DISCOURAGING HEARTS AND MINDS:
Democracies and Insurgencies

Major Erik Claessen, Belgian Armed Forces

FIGHTING AN INSURGENCY is challenging for any type of government, but for democracies the task is particularly difficult. This article looks at the insurgent's opportunities and the counterinsurgent's challenges when the counterinsurgent is a state with a democratically elected government. It will come as a surprise to no one that the main problem for a democratic state involved in a counterinsurgency (COIN) is to maintain resolve. This article holds that to maintain resolve, the counterinsurgent should seek to minimize publicity about the conflict rather than try to drum up public support for it.

I will not focus on insurgent tactics. I assume the insurgent is capable of planning and executing bombings and kidnappings, setting improvised explosive devices, throwing stones at tanks, sending envelopes with white powder to official buildings, and organizing violent demonstrations. Nor will I elaborate on counterinsurgent tactics. Instead, my intent is to show how insurgents link their actions in such a way as to undermine the counterinsurgent's resolve, and to focus on the importance to the counterinsurgent of having a strategy to maintain his people's will.

The Necessity of Strategy

The ultimate goal in war is "to compel our enemy to do our will."[1] Counterinsurgency provides no exception to this rule. All parties in war try to achieve this goal despite their opponents' countervailing efforts. They focus on attacking their opponents' centers of gravity and protecting their own.[2] Both efforts are equally important. An insurgency's centers of gravity are its leadership and its armed forces. The associated critical vulnerability is the support of the people in which the insurgent is rooted and on which he relies for resolve, recruitment, shelter, supplies, and other necessities. According to David Galula, "The population therefore becomes the objective for the counterinsurgent as it was for his enemy."[3] This insight, now broadly accepted, is the foundation of the COIN strategy of winning the hearts and minds of the population, the insurgent's base of support. Such a strategy will entail a very lengthy effort; in fact, many counterinsurgencies last more than a decade. According to T.X. Hammes, "When getting involved in this type of fight, the United States must plan for a decades-long commitment."[4]

The insurgent faces two challenges. First, he must win the allegiance of the people in which he is rooted. To do so, he enters into direct competition with the counterinsurgent. Second, he must defeat the counterinsurgent's military forces. In an insurgency, especially at the outset, the insurgent's

Major Erik A. Claessen, Ir, is a student in the Advanced Staff Officers Course in Brussels, Belgium. He holds an M.S. from the Belgian Royal Military Academy and is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, where he earned an M.M.A.S. degree. Major Claessen has served in a variety of command and staff positions in Belgium and Croatia.

military power is almost invariably inferior to that of the counterinsurgent; consequently, it is very difficult if not impossible for the insurgent to destroy the counterinsurgent's forces. However, in the special case of a democratic counterinsurgent, the nature of democracy offers another opportunity to the insurgent. In essence, a democracy's electorate chooses its politicians, the politicians commit the armed forces, and the armed forces conduct the counterinsurgency. Thus, the armed forces need continuous political support to remain committed, and the politicians need continuous electoral support to remain in office. If the insurgent succeeds in coercing the counterinsurgent's government to decide on an exit strategy, the counterinsurgent's military forces simply obey their political masters and quit.

Coercing the counterinsurgent's democratic government to embrace an exit strategy requires the ability to influence the mainstream opinion of the counterinsurgent's electorate. In other words, the insurgent must be able to discourage the democratic constituents' hearts and minds. It is important to emphasize that *from the insurgent's perspective, the political decision to end the commitment of armed forces is equivalent to the destruction of these forces*. This means that the counterinsurgent must have a strategy to win the hearts and minds of the insurgent's population, and he must prevent the insurgent from discouraging his own (the counterinsurgent's) electorate.

Why do democracies get involved in COIN? By definition, democracies provide opportunities to participate in the exercise of power without resorting to violence. Insurgents, however, do not take advantage of these opportunities. They may choose not to participate in the democratic process for ideological reasons, or the democracy's

constitution might outlaw the insurgent's political goal (for example, secession), or the population in which the insurgent is rooted may be excluded from the democratic process. A democracy might also intervene against an insurgency in another country. Regardless of the case, the insurgent's population base is clearly distinct and separate from the counterinsurgent's electorate. As a result, there are two fronts in a counterinsurgency: the insurgent's population base, and the counterinsurgent's electorate. We are concerned here only with the latter.

Democratic Characteristics Relevant to COIN

According to Galula, "The basic tenet of the exercise of political power [is that] *in any situation, whatever the cause, there will be an active minority for the cause, a neutral majority, and an active minority against the cause"* (italics mine).[5] It takes considerable political interaction to make the neutral majority choose sides. The majority of the counterinsurgent's electorate is only marginally interested in politics. In a democracy, three types of actors can generate the political interactions necessary to make the neutral majority choose sides on an issue: the government, the opposition, and active minorities. All three must compete to gain media traction because the average constituent either cannot, or will not, handle more than a few political issues, and the media largely decides what those issues are. One of the most important characteristics of a democracy is the fact that the government, the opposition, and active minorities all have access to the electorate via the media. For the most part, the constituent determines his electoral preference based on the few issues that the media presents to him as important, i.e., on the limited number of issues that gain media traction.

Undermining Democratic Resolve

According to Jon Western, "In nearly every instance when a president has considered using American force in overseas combat missions, intense political debates have ensued . . . and extensive efforts have been designed to mobilize public and political support."[6] A first consequence of this situation is the government's need to justify its involvement in the conflict to the electorate. Ivan

> *…the counterinsurgent must have a strategy to win the hearts and minds of the insurgent's population, and he must prevent the insurgent from discouraging his own (the counterinsurgent's) electorate.*

Arreguín-Toft holds that "one can hardly think of an example of a democratic state launching a small war it didn't claim (and its leaders and citizens did not in some real measure believe) was of vital importance to its survival; albeit via domino logic."[7] The government's problem is that it is difficult to explain to the electorate why a small conflict is of vital importance. Western writes, "Because rhetorical campaigns are such an integral part of mobilizing public and political support, there is a tendency to oversell the message. The constant temptation to manipulate and distort information frequently leads the public to develop unrealistic expectations about the nature or likely cost or efficacy of military intervention."[8]

This initial justification for the involvement in COIN becomes a de facto contract between the government and the electorate. The government must abide by this contract or pay a high political penalty. Because the most important terms of this contract are the expected duration, nature, and cost of the counterinsurgency, the insurgent can inflict a political penalty on the government by prolonging the conflict, changing the perception of its nature (e.g., from a "war of liberation" to a "war against imperialist oppression and cruelty"), and/or increasing its cost. None of these require the insurgent to attain military victory.

The second consequence of a government's decision to undertake COIN is that the political opposition can exploit the conflict for electoral gain. In a democracy, the opposition represents the electorate's alternative to the government. When both the government and the opposition agree that the country should be involved in a counterinsurgency, it is irrelevant whether part of the electorate is discouraged or not. However, when a significant part of the electorate is discouraged, and the opposition chooses to court them by being less belligerent than the government, the discouraged part of the electorate can tip the balance of power in favor of the opposition.

Political commentator Dick Morris holds that during a war, the government has to give up its political priorities and include the opposition in the government. During World War II, both the American and British Governments included members of the opposition. Indeed, "when Churchill took office, he immediately set about to include the opposition Labour Party in his government" and "President Roosevelt was similarly committed to bipartisanship as the war approached."[9] At the same time, "the WPA and other New Deal programs were discontinued, as wartime priorities displaced Roosevelt's Depression-era services."[10] Morris argues that President Lyndon Johnson's refusal to interrupt his Great Society policy and his antipathy towards the opposition were important causes of his inability to maintain public support for the Vietnam War.[11] However, the nature of counterinsurgencies in general—they can go on for more than a decade—makes it almost impossible for the government to give up its political priorities, include the opposition in the government, and abide by the contract. The insurgent can ensure this happens simply by prolonging the conflict.

If the opposition decides to exploit the counterinsurgency for electoral gain, it must present a credible alternative to the electorate. It is not enough to prove that the government has been unsuccessful; the opposition must prove to the electorate that it will do better. The electorate uses some kind of metrics to determine whether the opposition's alternative is better than the government's strategy. The pain-to-gain ratio can be such a metric. As we have seen, the government's justification for involvement in a counterinsurgency generates certain expectations about its cost, its duration, and the value of victory. The opposition's alternative must change the electorate's perceptions. If the opposition chooses to continue the counterinsurgency, it will present a strategy to decrease the pain by reducing the risks, troop levels, or military objectives. If the opposition chooses to end the counterinsurgency, it will seek to make an exit strategy politically acceptable by questioning the value of victory or the government's argument that a favorable outcome of the conflict is of vital importance for the country. Because the opposition's alternative strategy only serves electoral purposes, it does not necessarily have to make military sense.

A third consequence of a democratic government counterinsurgency is that it provides opportunities for active minorities to push their own agendas or even simply to advocate their own existence. This phenomenon is relatively new, its rapid development due to the revolution in communication technology. Computers and the Internet, cell phones, and fax

machines have enabled small, well-organized groups to gain media traction and set parts of the political agenda. The Zapatista insurgency in Mexico is an example of this. A RAND Corporation publication reported that the Zapatista-related "swarming by a large multitude of militant NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] in response to a distant upheaval—the first major case anywhere—was no anomaly. It drew on two to three decades of relatively unnoticed organizational and technological changes around the world that meant the information revolution was altering the context and conduct of social conflict. Because of this, the NGOs were able to form into highly networked, loosely coordinated, cross-border coalitions to wage an information-age social netwar that would constrain the Mexican government and assist the EZLN's [Zapatista Army of National Liberation's] cause."[12]

The insurgent now has access to the counterinsurgent's electorate via active minorities, typically well meaning groups, often based in the counterinsurgent's own country, which have no direct stake in the conflict. Lenin had a term for active intellectuals who adopted a foreign cause to challenge their own

AFP, Yuri Cortez

Supporters of the Zapatista movement and members of social organizations take part in a protest against the electoral process 2 July 2006 in Mexico City.

leaders. He called them "useful idiots." What *is* new is the greatly increased ability of these minorities to reach the counterinsurgent's electorate and affect the political agenda. Unlike the political opposition, active minorities do not offer an alternative to the government. Usually, they are opposed to the government and/or to the conflict and emphasize the counterinsurgent's cruelty, imperialistic objectives, collateral damage, and the like, less than the pain-to-gain ratio. Active minorities do not appeal to metrics, but to absolute values like self-determination and human rights. When the insurgent exploits this by providing images and information that fit the active minorities' agendas, these minorities distribute that information to the electorate.

Only rarely can the minorities unilaterally force the government from power or compel it to withdraw from the conflict. However, highly polarized interactions between the government and the minorities have news value and attract the media. The electorate soon perceives the government's strategy and the active minorities' views to be extreme positions at the opposite ends of a spectrum, thus enabling the opposition to present its strategy as a moderate alternative.

Hammes's study of the First Intifada illustrates the interactions between the government, the opposition, and active minorities. The Palestinians successfully exploited the advantages of modern communication technology and the role of each player in the democratic political game. As a result of a violent uprising in the occupied territories and a moderate political message in the Israeli and international media, "liberal and secular elements of the Israeli society were deeply disturbed. . . . Israel was an oppressor of an occupied area. They began to question the value of the occupation. In the end, the Palestinian message to Israeli voters got through. They believed there could never be peace until the Palestinians had their own country. The problems were in the occupied territories, not in Israel proper. Their long-term resistance caused a rift in the Likud over what tactics to employ against the Palestinians. The result was the election of a Labor government, which then agreed to and conducted the Oslo negotiations."[13] This example shows how democracies are vulnerable to attacks on their resolve and how insurgents can exploit that vulnerability.

Palestinian demonstrators hurl rocks and bottles at Israeli troops during the Palestinian uprising in Nablus, Occupied West Bank, on 13 December 1987.

The Divisiveness of COIN

The burden is not distributed equally in a nation engaged in counterinsurgency. Most insurgencies are "small wars," which usually means that only the armed forces and colonizers take part in them. (Colonizers are the members of the counterinsurgent's electorate who live among the insurgent's population. They are typically a small minority of the counterinsurgent's electorate, e.g., Israeli colonists in the occupied territories.)

There are two distinctions between the armed forces and the colonizers on the one hand and the rest of the electorate on the other. First, the soldiers' and colonizers' investment is considerably higher than that of the rest of the electorate. Soldiers endure long separation from their families, suffer wounds, lose friends in combat, and see their marriages end in divorce. Having invested so much, they develop a huge stake in the outcome. Colonizers endure all these hardships and more. Because they live in hostile territory, their livelihoods and the survival of their families depend on the outcome of the conflict. Their personal investment in the counterinsurgency can make the idea of defeat unbearable to them.

The second distinction, really a corollary of the first, is that the electorate's resolve typically decreases over time, while the resolve of the armed forces and the colonizers increases. Frustration is the most likely result of the growing "resolve gap" between the soldiers and colonizers and the electorate. Although soldiers and colonizers get better and better at counterinsurgency, military success matters less and less. The difference between tactical victory and defeat becomes blurred. Frustration increases because the real fight revolves around what the counterinsurgent's electorate thinks. The constituent does not compare the insurgent's tactical performance with that of the counterinsurgent; instead, he compares his expectations with the "realities" presented by the media. For the constituent, tactical successes should push the conflict closer to termination. As a consequence of the human tendency to think in linear terms, the constituent expects that "getting closer to termination" will bring a gradual decrease in violence. If there is little change in the number of violent incidents, whether the military outcome is tactical victory or defeat almost does not matter: the constituent concludes that "realities" do not fit his expectations and becomes frustrated.

Adding to the overall motivational problem is the fact that soldiers and colonizers represent only a small part of the electorate; therefore, politicians typically care less about their opinions than those of the electorate back home, even though soldiers and colonizers contribute much more to the COIN effort. This adds considerably to the latter's frustration.

Military coups d'etat, political assassinations, and deeply scarred armed forces are but a few dramatic examples of the effects of "resolve gap" frustration on democracies. In 1958, the French electorate's opposition to the war in Algeria grew to the point that the colonizers and army feared that President Charles de Gaulle would capitulate to the insurgents; in May 1958, they united and attempted to seize power.[14] In 1995, a Jewish extremist who opposed giving up colonies in the occupied territories assassinated the Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin. As part of its legacy, the Vietnam War left the American military largely demoralized.

Keys to Maintaining Resolve

A discouraged electorate can be devastating for the democratic counterinsurgent, akin to destruction of his armed forces. The counterinsurgent must have a strategy to prevent this from happening. However, the three steps that might preclude such discouragement are impossible to take. The counterinsurgent cannot start a war without justifying it to his electorate; he cannot include the opposition in the government and abandon the government's

political priorities for the entire duration of the war; and he cannot curtail the activities of the active minorities that oppose the counterinsurgency.

According to Max Boot, it is possible to fight "wars without significant popular support."[15] Boot argues that "mass mobilization of public opinion is needed for big wars, especially those like Vietnam that call on legions of conscripts. It is much less necessary when a relatively small number of professional soldiers are dispatched to some trouble spot. This has been especially true of marines. Whereas the presence of the army signaled to American and world opinion that a war was in progress, the marines were known as State Department troops and landed with little public fuss."[16]

Thus, the key to maintaining resolve and preventing the insurgent from discouraging the electorate is to ensure that the conflict loses media traction. In theory, this is possible because the great majority of the electorate cannot or will not handle more than a few political issues at a time. If the media considers other issues more important than the counterinsurgency, then the problem is solved: issues dominate public attention, the counterinsurgency disappears from the political agenda, the electorate slips into indifference, and the government can sustain its resolve indefinitely. Of course, this scenario runs counter to the usual government reaction when popular support for the conflict decreases which is to start a media campaign to promote the counterinsurgency.

To substantiate the thesis of this article—that to maintain resolve, the counterinsurgent should seek to submerge the conflict rather than increase public support for it—it is first necessary to explain why promoting a counterinsurgency is a bad strategy.

A media campaign's basic weakness is that it reacts to, rather than anticipates, decreased popular support. As aforementioned, governments typically put themselves in the reaction mode by overselling their initial justification for action and hyping the public's expectations. To renew public support for the counterinsurgency, the government must then find new good reasons to continue the war and a new strategy for victory. The insurgent has to do nothing. The government's ensuing media campaign will temporarily increase public support, but it will also stimulate a new set of public expectations. The insurgent can react to these new expectations by carefully timing his actions to frustrate them.

A good example of this was the launch of the Tet Offensive by the Vietcong two months after U.S. Army General William Westmoreland declared that "we have reached an important point when the end begins to come into view. I am absolutely certain that the enemy . . . is losing."[17] President Johnson's withdrawal from the presidential race after the Tet Offensive demonstrated the political effectiveness of well-timed insurgent actions in response to a media campaign for renewed public support.

Another major problem with such campaigns is that they keep the conflict prominently in the media. By conducting an offensive on media terrain to increase public support, the government exposes its flanks: the first flank to the insurgent, as described above, and the second flank to the opposition and to active minorities who have easy access to the public and can challenge the government's conduct of the counterinsurgency. Moreover, the bad effects seem to multiply, because if the initial success of such campaigns cannot be sustained, each successive campaign will be less effective than the previous one.

Assuming that it is better to foster indifference about a counterinsurgency than to increase public support for it, the questions then become: Is it feasible to create indifference, and if so, how does one do it? Based on experience, we can conclude that it is feasible to stimulate indifference. Referring to the counterinsurgency in El Salvador, Paul Cale claims that "during the build up in the early 1980s, the fear of 'another Vietnam' and American 'expansionism' dominated the news. By the end of the 1980s, the crisis in El Salvador was rarely reported on the evening news."[18]

The second question requires more analysis. The counterinsurgency must disappear from the news headlines, but it is impossible to start a counterinsurgency in a democracy without a political debate that attracts the attention of the media, the opposition, and the active minorities. Whether the issue remains in the media depends on its cost, its duration, and the occurrence of events with high news value, such as spectacular insurgent or counterinsurgent actions, human rights violations, or collateral damage. Again, the counterinsurgency in El Salvador provides valuable insights in the ways to push such a conflict out of the media.

A counterinsurgency's costs include money and casualties. The best way to keep these costs down

is to reduce the number of deployed troops. Fewer troops cost less to deploy and limit the number of soldiers put in harm's way. In El Salvador, the number of troops committed was extremely low—it was limited by statute to 55.[19] Surprisingly, the people directly involved considered that "the 55-man limit may have been the best thing that happened to the [Salvadoran Armed Forces] during the 1980s."[20] It forced everyone involved to be very creative. For example, with so few Soldiers, the United States could not attempt to impose stability, the rule of law, or democracy; it had to stimulate progress in these areas by offering financial incentives to local authorities for compliance.

The 55-man limit also meant that many COIN activities, such as the training of thousands of Salvadoran soldiers, had to take place outside of El Salvador, thus putting the activities beyond insurgent reach. Additionally, because the U.S. trainers of those soldiers never deployed to El Salvador, they were never targets—either of the insurgency or of the active minorities in the United States.

Another consequence of the limited number of boots on the ground was that the environment was unsafe for journalists. Given that heroes are in short supply in every profession, it is logical that journalists prefer to report on missing American girls in Aruba rather than on a counterinsurgency in a country where they risk injury or death. Although human rights violations, spectacular action, and collateral damage did occur in El Salvador, it was difficult for those journalists who did report on the war to blame them on American Soldiers, since there were so few American Soldiers in El Salvador.

The El Salvador experience also suggests that it is probably easier to teach respect for human rights and humane conduct to poorly trained soldiers who know the language, culture, and terrain of another country than it is to teach the language, culture, and terrain of another country to humane and competent soldiers. More important, it is not only easier to do this, but more sustainable. The United States helped conduct a successful counterinsurgency in El Salvador for more than a decade. Initial insurgent attempts to undermine American resolve were unsuccessful and subsequently abandoned.[21]

Recent history supports Boot's statement that it is possible to wage wars without significant popular support if you keep the number of soldiers small

and there is "little public fuss."[22] American troops have remained in the Balkans and in Colombia for many years with few complaints from the American public. This is not a result of active media campaigns to support these operations. On the contrary, it shows that maintaining a low profile is one way to protect national resolve.

Conclusion

The analysis above shows that when a nation participates in COIN, it is feasible—and necessary—that the nation consider ways to protect its public's resolve from calculated undermining. The U.S. experience in El Salvador shows that one basic rule works best: reduce the military presence on the insurgent's territory to the absolute bare minimum. The best way to win a counterinsurgency is not to put more boots on the ground, but to deploy a politically sustainable number of soldiers there and use them more creatively. In short, when the counterinsurgent is a democracy, a limited military capability that is too small to attract media attention can be more sustainable and, hence, more successful than a large military capability, which can be constantly exploited for political gain. *MR*

NOTES

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 75; Jon Western, *Selling Intervention and War: The Presidency, the Media, and the American Public* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 4.
2. Jack D. Kem, *Campaign Planning: Tools of the Trade* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2005), 19-23.
3. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (St. Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 2005), 75.
4. Thomas X. Hammes, *Insurgency: Modern Warfare Evolves into a Fourth Generation* (Washington, DC: INSS Strategic Forum No. 214, January 2005), 6.
5. Galula, 75.
6. Western, 4.
7. Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 16.
8. Western, 232.
9. Dick Morris, *Win or Lose-How History's Great Political Leaders play the Game* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), 310.
10. Ibid., 305.
11. Ibid., 305-307.
12. David F. Ronfeldt, John Arquilla, Graham E. Fuller, and Melissa Fuller, *The Zapatista Social Netwar in Mexico* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1998), <www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR994/>.
13. Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2004), 108.
14. Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (London & New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 281-95.
15. Max Boot, *Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 340.
16. Ibid., 341.
17. Spencer Tucker, *Vietnam* (London: UCL Press, 1999), 136.
18. Major Paul P. Cale, "The United States Military Advisory Group in El Salvador, 1979-1992," *Small Wars Journal,* 1996, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/reference/elsalvador.php>.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Boot, 341.