



Counter-insurgency *Redux*

David Kilcullen

To cite this article: David Kilcullen (2006) Counter-insurgency *Redux* , Survival, 48:4, 111-130, DOI: [10.1080/00396330601062790](https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330601062790)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330601062790>



Published online: 30 Nov 2006.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 20635



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 20 View citing articles [↗](#)

Counter-insurgency *Redux*

David Kilcullen

Counter-insurgency is fashionable again: more has been written on it in the last four years than in the last four decades. This is heartening for those who were in the wilderness during the years when Western governments regarded counter-insurgency as a distraction, of interest only to historians. So it is no surprise that some have urged the re-discovery of classical, ‘proven’ counter-insurgency methods.¹

But some of this enthusiasm may be misplaced. Today’s insurgencies differ significantly – at the level of policy, strategy, operational art and tactical technique – from those of earlier eras. An enormous amount of classical counter-insurgency remains relevant. Indeed, counter-insurgency provides the ‘best fit’ framework for strategic problems in the ‘war on terror’.² But much is new in counter-insurgency *redux*, possibly requiring fundamental re-appraisals of conventional wisdom.

The term ‘classical counter-insurgency’ describes the theory of counter-revolutionary warfare developed in response to the so-called wars of national liberation from 1944 to about 1980.³ The term ‘counter-insurgency’ was invented in this period, which produced a canon of works now regarded as classics (and listed as such in the latest US counter-insurgency manual).⁴ Key theorists included David Galula, Robert Thompson, Frank Kitson, Bernard Fall, Mao Zedong, Che Guevara and Vo Nguyen Giap. These classics still colour the modern view of earlier theorists like T.E. Lawrence, Louis Lyautey and C.E. Callwell (whose works are often seen through the lens of 1960s counter-insurgency). Classical counter-insurgency thus constitutes a dominant paradigm through which practitioners approach today’s conflicts – often via the prescriptive application of ‘received wisdom’ derived by exegesis from the classics. The 1960s theorists

David Kilcullen is Chief Strategist in the Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, The State Department, Washington DC. This paper represents his personal views only.

cast a long shadow, but current field experience seems to indicate their 'classic' version of counter-insurgency is less relevant for current conflicts.⁵

The concept of '*counter-insurgency*' is logically contingent on that of '*insurgency*'. Counter-insurgency is 'all measures adopted to suppress an insurgency'.⁶ Thus, the nature of counter-insurgency is not fixed, but shifting; it evolves in response to changes in insurgency. There is no constant set of operational techniques in counter-insurgency; rather, this is a form of '*counter-warfare*'⁷ that applies all elements of national power against insurrection. As insurrection changes, so does counter-insurgency. Hence, to understand modern counter-insurgency one must first understand modern insurgency.

Insurgency is a struggle to control a contested political space, between a state (or group of states or occupying powers), and one or more popularly based, non-state challengers.⁸ Therefore changes in the state, its functions as an independent polity or member of a regional community, or in the international system, change the nature of insurgency. History shows that insurgents rarely overthrow nation-states, but when they do there are usually world-historical consequences.⁹ Thus, to understand insurgency we must understand the state system insurgents are attacking.

Contemporary insurgency

Classical counter-insurgency theory posits an insurgent challenger to a functioning (though often fragile) state. The insurgent challenges the status quo; the counter-insurgent seeks to reinforce the state and so defeat the internal threat. This applies to some modern insurgencies – Thailand, Sri Lanka and Colombia are examples. But in other cases, insurgency today follows state failure, and is not directed at taking over a functioning body politic, but at dismembering or scavenging its carcass, or contesting an '*ungoverned space*'. Chechnya, Somalia and East Timor are examples. In other cases, like Afghanistan, the insurgent movement pre-dates the government. This situation is covered in works on colonial small wars¹⁰ but not emphasised in classical 1960s counter-insurgency theory.

Similarly, in classical theory, the insurgent initiates. Thus, Galula asserts that 'whereas in conventional war, either side can initiate the conflict, only one – the insurgent – can initiate a revolutionary war, for counter-insurgency is only an effect of insurgency'.¹¹ Classical theorists therefore emphasise the problem of recognising insurgency early. Thompson observes that 'at the first signs of an incipient insurgency ... no one likes to admit that anything is going wrong. This automatically leads to a situation where government countermeasures are too little and too late.'¹² But, in several modern campaigns – Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Chechnya, for example – the government or invading coalition

forces initiated the campaign, whereas insurgents are strategically reactive (as in 'resistance warfare'). Such patterns are readily recognisable in historical examples of resistance warfare, but less so in classical counter-insurgency theory.¹³

Politically, in many cases today, the counter-insurgent represents revolutionary change, while the insurgent fights to preserve the status quo of ungoverned spaces, or to repel an occupier – a political relationship opposite to that envisaged in classical counter-insurgency. Pakistan's campaign in Waziristan since 2003 exemplifies this. The enemy includes al-Qaeda-linked extremists and Taliban, but also local tribesmen fighting to preserve their traditional culture against twenty-first-century encroachment.¹⁴ The problem of weaning these fighters away from extremist sponsors, while simultaneously supporting modernisation, does somewhat resemble pacification in traditional counter-insurgency. But it also echoes colonial campaigns, and includes entirely new elements arising from the effects of globalisation.¹⁵

In many cases the insurgent fights to preserve the status quo

One of the most significant 'globalisation effects' is the rise of a worldwide audience, giving insurgents near-instantaneous means to publicise their cause. Globalised Internet communication also enables moral, financial and personnel support, creating a strategic hinterland or 'virtual sanctuary' for insurgents. Classical theory deals with 'active' and 'passive' sanctuaries, methods to quarantine such sanctuaries and their effects on insurgent performance.¹⁶ But it treats sanctuary as primarily a geographical space in which insurgents regroup or receive external support. Today's Internet-based virtual sanctuary is beyond the reach of counter-insurgent forces or neighbouring governments, and its effects are difficult to quarantine. Insurgents in Iraq are adept at exploiting global media effects, while the 'Global Islamic Media Front' (*al-Jabhah al-'ilamiyah al-islamiyah al-'alamiyah*) and al-Qaeda's *as-Sahab* media production arm have achieved new heights of professionalism.¹⁷ Internet-based financial transfers, training and recruitment, clandestine communication, planning and intelligence capabilities allow insurgents to exploit virtual sanctuary for more than just propaganda. Classical counter-insurgency theory has little to say about such electronic sanctuary.

As Oxford's Audrey Cronin convincingly argues, cyber-mobilisation or 'electronic *levée en masse*' is a major new factor. 'Individually accessible, ordinary networked communications such as personal computers, DVDs, videotapes, and cell phones are altering the nature of human social interaction, thus also affecting the shape and outcome of domestic and international conflict',¹⁸ she observes, noting that

the Internet is utterly intertwined with the insurgency in Iraq, for example. Insurgent attacks are regularly followed with postings of operational details, claims of responsibility, and tips for tactical success. Those who use insurgent chat rooms are often monitored by the hosts and, if they seem amenable to recruitment, contacted via email. Insurgent sites contain everything from practical information for traveling to Iraq to morale boosters for those currently involved in the struggle. Videos of killings by the 'Baghdad Sniper' or 'Juba', who is claimed to have killed 143 American soldiers and injured 54, are posted on the web. Cyber-mobilization already has changed the character of war, making it much harder for the United States to win in Iraq, and it has the potential to culminate in further interstate war in the 21st century.¹⁹

The transnational character of modern insurgency is also new. Classical-era insurgents copied each other (for example, the Algerian FLN copied the Viet Minh, and EOKA in Cyprus copied the Jewish Irgun Zvai Leumi).²⁰ But each movement operated in its own country, emulation typically happened after the event, and direct cooperation between movements was rare. Thus classical theory typically regards insurgency as something that occurs within one country or district, between an internal non-state actor and a single government.²¹ This is reflected in official definitions of insurgency.²² By contrast, in the field today we see real-time cooperation and cross-pollination among insurgents in many countries.²³ Ayman al-Zawahiri has referred to a four-stage strategy in Iraq, involving expulsion of US forces, creation of an Islamic Emirate in Sunni areas, its extension to neighbouring countries and then attacks on Israel.²⁴ This goes far beyond classical single-state insurgent goals. Al-Qaeda operatives pass messages between and among Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq.²⁵ Improvised explosive devices that first appear in Chechnya proliferate to Iraq and Afghanistan. Iranian improvised-explosive technology appears in Iraq,²⁶ and Pakistani extremists operate in Afghanistan.²⁷ Insurgents in Iraq mount operations in response to events in Lebanon, and conduct attacks in Jordan.²⁸ Southeast Asian insurgents apply methods developed in the Middle East, which circulate via the Internet or on CD-ROMs.²⁹ This transnational pattern is part of a deliberate al-Qaeda strategy, but there is evidence that non-al-Qaeda groups are also noting and copying these methods.³⁰

Modern insurgent strategy – being, not doing

Classical theory describes insurgent movements as seeking to gain control of the state, or a portion of it. Galula asserts flatly that 'the conflict arises from

the action of the insurgent aiming to seize power – or at splitting off from the existing country'.³¹ This was arguably appropriate for twentieth-century revolutionary and separatist movements.³²

But the intent to replace existing governments or create independent states is only partly evident today. For example, in Iraq multiple groups are seeking to paralyse and fragment the state, rather than to gain control of its apparatus and govern. Insurgents favour strategies of provocation (to undermine support for the coalition) and exhaustion (to convince the coalition to leave Iraq) rather than displacement of the government. This is a 'resistance' insurgency rather than a 'revolutionary' insurgency.³³ Insurgents want to destroy the Iraqi state, not secede from it or supplant it. As Anthony Cordesman pointed out in March 2006, the

insurgency has not been able to ... establish sanctuaries, win larger-scale military clashes, or dominate the field ... Much of its activity consists of bombings of soft civilian targets designed largely to provoke a more intense civil war or halt the development of an effective Iraqi government, rather than progress towards control at even the local level ... Provoking civil war and undermining the Iraqi political process may not bring the insurgents victory, but it can deny it to the Iraqi government and the US.³⁴

Similarly, Afghan insurgents act as 'strategic spoilers', seeking to discredit and undermine the government by targeting coalition forces, officials and President Hamid Karzai's support base in the Durrani tribal confederation. Again, there is no apparent strategy to seize the instruments of the state. The insurgents seek to expel foreigners, but have little to say about what might replace the national government.³⁵

Indeed, some modern insurgents lack any unified strategy, compared to classical insurgents. As Jeffrey Record and Andrew Terrill noted in 2004,

In Vietnam, the Communists waged a classic, peasant-based, centrally directed, three-stage, Maoist model insurgency, culminating in a conventional military victory. The Communists also had a clear and well-publicized political, economic, and social agenda. In Iraq, small, scattered, and disparate groups wage a much smaller-scale war of ambushes, assassinations, car bombings, and sabotage against U.S. and other coalition forces and reconstruction targets, including Iraqis collaborating with coalition forces. Nor do the insurgents have an explicit set of war aims.³⁶

This lack of a practical strategy in the Iraqi and Afghan insurgencies is reflected in the absence of guerrilla counter-government, a feature of classical counter-

insurgency.³⁷ ‘Local Taliban’ in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas have acted against local criminals and sought to impose law and order in a limited fashion.³⁸ Some Iraqi groups have rudimentary local administrative systems to intimidate the population.³⁹ But there has been little attempt to create permanent liberated areas, raise taxes, regulate daily life or control social interaction, as would be expected if insurgents were trying to replicate the ‘state capabilities’ identified by Joel Migdal.⁴⁰ Analysts have used Migdal’s model to map the effectiveness of insurgents as shadow governments.⁴¹ But the parallel hierarchies⁴² of classical counter-insurgency are largely absent today.

Classical counter-insurgency also tends to assume a binary struggle between insurgent and counter-insurgent.⁴³ In reality, classical-era insurgencies such as Algeria and Indochina involved multiple insurgent movements, and most immature insurgencies include numerous factions, though this complexity was often not reflected in classical writings. But insurgencies today remain multilateral even in their mature state, incorporating many diffuse, competing insurgent movements. In contrast to revolutionary war theory, these conflicts lack a ‘united front’. Rather, dozens of competing groups pursue their own, frequently conflicting agenda. Field experience from Iraq suggests that it may be harder, not easier, to defeat such a complex, inchoate and disorganised swarm of opponents.⁴⁴

The PROVN study,⁴⁵ a masterpiece of best-practice traditional counter-insurgency, argued that a sustainable, independent, democratic state was the American object in the Vietnam War.⁴⁶ Similar perspectives led theorists to describe insurgency as a ‘struggle for legitimacy’⁴⁷ or ‘competition for government’.⁴⁸ Fall expressed this succinctly in 1965, arguing that a government which is losing to an insurgency ‘is not being outfought; it is being out-administered’.⁴⁹ The same view is expressed in the latest US counter-insurgency manual.⁵⁰

The religious ideology of some modern insurgents creates a different dynamic

But this assumes the insurgent has real-world objectives, and a practicable strategy that can be defeated by denying these objectives. The religious ideology of some modern insurgents creates a different dynamic. Particularly in al-Qaeda-linked insurgencies, the insurgent may not seek to

do or achieve any practical objective, but rather to *be* a *mujahid*, earning God’s favour (and hope of ultimate victory through his intervention) through the act itself. Osama bin Laden alluded to this in an October 2001 interview with al-Jazeera journalist Tayseer Alouni:

[Alouni]: ...How can al Qaeda defeat America militarily?

Bin Laden: This battle is not between al Qaeda and the U.S. This is a battle of Muslims against the global crusaders ... God, who provided us with his support and kept us steadfast until the Soviet Union was defeated, is able to provide us once more with his support to defeat America on the same land and with the same people. We believe that the defeat of America is possible, with the help of God, and is even easier for us, God permitting, than the defeat of the Soviet Union was before ... Remember the saying, 'If they want to exile you, they can't exile you unless it is written by God'.⁵¹

Insurgent operational art – the self-synchronising swarm

At the operational level, there are many similarities between today's insurgents and those of the classical era. Insurgencies remain popular uprisings that grow from, and are conducted through, pre-existing social networks (village, tribe, family, neighbourhood, political or religious party).⁵² Insurgent operational art remains fundamentally a matter of aggregating dispersed tactical actions by small groups and individuals, and orchestrating their effects into a strategically significant campaign sequence. Similarly, the operational art of counter-insurgency remains fundamentally concerned with displacing enemy influence from social networks, supplanting insurgent support within the population, and manoeuvring to marginalise the enemy and deny them a popular base. Thus, at the operational level counter-insurgency remains a competition among several sides, each seeking to mobilise the population in its cause. The people remain the prize.

But today's environment ensures that this operational art develops differently than in the past. Modern insurgents operate more like a self-synchronising swarm of independent but cooperating cells than like a formal organisation. Even the fashionable cybernetic discourse of 'networks' and 'nodes'⁵³ often implies more structure than exists.

Classical theorists considered the aggregated effect of many small incidents – the 'war of the flea' – as the key driver even while recognising the impact of well-publicised incidents.⁵⁴ By contrast, modern communications compress the operational level of war, so that almost any tactical action can have immediate strategic impact. This makes counter-insurgency more unpredictable and even less linear, rendering statistical trends⁵⁵ less important as an operational driver than the 'single narrative' of public perception. Again, this factor was accounted for in classical theory but 'globalisation effects' have dramatically increased its influence.

The term 'strategic corporal'⁵⁶ was coined to illustrate this, but media penetration has created strategic privates (like Lynndie England, 'whose smiling poses in photos of detainee abuse at Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison made her the face of the scandal'),⁵⁷ strategic marines (like the marine who killed a wounded Iraqi in a mosque during the second battle of Fallujah)⁵⁸ and strategic civilians (like the Blackwater contractors whose murder sparked the first battle of Fallujah).⁵⁹ The contractors' deaths provoked political intervention that forced the operational commander to abandon a well-developed campaign plan and instead pursue, then precipitately abandon, a set-piece urban battle.⁶⁰ This contributed to a strategic shift in the insurgency, although the roots of the crisis lay deeper.⁶¹ More generally, given pervasive media presence, the demeanour of a single soldier or official instantaneously communicates more about the state of a campaign than any public information operation.

Media-driven political interference, of course, featured in classical counter-insurgencies.⁶² And historical experience starkly illustrated the influence of mass media.⁶³ But media penetration has reached unprecedented levels, largely through the emergence of *insurgent* mass media,⁶⁴ with every incident in Iraq,⁶⁵ and many in Afghanistan, Palestine and Chechnya,⁶⁶ being recorded for propaganda purposes by insurgent video teams. Political leaders' involvement is entirely valid given the importance of home-front morale as a success factor in counter-insurgency. Educating these leaders, and proactively controlling 'spin' from incidents, is now central to the operational art in counter-insurgency. Hence, most coalition operations in Iraq and Afghanistan now routinely include embedded video teams to record events.⁶⁷

A key component of insurgent operational art in classical revolutionary warfare was the creation of local, regional and main force components able to transition from defensive to offensive and, ultimately, decisive operations.⁶⁸ Theorists like Mao and Giap spent considerable effort on the operational development of insurgent forces, treating the transitions between developmental 'stages' as key campaign milestones.⁶⁹ Classical counter-insurgency therefore emphasised the creation of a range of security forces to counter local, regional and main force insurgents and cadres.⁷⁰

By contrast, today's insurgents often employ diffuse, cell-based structures resembling 'leaderless resistance'.⁷¹ This generates far less organisational superstructure than in classical movements. Such methods were recognised in traditional counter-insurgency – 'focoist' guerrillas⁷² used this system, and the Irish Republican Army developed a cell structure based on 'Active Service Units'.⁷³ But today's movements apply this approach on an immense scale, creating mass movements without mass organisation and rendering classical

countermeasures ineffective. For example, the *Phoenix* programme targeted a stable and well-developed Viet Cong infrastructure. No equivalent exists in Iraq or Afghanistan, where independent cells and micro-movements cooperate in constantly shifting alliances of convenience.⁷⁴ So *Phoenix*-style operations might have benefits in eliminating tactical 'players', but have less operational impact than the original programme. Moreover, in Iraq (a community-based insurgency) or Afghanistan (a tribally based insurgency), the blood feuds and community alienation arising from this would be more severe than in Vietnam, where professional party cadres (often from other districts) were key targets.

Logistically, classical insurgency assumes that the insurgents live off the population and resupply themselves from their opponents. Thus, the 1954 *Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya* states that 'the most important factor in destroying the [Communist Terrorist] is to complete his isolation from the rest of the community. He must get no money, no food or clothing; no help of any sort.'⁷⁵ The key operational concept of the Malayan Emergency – the Briggs Plan – was designed to achieve precisely this,⁷⁶ and similar efforts occurred in most other classical counter-insurgencies.

But the economic relationship between insurgents and the population is exactly the opposite in some modern insurgencies. For example, in Iraq the insurgents' primary funding sources in 2004 were courier infiltration and access to buried caches.⁷⁷ The insurgents were wealthier than the population, and routinely paid poverty-stricken locals to conduct attacks for cash.⁷⁸ Thus, efforts to isolate the insurgents (intended, based on classical theory, to hurt the guerrillas and protect the population) had precisely the opposite effect, starving and thus alienating the population, while leaving the insurgents largely unaffected.⁷⁹ Donations from abroad also provide funds for insurgents: the emphasis on videotaping attacks is intended precisely for sponsorship and fund-raising purposes. In Afghanistan narcotics, corruption and extortion also provide funds. Thus, the economic and logistics base of modern insurgency may be very different from classical theory.

Insurgent tactics – the urban bomb

At the tactical level, one obvious feature of today's campaigns is their urbanised quality. Classical theory treats insurgency as primarily rural – urban insurgency is usually considered a supporting action (as in Vietnam, Malaya or the Irish Civil War) or ultimately futile (as in some Latin American cases). Classical insurgencies actually included several campaigns with urban components, such as Aden, Algeria, Cyprus and Palestine. But these also had significant, and ultimately dominant, rural components. The reason was straightforward:

insurgents must hide to survive, and in classical-era insurgencies in 'colonial or independent under-developed territories'⁸⁰ concealment was better in rural areas.

But this is often not so today, as is apparent when flying in Afghanistan or Iraq. Cover and concealment are far greater in the urban jungle of Baghdad, with its no-go areas and sectarian slums, than in the open desert outside the Tigris and Euphrates valleys. Incidents in Iraq cluster in urban centres or areas of suburban sprawl around Iraq's major cities.⁸¹ The insurgent, as in classical theory, continues to hide amongst the population. But in urbanised societies (like Iraq) or countries with under-populated mountains, deserts and forests (like Afghanistan), the cover is in the cities.

Media presence is greatest in cities

This has significant tactical implications: engagements are short range and fleeting as in traditional insurgencies, but bystanders are now always present and cleverly exploited by insurgents. Media presence is greatest in cities, fuelling propaganda-based tactics that target the population to generate shock and provoke sectarian unrest. Traditional counter-insurgency methods like fencing villages, cordon and search, curfews and food control (accepted as routine in Malaya) have drawn sharp criticism in Iraq and Afghanistan because of the enhanced disruption they cause in urban neighbourhoods, combined with the negative propaganda effect of enhanced media coverage.⁸²

Internet, mobile-phone and television coverage (most houses in Iraqi cities have at least one satellite dish, for example⁸³) enables web- and mobile-phone-based coordination, changing insurgent tactics and countermeasures. Underground newspapers, pirate radio stations and posters still matter in places like the North West Frontier, which lacks the Internet coverage and urbanised population of Iraq.⁸⁴ But perception management is vastly more complex when the population has instantaneous access to media broadcasts intended for third-nation audiences.⁸⁵

Modern insurgent tactics centre on the urban bomb and its exploitation for propaganda and intimidation purposes, rather than the more traditional rural ambush. Improvised explosive devices, particularly suicide bombs, generate 'good copy' for insurgents and encourage sponsorship from supporters. They also overcome the 'lethality self-limit' of classical insurgents, whose rifle-based tactics meant that they had to field more fighters, and risk more casualties, to generate greater lethality.⁸⁶ The Irish Republican Army developed this approach 20 years ago, but unlike Northern Ireland (where acquisition, storage, transport and caching of explosives were so difficult that insurgent quartermasters were key players⁸⁷), theatres like Iraq are awash with military-grade ordnance.

This has forced changes in counter-insurgent tactics – particularly for patrolling. In classical counter-insurgency, patrolling is a key tactic designed to dominate an area, reassure and protect the population, disrupt insurgents and gather intelligence. But improvised explosive devices have forced patrols (and private security details)⁸⁸ to move down the centre-line of roadways, disrupting traffic and alienating the population. And attacks on patrols usually cause civilian casualties, making locals wary of foot patrols and frightened to be near them. Far from finding ‘presence patrols’ reassuring, the population finds them alienating and a source of danger.⁸⁹ The intelligence value of patrols is reduced, along with their ability to disrupt insurgents. Emplacement of snipers overlooking likely bomb sites, employment of informant networks and targeted raids have proven more effective than classical-style patrolling in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus the purpose of patrolling remains valid, but classical patrol tactics may require substantial modification.

New counter-insurgency paradigms

It is dangerous to be prescriptive, since the latest cycle of counter-insurgencies is just beginning, and there is undoubtedly more adaptation ahead. But, fortunately or not, we have at our disposal a continuous live experiment, enabling us to validate tentative hypotheses in the field. What follows is a series of preliminary judgements to be refined as events disprove them. They are presented in a spirit of open inquiry, not as firm conclusions.

In modern counter-insurgency, the side may win which best mobilises and energises its global, regional and local support base – and prevents its adversaries doing likewise. Most fundamentally, we might reconsider the classical conception of counter-insurgency as a competition for legitimate government, seeing it instead as a competition to mobilise, interpreted in the broadest sense. Modern insurgents may not seek to seize government, relying instead on their ability to mobilise sympathisers within a global audience and generate local support. Thus local government legitimacy may be a secondary factor. Likewise, the counter-insurgent must mobilise the home population, the host country, the global audience, the populations of allied and neutral countries, and the military and government agencies involved. Success may be less about local legitimacy and more about the ability to energise and mobilise support, and to deny energy and mobility to the enemy’s support base.

In modern counter-insurgency, the security force ‘area of influence’ may need to include all neighbouring countries, and its ‘area of interest’ may need to be global. The classical single-state paradigm for counter-insurgency may no longer apply, since insurgents operate across boundaries and exploit a global ‘virtual

sanctuary'. Legal and political considerations will probably prevent military activity outside a single-country 'area of operations'. But border security, money transfers, ungoverned areas, ethnic minorities, refugees and media in neighbouring states may all play key operational roles for the insurgent – hence the counter-insurgent must be able to influence them. Similarly, the insurgents' propaganda audience, funds, recruits and support may be global. So the counter-insurgent's parent government must work globally to counter propaganda and disrupt funding and recruiting. The people remain the prize, but comprise a global audience rather than a local citizenry. This implies a vastly increased role for diplomacy, global intelligence liaison and information operations.

In modern counter-insurgency, the security force must control a complex 'conflict ecosystem' – rather than defeating a single specific insurgent adversary. Classical counter-insurgency focuses on securing the population rather than on destroying the enemy. But it still fundamentally views the conflict as a binary struggle between one insurgent (or confederation) and one counter-insurgent (or coalition). Modern insurgencies belie this binary approach, since there are often multiple competing insurgent forces fighting each other as well as the government, and the 'supported' government's interests may differ in key respects from those of its allies. Hence, we might conceive of the environment as a 'conflict ecosystem' with multiple competing entities seeking to maximise their survivability and influence. The counter-insurgent's task may no longer be to defeat the insurgent, but rather to impose order (to the degree possible) on an unstable and chaotic environment.

In modern counter-insurgency a common diagnosis of the problem, and enablers for collaboration, may matter more than formal unity of effort across multiple agencies. A key principle of classical counter-insurgency is unity of effort – unified control of all elements of power, vertically from local to national level, and horizontally between districts. Even this is a watered-down version of the military's preferred 'unity of command'. But today, international aid organisations, global media, non-government organisations and religious leaders are critical for success, yet outside the counter-insurgent's control. Many of these entities will not accept direction, but can deny success unless collaboration is achieved. Since command requires control, 'unity of effort' (let alone 'unity of command') may be unworkable in this environment. Luckily, international relief organisations have developed collaboration and information-sharing tools, designed to build a common diagnosis of 'complex emergencies', enabling collaboration in precisely this situation.⁹⁰ A similar approach may work for modern counter-insurgency.

Modern counter-insurgency may be 100% political – comprehensive media coverage making even the most straightforward combat action a ‘political warfare’ engagement.

General Gerald Templer famously asserted that ‘the shooting side of this business is only 25 per cent of the trouble’,⁹¹ while Galula described counter-insurgency as ‘80% political, 20% military’.⁹² This certainly remains relevant to modern counter-insurgency in the sense that non-military elements of national power remain decisive, though less well resourced than military elements. But it could be misinterpreted as implying that some issues remain outside political leaders’ purview and subject to conventional norms of combat. In modern counter-insurgencies, this may not be so. Given pervasive media presence and near-instantaneous propaganda exploitation of all combat action, counter-insurgency may now be 100% political. Commanders, even at the lowest tactical level in the most straightforward combat action, may need to conceive of their task as a form of ‘political warfare’ in which perception and political outcomes matter more than battlefield success. Counter-insurgency specialists already understand this, but broadening it to conventional units and ‘big army’ commanders would be a true paradigm shift.

*Perception
and political
outcomes
matter
more than
battlefield
success*

In modern counter-insurgency, ‘victory’ may not be final – ‘permanent containment’ may be needed to prevent defeated insurgents transforming into terrorist groups. Classical counter-insurgency defines victory as military defeat of the insurgents, destruction of their political organisation, and their marginalisation from the population.⁹³ Typically, destruction of insurgent remnants takes decades, but once permanently marginalised they are no longer considered a threat.⁹⁴ Yet this may no longer apply to modern counter-insurgency, in which cell-based organisations, bomb-based tactics, global communications and improved lethality make it easier for marginalised insurgent movements to transform themselves into terrorist groups. Pursuing classically defined victory over insurgents, particularly those linked to al-Qaeda, may simply create a series of virtually linked, near-invisible ‘rump’ terrorist movements in previous insurgent theatres. Since terrorists do not require a mass base, this may perpetuate rather than end the broader conflict. In modern counter-insurgency, victory may need to be re-defined as the disarming and reintegration of insurgents into society, combined with popular support for permanent, institutionalised anti-terrorist measures that contain the risk of terrorist cells emerging from the former insurgent movement.

In modern counter-insurgency, secret intelligence may matter less than situational awareness based on unclassified but difficult-to-access information. A final observation

is that today's intelligence paradigm, which emphasises the acquisition of secret intelligence from foreign governments, may be ill suited to modern counter-insurgency. Secret intelligence is often less relevant than information which is not classified by any government, but is located in denied areas. Feedback on the effect of counter-insurgent operations on public perception may be critical. Human intelligence and tactical signals intelligence are clearly crucial, and additional effort in these areas would be valuable. But in modern counter-insurgency, where there is no single insurgent network to be penetrated but rather a cultural and demographic jungle of population groups to be navigated, 'basic intelligence' – detailed knowledge of physical, human, cultural and informational terrain, based on a combination of open-source research and 'denied area ethnography' – will be even more critical.

* * *

Today's insurgencies differ significantly from those of the 1960s. Insurgents may not be seeking to overthrow the state, may have no coherent strategy or may pursue a faith-based approach difficult to counter with traditional methods. There may be numerous competing insurgencies in one theatre, meaning that the counter-insurgent must control the overall environment rather than defeat a specific enemy. The actions of individuals and the propaganda effect of a subjective 'single narrative' may far outweigh practical progress, rendering counter-insurgency even more non-linear and unpredictable. The counter-insurgent, not the insurgent, may initiate the conflict and represent the forces of revolutionary change. The economic relationship between insurgent and population may be diametrically opposed to classical theory. And insurgent tactics, based on exploiting the propaganda effects of urban bombing, may invalidate some classical tactics and render others, like patrolling, counterproductive under some circumstances. Thus, field evidence suggests, classical theory is necessary but not sufficient for success against contemporary insurgencies. As Fall – who learned resistance warfare in the French underground, mastered counter-insurgency in the 1950s in Indochina, and reapplied it in the radically different circumstances of the American effort in Vietnam, before being killed on operations near Hue in 1967 – observed:

There are no easy shortcuts to solving the problems of revolutionary war. In fact, I would like to close with one last thought, which applies, of course, to everything that is done in the armed forces, but particularly to revolutionary war: *If it works, it is obsolete.*⁹⁵

All this is, for the moment, a tentative set of field observations, many of which could eventually prove incorrect. But they should give us pause in seeking to 'cut and paste' the tenets of classical 1960s counter-insurgency. We are experiencing a paradigm shift in the discipline of counter-insurgency, driven by new expressions of one of war's oldest forms. Much of classical counter-insurgency remains, but in today's conflicts we must apply its precepts with judicious scepticism and willingness to admit error.

Notes

- ¹ See William Rosenau, 'Subversion and Terrorism: Understanding and Countering the Threat', in *The MIPT Terrorism Annual 2006* (Oklahoma City, OK, National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, 2006), pp. 53–4; also the extensive media reporting surrounding the publication of the US military's new counter-insurgency doctrine in 2005–06.
- ² See David Kilcullen, 'Countering Global Insurgency', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 28, no. 4, August 2005, pp. 597–617.
- ³ The dates take in the period from the beginning of the Greek Civil War in 1944 to the end of the Rhodesian Civil War in 1980, and include all the wars of decolonisation associated with the end of European empires after the Second World War, and the contemporary nationalist, separatist and communist-inspired insurgencies.
- ⁴ US Department of Defense, FM3-24/FMFM3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, Final Draft, 16 June 2006, paras 1–61, available online at <http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24fd.pdf>.
- ⁵ This paper builds on evidence gathered in the 1990s during fieldwork for a doctoral dissertation on insurgency: David Kilcullen, *Political Consequences of Military Operations in Indonesia 1945–99*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of New South Wales, 2000. It draws on personal experience as a commander, operations officer, intelligence officer and military adviser to indigenous forces during operations in the Middle East, Pacific and Southeast Asia over the past decade. More importantly, it reflects insights gained since 11 September 2001, including firsthand observation of counter-insurgency in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, Thailand and the Northwest Frontier of Pakistan. The author was an adviser with Indonesian forces in 1994–95, commanded an infantry company on counter-insurgency operations in East Timor in 1999–2000, was operations officer of the Peace Monitoring Group in Bougainville during the final stages of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army insurgency in 1998, served as a counterterrorism adviser to an Arabian Gulf state in 2004 and has worked with police, paramilitary and military forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia and elsewhere since 11 September.
- ⁶ The Australian *Joint Services Glossary* defines counter-insurgency as 'those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological and civic actions undertaken by a government to defeat a subversive insurgency'. The equivalent British and United States publications use the identical definition, except for the absence of the word 'subversive'.

- 7 For a discussion of the concept of 'counter-warfare', see Loup Francart and Jean-Jacques Patry, 'Mastering Violence: An Option for Operational Military Strategy', *Naval War College Review* 53, no. 3, Summer 2000, pp. 144–84.
- 8 This definition follows that put forward by Gordon H. McCormick, who suggests that 'an insurgency is a struggle for power (over a political space) between a state (or occupying power) and one or more organized, popularly based internal challengers'. Gordon H. McCormick, 'Things Fall Apart: The "Endgame Dynamics" of Internal Wars', RAND, draft paper, forthcoming, p. 2. But, to take into account the transnational nature of several contemporary insurgencies, I have replaced McCormick's notion of a single state entity facing an internal challenger with the broader concept of a state or group of states confronting one or more (internal or external) non-state challengers.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 C.E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, 3rd ed. (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996 (first published 1896, 3rd ed. originally published 1906)); Department of the Navy, United States Marine Corps, NAVMC 2890, *Reprint of USMC Small Wars Manual 1940*, Washington, 1987.
- 11 David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (London: Pall Mall, 1964), p. 3.
- 12 Robert Thompson, *Revolutionary War in World Strategy 1945–1969* (New York: Taplinger, 1970), pp. 20–21.
- 13 For examples of this pattern in resistance warfare see Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History*, 2 vols (New York: Doubleday, 1975); Ian F.W. Becket, *The Roots of Counter-Insurgency: Armies and Guerrilla Warfare 1900–1945* (London: Blandford, 1988); Walter Laqueur, *Guerrilla* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1977); and Alexander Orlov, *Handbook of Intelligence and Guerrilla Warfare* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1963).
- 14 Discussion with Mahsud informant, Northwest Frontier Province, June 2006. The informant noted that each Mahsud family has contributed one fighter to the anti-government insurgency in order 'to protect their traditional ways' while Ahmadzai Wazir tribesmen have joined the fight in a less-organised but more fanatical manner. These patterns of behaviour are highly consistent with the cultural characteristics of these tribes. See Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans* (London: St Martin's Press, 1958), pp. 390–413, and Akbar S. Ahmed, *Resistance and Control in Pakistan*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 11–29.
- 15 For a discussion of these effects in relation to Indonesia, see David J. Kilcullen, 'Globalisation and the Development of Indonesian Counterinsurgency Tactics', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 17, no. 1, March 2006, pp. 44–64.
- 16 See Thompson, *Revolutionary War* and Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, pp. 38–41.
- 17 See 'Al Qaeda Takes Media Jihad Online' at <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=14500>.
- 18 Audrey K. Cronin, 'Cyber-Mobilization: The New *Levée en Masse*', *Parameters*, Summer 2006, p. 77.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 20 Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 45–53.

- ²¹ See Kilcullen, 'Countering Global Insurgency' for a more detailed discussion of these issues.
- ²² See US Joint Publication 1-02 which defines insurgency within a single-state, single-insurgent paradigm, as 'an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through use of subversion and armed conflict'.
- ²³ Kilcullen, 'Countering Global Insurgency'; see also David W. Barno, 'Challenges in Fighting a Global Insurgency', *Parameters*, Summer 2006, pp. 15-29.
- ²⁴ 'English translation of Ayman al-Zawahiri's letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi', *The Weekly Standard*, 12 October 2005, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/006/203gpuul.asp>.
- ²⁵ For example, see *ibid.* and other correspondence between al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and insurgents in Iraq and Southeast Asia.
- ²⁶ AFPS, 'IED Components Moving Across Iraq-Iran Border, General Says', 17 March 2006.
- ²⁷ Interview with Pakistan government official, North-West Frontier Province, Pakistan, June 2006.
- ²⁸ For example, in July 2006 Shia militias in Iraq conducted operations in sympathy with Hizbullah fighters engaged in conflict with Israel, while in 2005 al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia conducted a hotel bombing in Amman, possibly in an attempt to disrupt support for coalition forces in Jordan.
- ²⁹ See materials captured in the possession of Jemaah Islamiyah operative Dr Azahari in November 2005, and the so-called 'Camp Hudaibiya manual' used by Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf Group insurgents in the Philippines, which drew on al-Qaeda source materials produced in South Asia.
- ³⁰ CIA analyst, unclassified personal communication, July 2006.
- ³¹ Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, p. 3.
- ³² See Thompson, *Revolutionary War*, for a discussion of the differences between 'rebellion' and 'revolutionary warfare' in this context.
- ³³ I am grateful to Rob Smith for this insight.
- ³⁴ Anthony Cordesman, *The Iraq War and Lessons for Counterinsurgency* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2006), pp. 3-4.
- ³⁵ Interview with former senior officer of British Intelligence, Kabul, July 2006.
- ³⁶ Jeffrey Record and W. Andrew Terrill, *Iraq and Vietnam: Differences, Similarities and Insights* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2004), p. 2.
- ³⁷ Partly, this lack of counter-government simply reflects the insurgents' desire to fall back on tribal governance systems (pre-classical) or the focoist (post-classical) nature of the insurgency in Iraq. But these concepts have little traction in the 'watered-down' version of classical counter-insurgency adopted by some modern commanders (Rob Smith, personal communication, September 2006).
- ³⁸ See Pamela Constable, 'In Tribal Pakistan, a Tide of Militancy', *Washington Post*, 20 June 2006, p. A11 and 'Waziristan: a New Strategy', *Dawn*, 24 June 2006, p. 7.
- ³⁹ Attempts by the Shia Badr Organisation to control the population in Basra governorate, and by Sunni insurgents in Fallujah and Tal Afar to intimidate local leaders into supporting insurgent objectives, are examples of limited attempts to create a counter-government, but these lacked the

- sophistication and elaborate administrative structures favoured by many classical insurgent movements.
- 40 Joel S. Migdal (1988) identifies four key capabilities of the state, including 'the capacities to *penetrate* society, *regulate* social relationships, *extract* resources, and *appropriate* or use resources in determined ways' (quoted in William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 13.
 - 41 Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars*; see particularly pp. 108–26 and 218ff.
 - 42 See Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare* (Washington DC: Brassey's, 1990), p. 95 for a discussion of this concept in classical counter-insurgency.
 - 43 See Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, for the classic exposition of this viewpoint.
 - 44 Personal observation, Taji, January 2006 and discussions with US military intelligence officers, Baghdad and Kuwait, January–February 2006.
 - 45 US Department of the Army, *Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam, 1966*, http://www.carrscompendiums.com/ccSEA/Documents/AD0377743_TOC.html.
 - 46 Lewis Sorley, 'To Change a War: General Harold K. Johnson and the PROVN Study', *Parameters*, Spring 1998, pp. 93–109.
 - 47 Thompson, *Revolutionary War*, p. 25.
 - 48 HQ Malaya Command, *The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya*, 2nd ed. (Kuala Lumpur, 1954), especially ch. 2, p. 10 and ch.3, pp. 1–5.
 - 49 Bernard Fall, 'The Theory and Practice of Counterinsurgency' *Naval War College Review*, April 1965.
 - 50 US Department of Defense, *Counterinsurgency*.
 - 51 CNN, 'Transcript of bin Laden's October Interview', 5 February 2002, <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/south/02/05/binladen.transcript/index.html>.
 - 52 I am indebted to Gordon McCormick of the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey and to Colonel Derek Harvey for insights into the 'small world, scale-free' aspects of insurgent social networks and the enduring influence of the pre-war Iraqi oligarchy on the current Iraqi insurgency.
 - 53 See McCormick, 'Things Fall Apart', for comments on this discourse.
 - 54 For a good example of this perspective, see Fall, 'Theory and Practice'.
 - 55 Cordesman, *The Iraq War*, p. 3.
 - 56 See Charles C. Krulak, 'The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War', *Marines*, January 1999.
 - 57 See Associated Press, 'Lynndie England Convicted in Abu Ghraib Trial', *USA Today*, 26 September 2005, http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-09-26-england_x.htm.
 - 58 The marine was subsequently judged to have acted in self-defense; see Jamie McIntyre, 'Marine Cleared in Videotaped Shooting', 5 May 2005, <http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/05/05/falluja.marine/index.html>.
 - 59 Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006), pp. 330–35.
 - 60 *Ibid.*, pp. 341–3.
 - 61 George Packer, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), pp. 297–8.
 - 62 For a detailed discussion of civil–military tensions in classical counter-insurgency see H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

- ⁶³ Rob Smith, personal communication, September 2006.
- ⁶⁴ See Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, pp. 197–28.
- ⁶⁵ Personal communication, Central Intelligence Agency officer, Baghdad, February 2006.
- ⁶⁶ See collected videos at the SITE institute, <http://www.siteinstitute.org>, for examples.
- ⁶⁷ Personal observation, Baghdad and Taji, January 2006 and Khost, Afghanistan, June 2006.
- ⁶⁸ See H.Q. Malaya Command, *Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations*, p. II-10.
- ⁶⁹ Mao's *Problems of Strategy in Guerrilla Warfare* (May 1938) is the most detailed exposition of this argument.
- ⁷⁰ Mike Forces, Regional Forces, Popular Forces and main force ARVN in Vietnam, and Special Operations Volunteer Force, Malayan Scouts (SAS), Police Jungle Squads and Police Anti-Terrorist Field Force in Malaya are examples of this 'force-mirroring' approach (see Kilcullen, *Political Consequences*, for a detailed description of this element of classical counter-insurgency).
- ⁷¹ See Louis Beam, 'Leaderless Resistance', *The Seditonist*, Issue 12, February 1992, <http://www.louis-beam.com/leaderless.htm>. Beam, a right-wing extremist leader in the United States, proposed an organisational method for revolutionary movements that has since been employed by movements as diverse as Iraqi insurgents, European Islamist movements and the Earth Liberation Front (see <http://www.earthliberationfront.com/main.shtml> for a description).
- ⁷² The focoist school of insurgency, originating in Latin America during the classical period, sought to employ a cadre of armed revolutionaries as a catalyst or focus (*foco*) around which popular insurgency would coalesce.
- ⁷³ See Martin Dillon, *The Dirty War* (London: Routledge, 1999) for a description of the Active Service Unit and specialised cell-based methodology applied by the Irish Republican Army to its much smaller movement of a few hundred active members only.
- ⁷⁴ Personal communication, allied intelligence officer, Kabul, June 2006. See also Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006) for a comprehensive description of Iraqi insurgent methods.
- ⁷⁵ HQ Malaya Command, *Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations*, p. III-2.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁷ Interview with Australian military officer in an operational headquarters in Baghdad, November 2004.
- ⁷⁸ Australian intelligence officer, Baghdad, August 2004.
- ⁷⁹ See Packer, *Assassins' Gate*, especially pp. 251ff.
- ⁸⁰ Thompson, *Revolutionary War*, p. 21.
- ⁸¹ Cordesman, *The Iraq War*, and interview with Multinational Force Iraq intelligence officer, January 2006.
- ⁸² Ricks, *Fiasco*, p. 312.
- ⁸³ Personal observation, Baghdad, Taji and Basra, February 2006.
- ⁸⁴ Interview with Pakistan Government civilian official, Khyber Agency, June 2006.
- ⁸⁵ Interview with senior Iraqi Government national security official, Green Zone, Baghdad, January 2006.
- ⁸⁶ McCormick, 'Things Fall Apart'.
- ⁸⁷ Dillon, *The Dirty War*.
- ⁸⁸ Personal communication, private security detail commander, Baghdad, January 2006.
- ⁸⁹ Personal observation, Taji, February 2006 and discussions with special forces officer, November 2004.

- ⁹⁰ See examples relating to Afghanistan at <http://www.acbar.org/index.php>, the website of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, and <http://www.adf.gov.af/>, website of the Afghan Development Forum. Both are interactive web portals where independent aid and relief agencies can share information, develop collaborative approaches, pool resources, deconflict activities and self-synchronise effects – all without belonging to a single overarching command structure.
- ⁹¹ Quoted in Simon C. Smith, 'General Templer and Counter-Insurgency in Malaya: Hearts and Minds, Intelligence, and Propaganda', *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 16, no. 3, Autumn 2001, p. 65.
- ⁹² Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, p. 89.
- ⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- ⁹⁴ For example, the Malayan Emergency ended in 1960, but Malayan Communist Party leader Chin Peng and the last band of guerrillas surrendered only in 1989.
- ⁹⁵ Fall, 'Theory and Practice'.