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HOW INSURGENCIES END

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Prepared for the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity

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Summary

Purpose and Approach

This monograph describes and explains insurgency endings in order to inform policy and to guide strategic and operational analysis.

Our methodological approach had two components. One was a review of insurgency and counterinsurgency (COIN) literature. The second was a quantitative and qualitative analysis of 89 insurgency case studies.

“How Insurgencies End” has produced several findings, some of which reinforce or explain conventional wisdom regarding insurgency and COIN. Others present a new range of dilemmas and opportunities to policymakers and planners. We derived additional findings primarily from the quantitative research. These findings reveal some useful insights into the relative success or failure of various methods employed by each side as they apply to insurgency endings. A few of these additional findings describe the impact of existing operational and environmental factors on COIN operations, thereby informing policy decisionmaking.

Finally, we describe a small set of key indicators drawn from the results of the study. RAND identifies key indicators as those found to be broadly applicable across a range of operational environments. Other interesting but less broadly applicable indicators are mentioned in the body text. The reader will find that conventional wisdom regarding tipping-point indicators in COIN is strongly reinforced by the research conducted for *How Insurgencies End*.

Generalized findings derived from historical case studies should not be taken as prescriptions for upcoming or ongoing operations. For example, while we found that insurgencies last about ten years, we do not suggest that any specific insurgency will last ten years. Predicting specific outcomes from general assumptions is a common logical or, by some scientific definitions, an ecological fallacy. Quantitative findings alone cannot—and should not—shape COIN campaign planning. Further, these findings are correlative and not necessarily causative. In other words, addressing only one factor, such as the availability of sanctuary or external support, will not necessarily create a tipping point that will mark the beginning of the end of the insurgency.

Key Findings

Modern insurgencies last approximately ten years, and the government's chances of winning may increase slightly over time. Quantitative analysis of the 89 cases selected for this study shows that the median length of an insurgency is ten years. An insurgency that hits a clear tipping point at or just before ten years typically tails out gradually to end state at 16 years. This finding squares with conventional wisdom, as well as existing conclusions published in a range of COIN literature. Furthermore, although the statistical data show only a weak relationship between time and outcome, the longer an insurgency lasts, the more likely the government is to win.

Based on this finding, a counterinsurgent might assume that a campaign will typically play out along a ten-year arc. However, this *does not* mean that every campaign will last ten years. At best, this finding plants a marker for basic planning assumptions and belies the notion that insurgents can win simply by surviving. Taking into account all other factors, governments executing COIN campaigns approaching the apex of this ten-year arc should not assume that insurgent perseverance foreshadows an insurgency's eventual success.

The tailing nature of government victories—where the violence ebbs slowly rather than rapidly, as in typical insurgent victories—reflects the concept of the tipping point, explained in the body text.

An insurgency could effectively be over without either side realizing that it had won or lost for several years. As evinced in several of the 89 cases, “defeated” insurgencies can splinter into smaller, more-violent terrorist organizations or hibernate with the intent of reigniting hostilities when conditions present themselves. Formation of the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA) in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement and the reemergence of the Peruvian Shining Path guerrillas illustrate these two trends.

Withdrawal of state sponsorship cripples an insurgency and typically leads to its defeat. Inconsistent or impartial support to either side generally presages defeat. State sponsorship is simply defined as either direct or indirect support provided to an insurgency by a nation-state (e.g., the United States supporting the Afghan mujahideen against the former Soviet Union during the 1980s) or by one nation-state to another. Sponsors provide direct support in the form of military intervention—through kinetic strikes, deployed troops, or deployed trainers—or indirect financing and equipping. Insurgencies that we studied that benefitted from state sponsorship statistically won at a 2:1 ratio out of decided cases. When that sponsorship was wholly withdrawn (e.g., Greece, 1945–1949), the victory ratio for the insurgent fell to 1:4 (also of decided and not mixed or ongoing cases). In other words, loss of state sponsorship correlates with a tipping point. Loss of sponsorship frequently correlates with loss of sanctuary, a critical requirement for insurgents. The effect of the withdrawal of state sponsorship is one of the most statistically robust findings in this study. We will show the crippling effects of inconsistent support to insurgencies over time in the Angola and South Thailand cases. In the Angola case, consistent support to the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA, or Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) insurgents allowed that organization to eclipse the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA, or National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) insurgent group that received support from over a dozen countries but dedicated support from none. Inconsistent or untimely termination of support for governments embroiled in a COIN fight can be equally crippling, as evinced in the Vietnam and Cuba cases, among others.

Anocracies (pseudodemocracies) do not often succeed against insurgencies and are rarely successful in fully democratizing. Fifteen of the 89 cases we studied could be described as *anocracies*, or democracies in name only. Anocracy is a particularly weak form of government in that it is good at neither democracy nor autocracy: It gains little benefit from reform and must refrain from using effective repressive tactics in order to retain the façade of democracy. Anocracies have a particularly poor record at countering insurgency, winning about 15 percent of all contests (1:7, with eight ongoing or mixed outcomes). Lessons from the one case of successful democratization we identified—Croatia—are both debatable and not necessarily transferrable to other conflicts. Democratizing an anocracy in the midst of an insurgency is an unappealing but not necessarily impossible venture.

Key Indicators

Desertions, Defections, and Infiltrations

The rates at which these phenomena occur, as well as changes in these rates, often indicate significant trends and, occasionally, tipping points. *Desertion* occurs when an insurgent or government agent (soldier, officer, or civil servant) flees control of the parent organization without necessarily defecting to the other side. *Defections* occur when a group or subset of belligerents changes sides, willingly entering the opposing camp. *Infiltrations* are the introduction of friendly elements into the opposing belligerent's organization or the covert "turning" of belligerents to act as informants.

In analyzing the trends associated with defection and desertion rates in particular, it is important not to confuse definitions. Although

deserters may also defect, in many cases, they may simply flee. Assuming that accurate information is available, defection and desertion statistics should be tracked separately and closely analyzed for relative value. If deserters do not also defect to the other side, this may indicate disillusionment with both sides, or it could reflect a range of other factors (e.g., the insurgent returns home for seasonal harvesting with the intent of eventually rejoining the insurgency). It is also important to analyze who is deserting. For example, officer desertions may have greater value than foot-soldier desertions. Simple desertions should not necessarily be taken as a significant indicator of success for one side or the other.¹

Information and Reporting

Qualitative analysis of the 89 cases substantiates conventional wisdom in that civilians' willingness to report on insurgent activity to the government usually reflects the success of government security and pacification programs.² Conversely, a lack of reporting correlates with a lack of progress. A change in the frequency and quality of reporting in either direction may mark a shift in momentum, particularly at the tactical level. Although it is difficult to quantify this kind of reporting, some counterinsurgents have tracked the number and quality of tip-line calls as a metric of success. Tip-line metrics are of dubious value, especially considering the number of ways in which tip-line calls can be spoofed.³ In the best case, all methods of reporting (telephonic, face-to-face, written) would be tracked.

¹ A declassified intelligence assessment prepared for the director of the Office of Current Intelligence of the Central Intelligence Agency in 1966 (Adams, 1966) aptly addresses the necessity to delink *defection* and *desertion* to prevent analytic fallacy.

² Insurgents also rely heavily on "street intelligence" and can similarly track their progress by the rate or flow of information.

³ Urban insurgent Carlos Marighella suggests spoofing tip-lines and mail to call in false bomb reports and other acts of terrorism to disrupt government COIN operations.

Additional Findings

Complex Insurgency, Complex and Protracted Ending

Insurgencies with more than two clear parties involved have longer, more-violent, and more-complex endings. Afghanistan is a case in point, with at least seven major ethnic groups, several insurgent organizations, Iran, Pakistan, India, the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and various other actors all claiming a stake in the outcome of the conflict. While not all parties must be satisfied to bring an end to the immediate conflict, the dissatisfaction of one or more parties will probably complicate the ending and may allow the insurgency to smolder and eventually reignite.

Governments Outlast Insurgents

Contrary to conventional wisdom, insurgents do not win by trying to simply outlast the government. In fact, over the long run, governments tend to win more often than not. This finding seems to belie the notion that the factor of time always runs against the counterinsurgent.

Governments Are Better Off Without Support

Governments benefit from direct support but tend to lose more frequently when provided indirect support; *they do slightly better with no external support at all*. Once support is given, it almost always creates a dependency on the external sponsor. We contrast the case of U.S. support to South Vietnam with Chinese (and Soviet) support to the north.

Insurgency Is Suited to Hierarchies and Rural Terrain

Unified hierarchies do better at insurgency than do fragmented networks. Most insurgencies consist of a hybrid of these two models, but urban insurgencies tend to be more networked than their rural counterparts. This finding is closely linked to the finding that insurgencies rarely succeed in middle-income and urbanized countries. Insurgency is an endeavor best practiced in rural, or a mix of rural and urban, terrain.

Terrorism Often Backfires

Broad terror campaigns by insurgents correlate with insurgent defeat, but selective terror attacks that do not kill innocent civilians correlate with a marked insurgent advantage. In other words, those insurgent groups that were able to restrict their use of terrorism by minimizing civilian—vice government—casualties were more likely to win than those that did not. Qualitative analysis shows that the use of indiscriminate terror often is a sign of overconfidence or, conversely, of weakness.

Weak Insurgents Can Win

Insurgents do not need to be militarily strong to win, and, in fact, military strength can backfire if the threat of insurgent military victory galvanizes government security forces. In cases of long-running insurgencies, like those in Colombia and Sri Lanka, the government was able to reinvigorate COIN efforts even in the face of powerful insurgent cadre (in this case, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia [FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] and the Tamil Tigers of Eelam).

Sanctuary Is Vital to Insurgencies

Availability of sanctuary directly correlates with an improved likelihood of insurgent victory, but only if it is provided voluntarily. Insurgencies rarely survive or succeed without some kind of sanctuary. Internal sanctuary is also very valuable, perhaps as valuable as voluntary, external sanctuary.

Conclusion

Full-blown insurgencies are messy affairs. External sponsors sometimes back winning causes but rarely emerge with a clear victory. Not one of our 89 cases provided an example that could be equated to an unambiguous conventional success like that of the Allies in World War II. Recent U.S. experience in COIN has been especially tangled. Vietnam speaks for itself, as do Iraq and Afghanistan. This kind of mixed outcome is all but inevitable. However, ways exist to mitigate negative

consequences. It is possible to shape insurgency endings with sufficient forethought, strategic flexibility, and sustained willpower.

When viewed holistically, the data set for this study revealed a few trends consistent to all insurgency endings. In some cases, these trends reinforce conventional wisdom and lend credibility to COIN advocates shaping U.S. policies on Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, they should give pause to those advocating for alternative approaches—specifically, the use of indirect tactics and strategies that separate the counterinsurgents from the population. In nearly all cases we studied, only the direct and consistent application of basic COIN methodology promulgated by David Galula (1964 [2006]), David Kilcullen (2009), Thomas X. Hammes (2006), GEN David Petraeus, Gen. James Mattis, and others leads to favorable endings. Failure to heed the past 50 years of expert opinion on the subject almost guarantees an undesirable, and possibly a disastrous, end.