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Money in the Bank
Lessons Learned from Past Counterinsurgency (COIN) Operations

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Summary

The Global War on Terror (GWOT) is being waged in multiple theaters possessing a wide spectrum of social dynamics, regional relationships, histories, political cultures, strengths and weaknesses, and salient grievances. As insurgent threats evolve and assume new forms, the United States must also evolve in its ability to counter potentially prolonged threats in several parts of the world. Because of the potential for global reach in contemporary insurgencies, the ability to draw on lessons learned from past counterinsurgency (COIN) operations using different historical cases can be valuable, helping current and future leaders prevent a repetition of mistakes and elucidating a foundation on which to build contemporary responses. Despite the need to look to the past for clues on how to proceed at present or in the future, it is also important not to generalize, making lessons learned not a loose analogy but a perfectly matching antidote. Rather than disregarding successes and failures as phenomena of the past or attempting to shove round lessons into square counterinsurgencies, strategists must consider a range of possible responses.

This paper analyzes six COIN case studies from the 19th and 20th centuries in which insurgent and counterinsurgent strengths and weaknesses are examined for their contributions to the outcomes of the conflicts, if they have been resolved as of this writing. The cases profiled in this paper are the Philippines (1899–1902), Algeria (1954–1962), Vietnam (1959–1972), El Salvador (1980–1992), Jammu and Kashmir (1947–present), and Colombia (1963–present). These cases were selected because of the potentially valuable lessons that can be drawn from them for future COIN operations and because they demonstrate the application of some of the methods detailed in the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM 3-24/ MCWP 3-33.5) released in December 2006. As the reader will find, in addition to the various tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) used to combat these insurgencies, these cases exhibit variations and commonalities in such characteristics as outcome, historical era, geographic spread, type and organization of the insurgency, and the level of foreign intervention, among others.

The Philippines (1899–1902)

The insurgency in the Philippines did not have a strong base of support among the population, because some Filipinos wanted provincial autonomy, whereas the insurgents’ goal was central-
ized government. The insurgency was highly factionalized with competing goals and it often alienated potential supporters in the population by levying taxes on them and using violence against those discovered to be cooperating with the Americans. The insurgents were also weakened by the fact that they were ill-trained, transitioned to guerrilla tactics too late in the war to have a significant effect, and were unable to obtain sanctuary in nearby countries or to arrange for any possible influx of supplies and manpower as a result of the country’s island geography.

Although the insurgents outnumbered the Americans and were often able to disappear into the population, the well-trained U.S. soldiers were able to defeat the insurgency despite their own misconceptions about the conflict, their unfamiliarity with the terrain, and the brutal tactics they employed to put down the insurrection. Many U.S. soldiers had learned how to fight a war of this type from their experiences in Puerto Rico and Cuba, as well as during the wars against the American Indians between the 1860s and the 1890s. From these conflicts, they learned to separate the population from the insurgents and to ration food to decrease the population’s incentive to share food with the insurgents. The counterinsurgents also participated in contingency operations during which they would help create and maintain infrastructure. The Americans also made it inescapably clear that collaboration with the insurgents would be severely punished. To help restore law and order to the archipelago, the United States created armed local indigenous forces who were instrumental in capturing the insurgent leader, gathering intelligence, and protecting the population from insurgent retribution.

**Algeria (1954–1962)**

In Algeria, the insurgent goal was to establish an independent state within the framework of the principles of Islam, although most of the population remained ambivalent until the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) initiated a campaign of discrete urban terrorism. The beginning of this campaign instigated a French overreaction targeting the Algerian population as a whole with such brutality that the FLN’s cause immediately gained popularity. The FLN’s targeting of civilian-centric venues in Algiers’ European sector resulted in the French employing extrajudicial means to detain, interrogate, and torture suspected insurgents. The draconian measures the French took to quell the insurgency eventually drove even unaffiliated moderates into the outstretched arms of the FLN. Once news of the institutionalized regime of torture was made known abroad, French public support for the war plummeted.

Eventually, the French realized that they needed to gain the support of the population through humanitarian assistance and secure Algeria’s borders to eliminate the influx of external support to the insurgents. Ultimately, they sought to persuade the population that they fared better under French rule than as an independent nation. Although the second half of France’s COIN strategy was successful, it was compromised by the degree to which France had attempted to pacify the country through brute force. With the loss of public support for the war at home, France was forced to grant Algeria independence after winning the military war but losing the political one.
Vietnam (1959–1972)

The part of the insurgency in Vietnam covered in this paper was a continuation of the Vietnamese War for independence from the French (1945–1954), from which a communist North Vietnam and a U.S.-backed South Vietnam emerged. North and South Vietnamese communists began their infiltration and indoctrination of cadres in the south and accelerated these efforts in the aftermath of the coup against Ngo Dinh Diem. Throughout the war, the insurgents emphasized the war’s political nature, using established networks to gain the support of the population and creating mass associations as a vehicle for political indoctrination. Acting as a shadow government, they were able to provide social services, enact land reform, and make those in the population feel that they had a stake in supporting them. Knowing that the South Vietnamese government was too weak to protect its population, insurgents also used discriminate terrorism to maintain control of their own cadres and the population at large. By the time U.S. combat troops arrived, the situation in South Vietnam had deteriorated to the point that U.S. involvement could not be restricted to counterinsurgency alone.

By the mid-1960s, pacification programs carried out under Diem were placed on the back burner, as U.S. and South Vietnamese security forces struggled to regain control of the military situation. The inability of indigenous security forces to shoulder an adequate amount of combat responsibility, inefficiencies in gathering intelligence from the population to target the insurgent infrastructure, and the unwillingness of the South Vietnamese government to build a political base perpetuated the spiral of chaos leading up to the Tet Offensive in 1968. Because of the severity of enemy losses during Tet, the counterinsurgents were able to intensify their pacification efforts and achieve moderate success. It was during this period that the United States was able to achieve unity of command with Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) and that the South Vietnamese government, in an effort to build a political base outside Saigon, enacted a program of land reform. Despite these innovations and reforms, the south was overrun by a conventional invasion from North Vietnam in 1975. Thus, the true periods of COIN and pacification in Vietnam occurred between 1959–1963 and 1968–1972.


The insurgency in El Salvador emerged from political-criminal activities, such as kidnappings and assassinations, and eventually evolved into guerrilla warfare. Although there was no mass support for such an insurgency, the insurgents were able to field a large number of fighters relative to the Salvadoran security forces, with members spanning the political spectrum. Although unified into one insurgent group, there was substantial disagreement as to the doctrine and identity of the movement, which severely compromised its strength. Because of the country’s rugged terrain and unregulated border with Honduras, the insurgents were able to enjoy sanctuary, as well as a steady flow of support from Cuba and Nicaragua, until the fall of the Soviet Union.
As a result of a series of free elections, the Salvadoran government has been awarded broad popular support and, thus, political legitimacy. To build on its legitimacy, the government implemented civic action programs to rebuild social and economic infrastructures and free the army to pursue insurgents. Additionally, a train and equip program run by the United States helped retrain the Salvadoran Army to fight the insurgency, although direct U.S. involvement was kept to a minimum. The government’s lack of control over death squad activity eroded domestic and international support, and uncertainty over continued U.S. support resulted in less-effective warfighting. The insurgency ended with a negotiated compromise in which the insurgents were given a stake in the political future of the country.


The insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has been ongoing for over half a century and has been sustained by support from Pakistan and by an influx of foreign fighters who may have links to al Qaeda. The various competing factions draw members from the ranks of other insurgent organizations and their cause is to establish a fundamentalist theocracy. The insurgents are mainly rural, because there are few security forces in those areas, and they do not provide social services or any form of informal government to local civilians. They frequently employ terrorism indiscriminately to force loyalty and instill fear in the population.

The Indian government, learning from British lessons during the Malayan Emergency as well as from its own experience with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), has been rather successful at militarily managing the insurgency. The government has created specially trained units to execute COIN, separated the civilians from the insurgents, protected the population, and restricted the use of airpower and firepower to reduce civilian casualties. It has also engaged in civic action to ensure amicable relations with the population and to encourage cooperation in gathering intelligence. The insurgency is ongoing largely because the insurgents enjoy sanctuary in Pakistan and a political solution has not yet been developed and applied.

**Colombia (1963–Present)**

The Colombian insurgent groups emerged from an atmosphere of revolutionary change in which they sought to take political power by force. Over time, their income has come from kidnapping, extortion, and the local drug trade, through which they have interacted with Latin American organized crime networks to ensure a steady supply of arms. Through the movement’s involvement in the drug trade, the insurgency has lost ideological cohesion, as many leaders have become more interested in personal enrichment than in the organization’s political and military agenda. Furthermore, many potential domestic and international supporters have been repelled by the insurgents’ involvement in the drug trade and their use of indiscriminate terrorism, and they are consequently extremely unpopular. The insurgents have also failed to challenge major population centers or sabotage vital economic assets and they
have not used their vast source of income to acquire sophisticated weapons to neutralize the government’s air superiority.

The Colombian government has had the advantage of political legitimacy, with a long record of freely and fairly elected civilian leadership. The government receives substantial aid from the United States and the European Union, with which they have increased the strength of their security forces, armed and trained local self-defense units, and implemented a seize-and-hold strategy to flush the insurgents from certain territories. However, the government does not have the numbers to secure the borders and maintain the seize-and-hold strategy. The insurgents enjoy sanctuary in Venezuela, Panama, and Ecuador and there is also evidence that they receive some level of support, tacit or overt, from Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez.

Some of the characteristics of the insurgencies covered in this paper can be found in Table S.1.

Conclusions

When presented with a variety of possible insurgencies, counterinsurgents may be more adept at managing the problem if they have “money in the bank”—in other words, if they can benefit from lessons learned during past COIN operations. For the sake of continuity and adaptability in the multifront Global War on Terror, counterinsurgents should approach lessons learned across past COIN operations as loose analogies. At the same time, those charged with executing COIN should avoid making generalizations that tend to form a model for COIN. Overall, seeing how counterinsurgents confronted the complexities of the insurgencies they faced in the past may enable current counterinsurgents to be more proficient at fighting a wide variety of modern insurgencies that have global reach. In the past cases of the Philippines and Vietnam and in the ongoing cases of Jammu and Kashmir and Colombia, the counterinsurgents were open to using knowledge gained from past counterinsurgency operations, which they then used to formulate TTPs for their ongoing operations. Doing so often required that they be objective critics in the face of failure and adjust their strategy accordingly.

It is important that counterinsurgents understand local dynamics so that all theaters of the conflict can be understood in context. This knowledge can help exploit cleavages and encourage competition among insurgent factions, which was done in the Philippines and, with less success, in Vietnam. In Vietnam, El Salvador, and Colombia, counterinsurgents used indigenous intermediaries with established social networks to earn the trust of the population and psychologically unhone the insurgents. In some of these cases, the indigenous intermediaries took the form of armed civilian self-defense militias who protected their own villages from insurgent attacks. In the case of the Philippines, the creation of a well-trained and uncorrupt police force was integral to the capture of the key insurgent leader and in demonstrating that locals were being trusted to provide for and control their own security. Police are also integral to counterinsurgency operations because they are responsible for detaining and interrogating suspected insurgents, from whom they can acquire intelligence to attack the insurgent infrastructure.
Table S.1
Characteristics of Selected COIN Case Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Philippines</th>
<th>Algeria</th>
<th>Vietnam</th>
<th>El Salvador</th>
<th>Jammu and Kashmir</th>
<th>Colombia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insurgent goal</td>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>Marxism</td>
<td>Marxism</td>
<td>Islamism control</td>
<td>Marxism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurgent approach</td>
<td>Military</td>
<td>Political/military</td>
<td>Political/military</td>
<td>Political/military</td>
<td>Military</td>
<td>Military</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational structure</td>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanctuary</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanctuary denied</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of foreign counterinsurgent intervention</td>
<td>Direct military</td>
<td>Direct military</td>
<td>Direct military</td>
<td>Train and equip</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign support</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counterinsurgent-to-insurgent ratio</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population-to-COIN force ratio</td>
<td>59.5</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>79.2</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>143.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>COIN win</td>
<td>COIN loss</td>
<td>COIN loss</td>
<td>COIN win</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Data collected by Martin Libicki based on coding by RAND researchers.
Depending on the situation, a hands-off approach is sometimes necessary to allow the host nation to learn which methods are most effective in dealing with an insurgency, considering its own strengths and limitations. With this in mind, foreign counterinsurgents should determine how best to assist the host nation in its efforts to reform, if this is necessary, to better fight the insurgency. Diversifying sources of data on the host nation and gathering information on its intelligence collection and dissemination abilities may support this effort.

As in the cases of El Salvador and Colombia, strong, competent, democratically elected leadership at all levels of government is especially helpful in situations in which both the insurgents and counterinsurgents are attempting to persuade the population not only that their form of government is legitimate but also that they will have the opportunity to improve their quality of life and the political means to express their desire for this. Efficient host nation provision of social services and employment opportunities can also demonstrate legitimacy and competence in the eyes of the population. Foreign or even host nation counterinsurgents who are not from the local area of operations should assume that they will have limited opportunities to convey their good intentions. Consequently, they may be viewed more favorably from the outset if they are perceived as contributing to progress and not to chaos. In the three cases with large foreign counterinsurgent contingents (the Philippines, Algeria, and Vietnam), as well as in Jammu and Kashmir, the counterinsurgents engaged in humanitarian actions designed to improve the lives of the population, although in some cases these actions were taken either too late or on such a small scale that they had minimal effect.

Counterinsurgents should strive for “unity of command,” akin to the bureaucratic structure of the CORDS program in Vietnam, so that there is fusion and continuity among counterinsurgency programs. To facilitate this structure, bureaucracies should encourage a culture of cooperation, both in the host nation and among the foreign counterinsurgents, and have either a foreign adviser in the background or a domestic political leader to bridge this gap. In the area of operations, local autonomy for counterinsurgents may enable innovation and adaptability.

In the case of Algeria, the French were extremely adept at securing the country’s borders to deny insurgents sanctuary, to minimize the influx and influence of unwanted external actors, and to sap the strength of the insurgent infrastructure. However, counterinsurgents failed in this effort in Vietnam and El Salvador, as well as in the ongoing cases of Jammu and Kashmir and Colombia. This failure has allowed insurgents to maintain the strategic initiative and recuperate mentally and physically in their sanctuaries when they feel threatened by the counterinsurgents.

Finally, counterinsurgents should analyze solutions in terms of long-term effectiveness, not short-term necessity. As demonstrated by the time spans of all the counterinsurgency operations discussed in this paper, insurgency can be a prolonged affair. In the face of long-term necessity, short-term effectiveness is often a poor substitute, especially when actions taken in the short term to solve immediate problems counteract the long-term goals of the counterinsurgency operation.