status quo. Insurgencies, in a broad sense, are limited, guerrilla (little wars-Spanish) conflicts such as in Afghanistan, Central America and southern Africa.

lar power plant. It costs as much to operate as a platoon of its World War II-era predecessors. This enormous cost in resources and skilled manpower is simply beyond the reach of a great many entities who feel a need for power.

Another factor is the inverse of the technical complexity and cost of modern weapons. At one end of the spectrum, we have expensive and powerful aircraft and armored vehicles; at the other end,





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we have compact, easy to operate weapons capable of destroying a modern fighter aircraft or tank in moments. Shoulder-fired missiles can destroy helicopters and light-armored vehicles, while slightly larger weapons can destroy a jet fighter or tank.

These weapons rely heavily on maneuver ability and secrecy to obtain surprise. In an era of sophisticated microelectronic sensors and instantaneous communications by portable radio and telephone, surprise becomes quite easy for the insurgent, while maintaining the operational security of conventional forces becomes increasingly difficult. This is especially true in countries with few limits on individual freedoms.

Insurgent Operations

The technological basis for insurgent warfare is only part of the picture. Insurgents operate under conditions of considerable discomfort. They hide among the criminal element of large urban areas or camp in remote mountains, jungles or deserts, beyond the reach of casual government activity. Why do they bother?

Insurgents are motivated by a variety of factors, but probably the strongest is idealism. Whether it is fundamentalist religion, Marxist-Leninism, ethnic nationalism or a combination of these and other dogmatic beliefs, insurgents are "true believers." They are willing to live in discomfort and sometimes risk death in an effort to destroy the system denying them their wishes. Some grow to love the life and become professional revolutionaries or terrorists. However, most hope for the day when they will be vindicated and will see the birth of their new nation or society.

It is this fervent belief in the urgency of change, and the need to use force to accomplish it, that gives the insurgent the stimulus to continue against apparently hopeless odds. Those same odds also give the insurgent the advantage of being able to maintain surprise and often obtain sympathy from a variety of people and governments not directly involved in the struggle.

Sometimes the odds are not really all that unfavorable. Two-thirds of the world's nations are less than 40 years old and were created out of colonial territories that are ethnically and economically disparate. Often lacking indigenous merchant and



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professional classes these young nations have very limited means of establishing an honest, stable and efficient government. The abilities of the police, judicial and military organizations are often limited by a lack of training, discipline, mobility and striking power. Many newer nations lack well-developed internal transportation networks. This prevents the government from maintaining an effective presence throughout their territory and creates potential bastions for insurgents.

Authoritarianism, inexperience, corruption and favoritism toward particular families or groups all tend to weaken the legitimacy of new governments. Many do not share a common history, language or faith but, rather, are composed of disparate ethnic and religious groups often at odds with each other. There is a tendency toward both separatism and revolutionary. Action aimed at putting a particular group "on top." Continued struggles for ascendancy often lead to repression and violence which, in turn,

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increase the ranks of those having serious grievances with the regime and no legal means of redress. Some of these disenchanted people, because of temperament, personal loss or a sense of obligation, become active or sympathetic supporters of insurgent movements.

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to the creation of a durable insurgency. To have any long-term hopes for success, insurgents need popular support and frequently support from foreign governments. To obtain it. they need to make their presence felt.

Insurgents, especially the “urban terrorists,” play to an audience, the bigger the better. This is why insurgents like the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the Lebanese Shiites, the Peruvian “Shining Path” and the Irish Republican Army all execute bloody acts of terrorism and then immediately contact radio stations, television broadcasters and newspapers to claim “responsibility.” Many insurgents, including the Afghans and the Nicaraguan Sandinistas invite members of the news media

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of perceived injustice and the inability to see hope for peaceful improvement that causes insurgencies to develop with the emphasis on *perceptions*.

The political weakness of many nations, coupled with the increasing ability of small insurgent groups to be militarily effective and the increasing perception of a need for violent action to change the course of world events does not, in itself, lead

to join them “in the bush,” reporting on their life, activities and dedication to their cause.

Why do insurgents need publicity? They wish to impress their enemy, the government, with their power. They also have to impress the general population, which is usually apathetic or unaware of the issue, that the insurgents’ cause is important and morally just. Failing this, insurgents will try to terrorize the people into demanding more “law and



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order” and ultimately more government repression, thus creating new supporters. The insurgents hope the combination of effects will either change

government policy. change the government or, at a minimum. bring new recruits and sympathizers to the insurgent side.



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The population being “impressed” may not necessarily be the population of the insurgents’ homeland. In some cases, insurgents will attack their government’s embassies overseas or prominent foreign nationals or businesses, especially if they are connected with a major power that could have “leverage” on the government they seek to change.

Another benefit gained by obtaining notoriety through terrorism and media manipulation is the support of foreign sponsors. Either due to actual beliefs or a cynical awareness of the need to recite certain key phrases to attract the support of foreign governments, insurgents declare their ideological affinity with the views of a major world power. The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) rebels and the Nicaraguan “contras” announce their staunch anticommunism and belief in democracy, while the Shining Path and the South-West African People’s Organization (SWAPO) declare for Marxist-Leninism. Afghan rebels look for support closer to home, as well as from the West, by avowing their desire to create an

Fighting Insurgency-Prevention

Preventing insurgencies is easier than fighting them. The elimination of obvious corruption and favoritism, preferably through the fair and rapid administration of established civil and criminal law, is critical to preventing insurgents from gathering. another preventive technique, not favored in some nations, is a government guarantee of free speech and a free press.

Free speech enables the government to determine the temper of the population simply by listening and to avoid the problem of being “out of touch” with its citizens. People can air grievances freely, thus lessening the feeling that no one cares about their concerns. Finally, the government can watch “chronic” complainers, helping to locate would-be revolutionaries before they cross the line between dissent and destructiveness.

It is not always possible to defuse an insurgency although these basic actions will help contain it. Insurgents are sometimes unwilling to settle for



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Not all insurgents get full-scale military training and equipment at Soviet and Libyan expense the way the PLO has, but they all get some support either from governments, fellow insurgents or private individuals and groups in certain countries. This aid is essential since the small, portable high-technology weapons favored by most insurgents cost money, as do food, clothing and shelter.

honest government and free speech, or they are tools of a foreign power seeking to overthrow the current government regardless of its honesty or efficiency. In these cases, security measures become essential.

Anti-insurgency security measures must avoid alienating the general population with excessive violence or repression, relying, instead, upon mobility, training and developing a well-publicized

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program for “rallying” repentant rebels back to the government. When needed, force should be applied quickly, precisely and thoroughly. Counterinsurgency primarily relies upon police-like actions and small-unit tactics, not artillery or air power which can destroy everything within a given area. Civil police with handguns is not the appropriate response either. Armed insurgents are not ordinary criminals; they are self-perceived revolutionaries and soldiers.

Insurgents, unlike criminals, cannot be expected to surrender to an inferior force or respond to pleas to “reason.” They must be met by sufficient force, have no possible avenues of escape and have no alternative but unconditional surrender. Negotiations are not an answer. If the insurgents really felt their demands were negotiable, they would have tried to obtain them through peaceful demonstrations or political action rather than through armed rebellion. They should also be warned, by public broadcast and well-seeded rumors prior to the beginning

of operations against them, that taking hostages will not save them from surrender or death.

Appropriate action, taken rapidly and resolutely, will normally defuse the insurgency. If the insurgents have little popular support and fail to cause confusion and repression by the government, the insurgency will die, even if a foreign power is backing the insurgents. Realizing the insurgency has failed, the foreign power will abandon it to avoid wasting resources and possible embarrassment.

Unfortunately, some governments ignore the problem, hoping it will disappear, or overreact with repressive policies such as martial law or suspension of civil liberties. This allows the insurgency to continue to grow and possibly drive many citizens to join the insurgents. The insurgency gradually ceases to be a localized problem caused by a few dozen hard-core radicals and becomes a regional or national problem, with an army of revolutionaries able to take and hold territory.

Once the general population begins to doubt the government’s ability to protect them, they begin to

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passively accept the insurgents among them. This does not mean they support the insurgents—the same apathy can be found in American cities in the face of armed street gangs who have no ideology. What it means is that the government must regain the confidence of the people.

Fighting Guerrilla Insurgency

When insurgencies grow out of control, beleaguered governments often turn to their allies for assistance. Usually, the United States is called upon to help defeat communist rebels but, increasingly, the Soviets are called upon to defeat anticommunist rebels in such diverse places as Cambodia,

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Nicaragua and Angola. What sort of help do these nations really need?

The most common response from both the United States and the Soviet Union is to sell (or give) the threatened government more weapons. The weapons often include heavily armed helicopter gunships, armored vehicles, artillery and even fighter aircraft. The United States often adds a profusion of tactical communications systems; infantry weapons, including mortars; and a variety of ground, water and air vehicles for moving troops. In general, Soviet aid is only effective if the government is willing to decimate its own population, while US equipment varies from extremely useful to counterproductive.

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weapons. This training may not have been of sufficient length and intensity to prepare them for the appropriate type of operations.

Another problem with these programs is that, due to time, funding and manpower constraints, training is usually provided to mid-grade or senior officers. US instructors usually have limited contact with the common soldiers. These soldiers are young and often are relatively uneducated conscripts. Their training emphasizes rigid, sometimes brutal, discipline. It is often lacking in motivation, team-building and enough basic education (literacy skills and local history) to turn a scared teen-age peasant or mill worker into an effective soldier.

Officers and conscripts live and work across a barrier of age, education, social class and goals. If the officer cannot bridge that gap, he cannot convey



Another area causing problems is cultural. US aid usually is accompanied by US demands for social, political and economic changes the smaller nation may not want, and sometimes the aid is seen as a bribe to ensure compliance. The United States must avoid falling into the trap of being feared and distrusted by the people we seek to help.



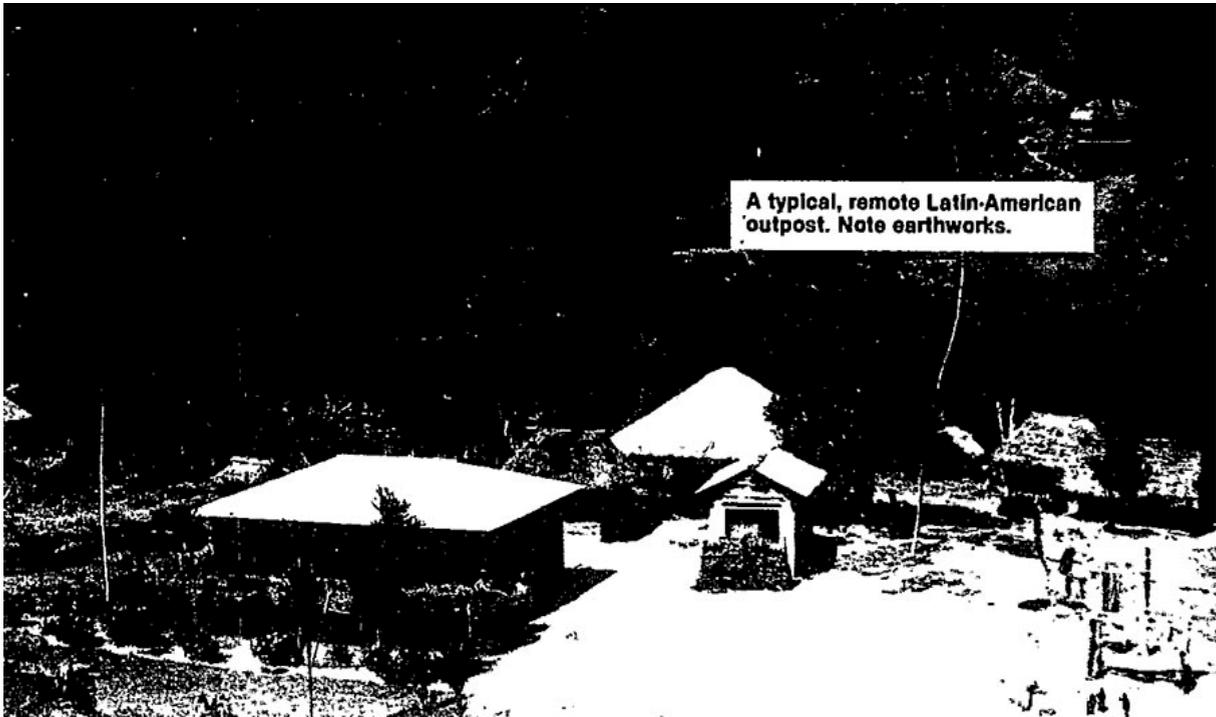
tion to compensate for defects in strategy, tactics, training discipline of the recipient army. The first requirement in most Third World nations is for education and training in how to operate as an army and how to effectively fight threats that rely on mobility to harass their opponents rather than on firepower to destroy them. They need to learn how to build a cohesive army that is able to locate, fight and defeat a highly motivated, often well-led force and to do it without terrorizing their own population.

Currently, US training for foreign nations tends to stress conventional warfare activities such as close-air-support coordination, artillery preparation of attack zones and large-scale troop movement. As a result, these foreign troops are well-trained for a land war in Korea or Central Europe. The only useful training they have received is in the area of small-unit tactics and light infantry

the knowledge he learned from US instructors. He risks having his troops panic, die needlessly or even defect because they do not care about the officer or the government he represents enough to fight for him, even if they have managed to learn how.

Facing the problems of preparing a small nation's army for effective counterinsurgency action must be preceded by effectively dealing with these sociopolitical problems. If the army will not expect its officers to talk to and work among their troops, they cannot succeed. If the army will not put aside "glamorous" weapons like tanks and gunships to concentrate on rifles, machineguns, armored cars and utility helicopters, they will be unable to "find, fix and fight" their elusive enemy.

The army must also be psychologically prepared to do something most armies hate—garrison duty. The army has to maintain a small presence in every village likely to be threatened by the insurgents to



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convince the villagers that the government is ready and able to protect them. Ideally, these small units would train a local militia but, to accomplish that, the troops in those units must:

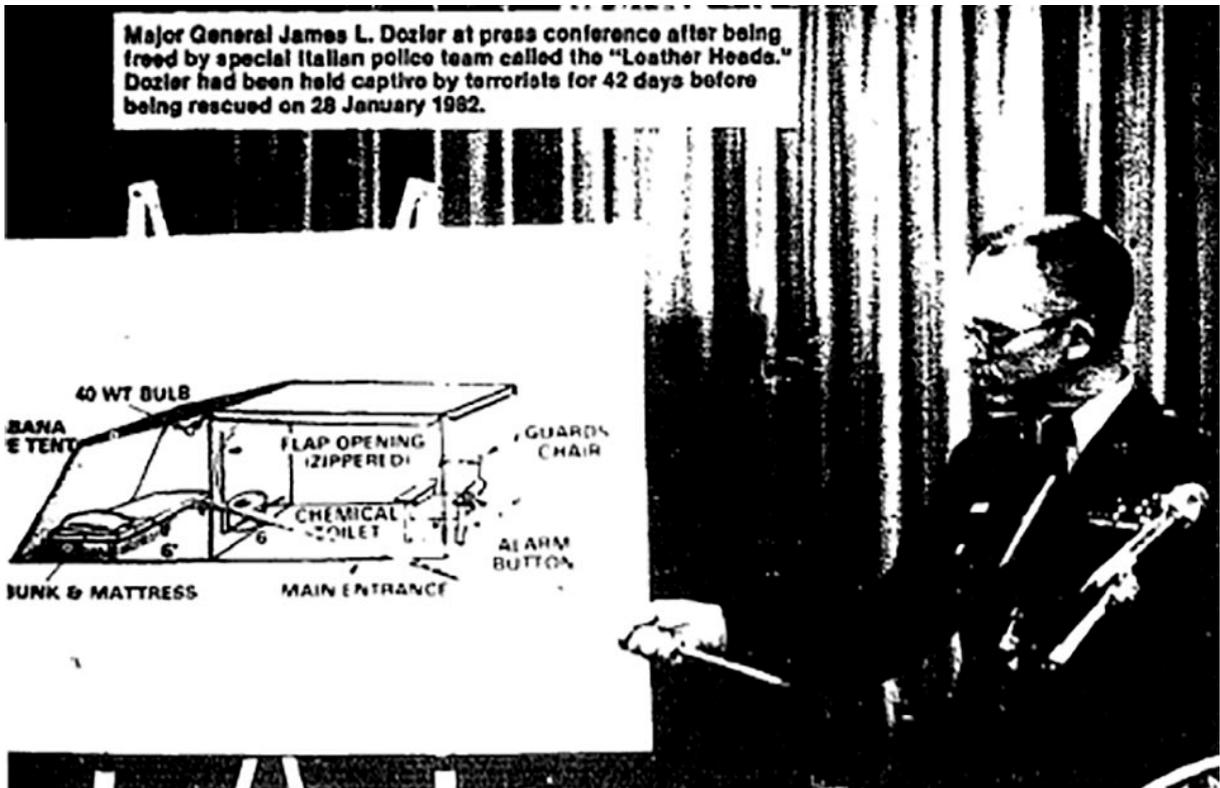
- ◆ Really know their weapons, their tactics and their opponent.
- ◆ Care enough for the villagers (and show that concern) that the villagers will respect them.
- ◆ Be patient in teaching these skills to people who would prefer to leave using weapons to others.
- ◆ Effectively assure the villagers, especially the village militiamen, that they will get a fast, powerful response when they call for help against the insurgents should they return.

Those who train these armies, as well as the trainees themselves, must remember that, when we hear or read of Mao Tse-tung, Ernesto (Che) Guevera or Carlos Marighella (Brazilian author of *The Mini-Manual of the Urban Guerrilla*) calling guerrilla warfare or insurgency “people’s war,” it is not an oversimplification or mistranslation. Insurgencies are just that. They are wars that are ultimately fought, not for territory but for people. The sole target of such wars, for both the government and the

insurgents, is the loyalty and support of the general population. These people have very basic concerns—that they be able to raise their families, till their lands in peace and keep what they grow. Whoever best answers those needs will win their support.

Fighting Urban Insurgency

Dealing with urban insurgents or terrorists is a somewhat different problem. Due to the population density, relatively confined spaces can hide significant numbers of insurgents. Using conventional military forces is difficult if not impossible. The opponents are often better educated and more adept at obtaining funds and supplies than their rural counterparts, and they operate at the center of a country rather than in its more remote areas. Urban terrorists can attack in countries considered to have better-than-average protection for individual rights, comparatively little poverty and many avenues for upward mobility.



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The urban terrorist is motivated by a desire to rebel regardless of whether a clear or rational grievance warrants armed action. They are, virtually without exception, the products of middle-class or wealthy families and are often well-educated and intelligent. Yet, they reject their background and potential and assault the society that gave them these benefits.

While their demands stress "social justice," the elimination of war and a socialist world order, they tend to be inconsistent and very naive in stating their demands. Many analysts have concluded that their real motivation is the excitement and "romance" of being a noble revolutionary, coupled with the ability to obtain attention from the wealthy and powerful. Some psychological experts believe they are subconsciously trying to punish their parents or gain their attention.

The important aspects to remember are that these urban terrorists are not like rural

terrorists and guerrillas. Their motivations are not the same, their goals are more oriented toward anarchy than justice and no amount of reform is likely to prevent urban terrorism or significantly curtail it. The urban terrorist is sociopathic, not just violent.

Due to their methods and their motivations, urban terrorists, such as the "Red Brigade," the "Red Army Faction" and the "Revolutionary Cells," must be treated as violent criminals rather than political or military opponents. They do not have legitimate grievances or popular support, and they pose no real threat to the government. The urban terrorist threatens prominent individuals and innocent bystanders with the sole purpose of creating sufficient media hysteria and popular panic that will lead to repression in the name of "restoring order." This repression, in turn, will supply the terrorists with sympathizers, recruits and foreign support, enabling them to destroy their society, not just reform it or create a separate substate.



Sportily attired follower of Yaasar Arafat In Tripoli Lebanon, with white Jogging shoes, warm-up Jackal: designer Jeana, Polish PMK-DGN60 assault rifle, plus PGN60 and finless F1/N60 rifle grenades. Shortly after this photo was taken, PLO loyalists were ousted from Tripoli by rival Syrian-backed leftists on 20 December 1983.

Urban terrorists, unlike guerrillas in the bush, must be dealt with by police forces (with appropriate training), not the military. Terrorists must not be allowed to bring about the repression and militarization of the country which will allow them to become a full-fledged insurgency. The Soviets and other anti-Western nations support urban insurgents because they are another weapon against the sociopolitical stability and economic prosperity of Western nations.

International Aspects of Insurgency

Insurgencies increasingly lead to larger wars between established nations. The insurgency within South Vietnam led to a war directly involving North and South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and the United States. The Palestinian insurgency against Israel has led to armed conflict between Israel and Lebanon, Syria and Jordan and to civil war within Lebanon. In both cases, other nations became involved peripherally, either aiding one side against the other or in attempting to calm the situation. Behind these growing insurgencies lie the arsenals and training facilities of the Soviet Union, North Korea and Libya which are using these insurgents to bring about the destruction or neutralization of their enemies.

Our natural response as Americans has been to aid those under attack by leftist insurgents, often through direct intervention with US military forces. Unfortunately, direct action is often an undesirable response. Many people in small nations, while appreciating US support, are afraid and resentful of large numbers of Americans, especially military personnel, entering their country to "help" them. In the aftermath of Vietnam and Iran, even pro-Western governments are wary of inviting US forces into their countries. Some see an American presence as a threat, to their independence. Others see it as increasing the threat of Soviet or radical Islamic attack.

Another area causing problems is cultural. US aid usually is accompanied by US demands for social, political and economic changes the smaller nation may not want, and sometimes the aid is seen as a bribe to ensure compliance. The United States must avoid falling into the trap of being feared and distrusted by the people we seek to help. The United States should never create a presence that could be misconstrued as an "invasion," overpowering the local government and economy or getting involved in political disputes. We can advise, train and provide equipment and supplies. We cannot win the people over to support their government, nor can we change a government to suit our desires. Only the local government and its military can do that.

The United States has worldwide commitments, including security assistance in defeating insurgencies threatening our allies.



Members of 41st Combat Support Hospital provide dental treatment to Hondurans as part of the civic action effort during Exercise *BIG PINE*, September 1983 through February 1984

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To be successful in this mission, we must help indirectly rather than sending US forces into a situation they cannot help. US advisers—military and civilian—must persuade foreign leaders that ultimately it is up to them to restore their citizens' faith in the government. The local government must train and equip its army for small-unit operations, village security support and small, precise strikes against insurgent hideouts.

While the United States can help prevent foreign support from reaching the insurgents, the internal problem must be faced by the local government. The United States can train officials and troops and can provide equipment for effective mobility, communications and firepower, but the officials and troops must prove themselves worthy of the support of the people.

In dealing with an insurgency, early, precise action is critical. Reaction must be appropriate to the threat. Ignoring the problem or resorting

to martial law and government terrorism will only worsen the problem. This is especially true in dealing with urban terrorism, a bizarre variant of insurgent warfare that can strike even the most open and prosperous societies. With a sound understanding of what insurgencies are and a realistic approach to the threat, an insurgency can be defeated with measures that will enhance national unity, stability and the overall effectiveness of the armed forces.

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