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On "Other War"

Lessons from Five Decades of RAND Counterinsurgency Research

Austin Long

Prepared for the
Office of the Secretary of Defense

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Summary

As part of the global war on terror, Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom showcased the dazzling technological capability and professional prowess of the U.S. military in conventional operations. Yet the subsequent challenges posed by insurgency and instability in both Afghanistan and Iraq have proved much more difficult to surmount for both the military and civilian agencies. Further, this difficulty in coping with insurgency may embolden future opponents to embrace insurgency as the only viable means of combating the United States. Thus, both the current and future conduct of the war on terror demand that the United States improve its ability to conduct counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. This study seeks to summarize much of what is known about prior COIN and to make recommendations for improving it based on the RAND Corporation's decades-long study of the subject.

The body of work generated from this study covers many aspects of COIN, from the most abstract theories of why insurgency takes place to tactical operations. It also covers a wide array of cases, varied in both geography and time, from the British experience in Malaya to the French in Algeria to the United States in El Salvador. However, the research is limited in that almost all of it is based on cases that occurred in the context of the Cold War. Some might question the continuing relevance of studies centered on conflicts that took place in such a radically different geopolitical context.

This study is based on the premise that, while many specific details do indeed vary greatly, insurgency and counterinsurgency is a more general phenomenon that is not a product of Cold War peculiari-

ties. Further, many of the alleged differences between past and current COIN are overstated. For example, the fragmented nature of the insurgency in Iraq is often remarked on as almost without precedent. Yet many insurgencies during the Cold War were highly fragmented, with elements fighting each other as well as the counterinsurgent.

RAND was intimately involved in the formulation of the two major theories of how one should view the population, the battle space in COIN. The first theory, commonly called the "hearts and minds," or HAM, theory of COIN, argues that the impact of development and modernity on traditional societies causes the fragmentation of old institutions before new institutions are in place. This institutional gap creates problems, which can then give rise to insurgency. The prescription for success is therefore to win the public's support (their "hearts and minds") for the government by ameliorating some of the negative effects of development while speeding up the provision of modernity's benefits. RAND analysts felt that even if the actual provision of benefits lagged, the key was providing security to the population and convincing it that government was operating for its benefit.

Other researchers at RAND, steeped in economics and systems analysis, responded to this first theory by arguing that what mattered was not what the population thought but what it did. The key to the population was therefore to provide it with selective incentives to cooperate with the government and disincentives to resist the government.

In response to this "cost/benefit" theory, other RAND scholars pointed out that coercive methods could actually stimulate the insurgency, leading to spiraling escalation between insurgent and counterinsurgent, a spiral that might be unwinnable by modern democracies with moral and political limitations on the use of force.

In addition to more abstract theorizing, RAND researched elements of COIN practice. Four elements of particular relevance today are organization of insurgency and counterinsurgency, amnesty and reward programs, border control, and pacification. RAND conducted research on insurgent organization and sought to understand the strengths and weaknesses of these movements, particularly focusing on the Viet Cong in Vietnam. Through this research, RAND sought to understand more than the traditional military intelligence focus on the

enemy order of battle, and included studies on insurgent learning and adaptation, motivation and morale, recruitment, and logistics. In addition, RAND worked to assess and develop new metrics for measuring progress against insurgent organizations, as traditional military indicators such as movement of the front or enemy killed were less relevant to COIN and might even be misleading.

RAND also conducted extensive research on the proper organization of government forces for COIN. The consensus of this research was the need for unity of effort between the political and military components of the government in order to ensure that the efforts of one did not undercut the progress of another. Further, RAND concluded that much of the U.S. military was overly focused on conventional war, leading to handicaps in the conduct of COIN.

The second element of COIN practice that RAND studied was the use of amnesty and reward programs to convince insurgents to surrender or to provide intelligence. In several cases, this approach proved both successful and cost-effective. In Malaya, an extensive reward program combined with informal amnesty for insurgents who cooperated against their former comrades worked very well. In Vietnam, the Chieu Hoi amnesty program was less successful than the Malayan experience, but it still led to the removal of thousands of insurgents from the Viet Cong at relatively low cost.

Border security was the third element studied by RAND, as many insurgencies rely on external support or cross-border sanctuaries. Sealing the borders could thus be very useful in COIN, as the French discovered in Algeria. The Morice Line sealed both the Tunisian and Moroccan borders to insurgents. RAND analysts, after initial skepticism about border security, began to advocate it in Vietnam as infiltration from the north became a bigger component of the war, though the system was never implemented.

The final category, pacification, is something of a catchall. It is best thought of as a combination of security and development in a given political unit (e.g., village or neighborhood). The central finding in RAND's pacification research was that it was by focusing on pacification in smaller political units, rather than ambitious plans for the nation as a whole, that progress could be made.

Several recommendations for current and future COIN can be derived from RAND's prior research. First, organization for COIN must be improved. The Provincial Reconstruction Team model that has been implemented in parts of Iraq and Afghanistan is a good start, but does not go far enough. This model, which unites U.S. civilian and military personnel with the local government, should be expanded and made the basis for current and future COIN efforts. Second, amnesty and reward programs should be implemented or expanded in COIN campaigns. These programs work in conjunction with military efforts to push insurgents out of the movement without having to fight them to literally the last person. A new study of insurgent motivation and morale should also be undertaken to provide greater insight into why insurgents fight. Third, given the cross-border elements of insurgency in both Iraq and Afghanistan, border security systems should be studied for both conflicts. Finally, pacification efforts should be focused on the lowest political echelons, and combined with census-taking and national identification cards.