

AN URBAN STRATEGY FOR GUERRILLAS AND GOVERNMENTS

Brian Michael Jenkins

August 1972

P-4670/1



AN URBAN STRATEGY FOR GUERRILLAS AND GOVERNMENTS

Brian Michael Jenkins<sup>\*</sup>

The Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, California

Revolutionaries in Asia and Latin America have turned away from the classic doctrines of rural insurgency as espoused by Mao Tse-tung and Che Guevara, and in the past few years have begun to devote more attention to the struggle in the cities. Failure in the countryside is one reason. Few of the guerrillas who took the hills a decade ago are still there. None can boast of much success beyond survival. The dramatic growth of cities in the so-called Third World is another reason.

The upsurge in urban guerrilla warfare has caused worldwide concern since it has not been confined to developing countries. Terrorist bombings, the kidnapping of government officials, and street barricades have become commonplace in European cities. And as the inspection of briefcases and purses at the entrances to most Federal buildings testifies, neither is the United States entirely immune from this threat.

Explanations for the apparent increase of political violence in European and North American cities are more complex. Some of the violence may be the echo of guerrilla warfare in Third World countries. The adulation of the guerrilla as a romantic figure among the world's

---

\* Any views expressed in this paper are those of the author. They should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of The Rand Corporation or the official opinion or policy of any of its governmental or private research sponsors. Papers are reproduced by The Rand Corporation as a courtesy to members of its staff.

This paper (which is based on an earlier one, P-4670) was presented to the working group on Military Operations in Urban Areas of the 29th Military Operations Research Symposium at the Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado, June 28, 1972, and later to the Engineering Foundations Conference on the Vulnerability of Urban Areas to Subversive Disruption, at South Berwick, Maine, July 18, 1972.

youth, the cult that has grown up around Che Guevara in the United States, and the carrying of Viet Cong flags at demonstrations support this view. The increase in the number of university students and the growth of student protest movements may also offer a partial explanation. The growth of cities everywhere along with the advent of television and the transmission of news via satellite, which provide an instant worldwide audience for almost any act of violence, must be mentioned too.

#### Prelude or Penultimate Stage

Like any other form of warfare, urban guerrilla warfare is a form of political struggle. It can be a prelude, a substitute, or an accompaniment to rural guerrilla warfare, or to a conventional military contest. Many of Asia's revolutionaries regard the assault on the cities as the penultimate stage of takeover. According to their view the struggle must begin in the countryside. "The countryside, and the countryside alone can provide . . . the revolutionary bases from which the revolutionaries can go forward to final victory," wrote Lin Piao.

Initially, this was the pattern followed by the Tupamaros in Uruguay who operated briefly as rural guerrillas, finding their support among the workers on the sugar and rice plantations in the northern part of the country. But they soon realized that Uruguay has too little countryside, or as one Tupamaro put it, "We do not have unsailable strongholds in our country where a lasting guerrilla nucleus could be installed. On the other hand, we have a large city with buildings covering more than 300 square kilometers and that allows the development of an urban struggle."

Carlos Marighella, the posthumously famous Brazilian author of the "Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla," saw urban guerrilla warfare as a means of diverting government forces while rural guerrillas established themselves in the countryside. In other parts of Latin America, urban guerrilla warfare increased as rural guerrillas were chased into the cities by successful government pacification campaigns in the countryside. This was the case in Guatemala.

With the possible exceptions of Hungary in 1956, France in 1968, and Northern Ireland, urban guerrillas in the developed countries of the world have come nowhere near threatening the survival of any government. They have mounted no sustained campaigns of violence. Their struggle is often weakened by the availability of nonviolent political options. Existing political organizations have harnessed their energies, coopted their causes, and siphoned off their potential support. Occasional disruption rather than takeover would seem to define the limit of their capabilities.

#### Intercontinental Guerrillas

Perhaps in response to the difficulties in sustaining an urban guerrilla movement in the politically more advanced nations, a new type of international terrorist may be appearing. Guerrillas have discovered mobility. Almost every major city in the world is linked by jet with twenty or thirty cities in other countries. Why storm embassies and corporate offices at home when you can deliver your destruction to your enemy's capital city?

Criminal elements using the tactics of terrorists and perhaps cloaking extortion schemes with political pretensions may pose a more serious threat. They seek no political objectives. They therefore have no worries about their acts alienating popular support. Neither would they be constrained by any humanitarian considerations. They would be less reluctant to use chemical or biological weapons which, even if predictably ineffective, could produce widespread panic.

#### No Mao of the City

No great theorist of urban guerrilla warfare has appeared. There is no Mao of the city. I have tried myself to distill from a variety of personal experiences and other accounts of conflict in urban areas a strategy by which urban guerrillas having political objectives could take over a city. It is a textbook model, of course, but it does provide a convenient framework for examining the tactics and targets of urban guerrillas and the constraints that urban conditions and their

own objectives impose upon them. Looking at it from the other side, the model suggests an urban strategy for governments as well.

The urban strategy for the guerrillas consists of five stages, each marked by different objectives, targets and tactics: a "violent propaganda stage," during which the guerrillas publicize their cause; an "organizational growth stage" during which the guerrillas concentrate on building their organization to prepare for the third phase, the "guerrilla offensive," during which the guerrillas challenge the police for control of the streets, followed by the "mobilization of the masses," during which the guerrillas turn their campaign into a mass movement, leading finally to the last stage, the "urban uprising."

#### Stage One: The Whole World is Watching

The violent propaganda stage would be characterized by sporadic bombings, abductions of high-ranking officials, and perhaps some assassinations. Publicity for the guerrillas is the objective of the first stage. The whole world is watching. Urban guerrillas can make them watch. Cities are centers of communication. They have radio stations, television studios, newspapers, reporters, and an audience. Who cares about a guerrilla movement in some remote highlands? Who even knows? Few pay attention to what the government does about it. But a single guerrilla attack in a major city captures headlines immediately.

Symbolic targets predominate in the first stage. These are targets whose destruction offers the guerrillas little more than publicity. They are struck to dramatize the guerrillas' opposition to a particular institution, policy, or to commemorate certain significant dates. The guerrillas blow up banks and the offices of large corporations -- symbols of economic exploitation, or plant bombs in government buildings -- symbols of political oppression.

Abductions and assassinations are another effective means of publicizing the guerrillas' cause and require few people to carry out. Only one man is needed to carry out an assassination. The victim may be a specific individual despised by the guerrillas, or he may simply be a member of a despised organization such as the police or the secret

police. Abductions offer more than assassinations in the early stages of the struggle since they do not provoke harsh countermeasures as long as the safety of the hostage is at stake, and the ransoms paid for their return fill the war chests of the guerrillas.

#### Stage Two: Organizational Growth

The tactics of the urban guerrillas in the second stage reveal their developing organization and its growing requirements for recruits, money, and weapons. Assassinations and abductions followed by ransom notes continue. The guerrillas plant larger and more sophisticated bombs -- evidence of some training. They also begin to launch small armed assaults. These demand more planning and entail greater risks. They are not wasted on symbolic targets. In the second stage, the guerrillas assault real targets -- banks and police stations -- to get money and weapons.

The violence of the guerrillas in the second phase is tempered by their desire to avoid provoking a crackdown by the government. The organization in its developmental stage must not be risked in a premature contest. It is more important for the time being to recruit and train additional followers, clarify lines of authority, and instill discipline.

#### Stage Three: A "Fort Apache" Mentality

The guerrillas would begin their offensive in the third phase. Control of the streets is their objective; the government's security forces, their principal enemy. By increasing their armed assaults, the guerrillas compel the police to pull men off the beat to guard persons and property. Continued attacks on policemen are designed to force them to operate in larger groups, demoralize them, provoke them into harsh repressive measures which isolate them still more from the population.

Cut off from intelligence, afraid of moving among the people, barricaded physically and psychologically, the police begin to adopt a "Fort Apache" mentality, seeing themselves as defenders of isolated forts surrounded by hostile "Indian country." When the police can

speak to the people only through bullhorns from behind plexiglass shields, the guerrillas will have achieved an important goal. In some areas of the city where police control is tenuous to begin with, the guerrillas can even begin to supplant the government. In Northern Ireland, these are the "no-go" areas. Behind their own lines, the guerrillas may collect taxes, provide protection for their supporters, and maintain order.

#### Stage Four: Repression is Rapture

If the guerrillas are to advance beyond guerrilla warfare, they must mobilize the masses to support their offensive against the government. Having isolated the police, the guerrillas next seek to provoke repression. Violence generated by guerrillas is aimed at compelling the government to assume dictatorial powers, declare martial law, suspend civil liberties, resort to mass arrests.

The judicial system is a primary target. If vital documents are destroyed, judges assassinated, the witnesses intimidated, the government may be forced to adopt extra-legal methods to deal with the dissidents. During the first Indochina War, for example, judges, threatened with assassination by the Viet Minh, handed down wholesale acquittals of arrested terrorists, forcing the government to rely on French military courts in order to get convictions. In 1971, the Uruguayan military was forced to take over the counter guerrilla campaign. Military courts now try suspected political extremists.

Repression is rapture to urban guerrillas. The government appears totalitarian. As alienation caused by government countermeasures increases, so will popular discontent. Numerous causes will arise for the guerrillas to exploit. If the people are denied their normal channels for addressing the government, then terrorist bombers will become their petitioners.

The next task of the guerrillas is to turn this popular discontent into action against the government. Youth are invariably in the vanguard of such movements. They are energetic, usually unemployed, they have plenty of time on their hands, and fewer family responsibilities to worry about. Strikes also can be called to paralyze the



economy and provide a pool of unoccupied workers for street fighting.

Out of strikes, marches, and demonstrations, riots can be started. Street barricades can be thrown up to give the rioters a front to face on and a line to defend. The government finds itself at war with a portion of its citizens, its superior power restrained by its reluctance to apply it.

Stage Five: The Tactics of a Few Must be Coordinated with a Mass Movement

The tactics of an urban struggle can be represented by a  $\Lambda$ . One leg of the  $\Lambda$  represents the guerrilla warfare aspects -- the abductions, the assassinations, the terrorist bombings -- what can be described as the tactics of a few. The other leg represents the mass movements frequently associated with popular discontent such as general strikes, demonstrations, and riots. As their movement develops, the leaders of the struggle will try to coordinate the two branches of activities more and more, ultimately combining them in full-scale urban warfare, or the urban uprising.

The urban uprising is the final assault on the government. It requires full coordination of guerrilla operations and mass movements. Arms are distributed to the people. Radio stations are occupied by the guerrillas to broadcast instructions to the dissidents. Camouflaged by chaos, guerrilla units move to destroy or occupy government installations and capture or assassinate key officials while the bulk of the government's forces are kept busy trying to restore order in the streets.

Unless a portion of the army switches sides, however, or unless it is committed to battle elsewhere, the government will probably win any such overt contest for power. Knowing this, urban guerrillas are sometimes willing to bargain with the government for a goal short of take-over. The government, long before its survival is threatened, may be willing to accede to certain demands by the guerrillas simply in order to end the violence. If the government is weak to begin with, unwilling to meet the demands of the guerrillas, and unable to suppress them, it risks being overthrown by those who demand more vigorous action to

crush the guerrillas once and for all, or by those who may be more sympathetic to the guerrillas' cause.

If we applied this five-stage model to the existing urban guerrilla movements of the world, the Irish Republican Army would be at the top of the current list -- they definitely have reached stage three and at times have managed to mobilize mass movements behind them. The Tupamaros of Uruguay would seem to have reached stage two, occasionally launching the guerrilla offensives of stage three as they did in mid-1969. All other urban guerrillas, including the Viet Cong operating in Saigon, would appear to be somewhere in stage one or possibly stage two.

#### Governments Lack an Urban Strategy

Any government clearly has a superiority of force in any open contest with guerrillas, although the employment of its superior force may be constrained by the high risks of unintended casualties and collateral damage when conventional military power is used in cities. Governments also have comparatively vast nonmilitary resources which could be mobilized against urban guerrillas. What governments lack is a strategy for the employment of their resources and superior force -- an urban strategy.

#### Anarchists or Populists

Any strategy must take into account the capabilities and vulnerabilities of each side, as well as the constraints that may apply to either one. The difficulty in protecting all of the potential targets that exist in any large city gives the guerrillas the advantage of the initiative. It is virtually impossible to prevent a handful of guerrillas from carrying out individual acts of destruction. But it is also virtually impossible for a few urban guerrillas to overthrow the government or even disrupt a large city for any length of time. Urban guerrillas do need popular support -- not because they depend on the people for sustenance as rural guerrillas might, but because it is a prerequisite for achieving political power.

Not everybody agrees with this view of urban guerrillas as armed populists of the streets. It is true that urban guerrilla warfare is

often the expression of a minority who substitute violence for their lack of widespread support. It is also true that urban guerrillas can maintain operational effectiveness in the absence of widespread popular support just as an assassin needs no nomination to carry out his act.

But this does not mean popular support is not sought by urban guerrillas. I think we are too ready to accept the notion that a few people can paralyze a city with fear. The evidence suggests that they cannot, at least not for a very long time. The conflict in Northern Ireland is certainly one of the longest and most violent urban conflicts in recent years, yet life goes on in Belfast. Life went on in Saigon, too, during the rocket attacks. Fired at random into the city, the rockets could just as easily have been bombs planted by terrorists. Guerrillas, no more than governments, can prevent the people from pursuing their lives or from expressing their will by sole reliance on terror.

The threat of continued terrorism that offers no viable choice for the victim becomes meaningless -- whimsical. "Your money or your life." "Halt or I'll shoot." There must always be an option. The rockets in Saigon were deadly -- the potential victim was offered no feasible course of action to stop them from coming. They came to be regarded as the lottery. It was your number or someone else's. The odds were that it would be someone else's.

#### Constraints

The realization that they must gain some measure of popular support imposes constraints upon the guerrillas. Urban guerrillas generally avoid doing things that would cause prolonged inconvenience and suffering among many people. Perhaps because of this, urban guerrillas generally have not attacked water and power systems. Interruption of either could alienate supporters. Even terrorists, to be effective, must in some way be selective.

The need to avoid inflicting unintentional casualties and collateral damage will prevent the government from applying its full range of military power. So will its desire to avoid the creation of martyrs,

and it will want to avoid doing anything that would make the guerrillas appear as a greater threat than they actually are. There are further moral constraints against totalitarian methods -- the employment of agent provocateurs, drumhead trials, preventive detention, covertly sponsored counterterror organizations -- which tend to be counterproductive and only play into the hands of the guerrillas. Institutional constraints may further limit a government's ability to react.

#### A Political Contest not a Military Campaign

The principal strength of any government is that it is the government. As the government, it has some built-in legitimacy. Even weak governments have demonstrated their capacity to survive protracted urban guerrilla warfare. To reach their position in the first place government leaders mobilized at least a portion of the people to actively support them, and gained at least the acquiescence of most others.

The proposed government strategy would take into account the difficulties in neutralizing the urban guerrillas. It would recognize their requirement to gain popular support. And it would take advantage of the government's strength -- its inherent capabilities for maintaining popular support. It would view the struggle against urban guerrillas less as a military campaign and more as a political contest. It would focus on maintaining the active allegiance of the many, not on attacking the few. It would avoid the actions against a few that could alienate many. Such a strategy could comprise three kinds of government measures: preemptive measures to reduce potential support for any urban guerrilla movement; measures to politically isolate the guerrillas; and measures to mobilize the population to actively support the government's efforts against guerrilla warfare. Of course, police efforts to penetrate the guerrilla apparatus, identify and apprehend individual guerrillas would continue concurrently.

#### Governments May Have to Absorb the Shock of Urbanization for a Decade

Obviously it would be unwise to wait until urban guerrillas launch their first attacks before initiating a program to counter urban guerrilla

warfare. A rapid rate of urbanization, chronic unemployment in urban areas, evidence of popular unrest would be cause enough to implement a number of programs aimed at preempting potential guerrillas from exploiting existing dissatisfaction. Improving the quality of urban life may be one such program; providing jobs another. In many parts of the world, unskilled rural migrants are arriving in the cities faster than any industry can absorb them. The government in these countries may have to temporarily absorb the shock of urbanization by providing some form of guaranteed employment until industries have developed enough to absorb the new arrivals. It could take a decade in some cases.

The government can also reduce the shock of urbanization by improving and expanding local government, particularly in Third World countries whose cities contain a large number of new arrivals uprooted from a traditional society. Establishing neighborhood and street councils with informally elected leaders might be one way of replacing the small, personalized government left behind when rural migrants abandoned their villages. Such councils could serve to siphon existing discontent into government channels. Why give urban guerrillas a monopoly on voicing popular grievances?

The government would also encourage, even sponsor, a variety of popular organizations in cities: youth groups, common interest associations, and neighborhood improvement committees, for example. Their creation would aim at preempting activist energies and leadership and directing it toward constructive activities. Many of the *tigres* or young gang members in Santo Domingo joined in the fighting in 1965, not because they were initially committed to any cause, but because it was the only action in town.

In the United States, historians may look back upon the period 1968 to 1970 as a high point in youthful protest. There was sporadic violence on both sides. Extremists on both sides even spoke of imminent violent revolution. There is still protest among young people in this country, but violence has lost much of its appeal. I believe the extension of the vote to eighteen-year olds and their mobilization into

the political system has a lot to do with that change in attitude. People are unlikely to bring down a system that allows them to participate in it.

#### Coooption is a Primary Weapon of Democratic Governments

Urban guerrillas will operate with a list of demands backed by the threat of violence. To isolate the guerrillas politically, the government must be able to coopt those demands which have widespread popular support, advance them as its own, perhaps in a less extreme form, leaving the guerrillas with a reduced list of less popular demands backed by the threat of unpopular violence. It is not appeasement, nor is it mere cynical slogan-stealing. The ability to absorb the platforms of political opponents is a long-standing political technique and is a basic test of government strength.

#### A Large Audience is Always Watching

What makes urban guerrilla warfare so different from rural guerrilla warfare or conventional military contests is the presence of a large audience to the struggle. Unlike rural guerrillas, urban guerrillas cannot withdraw to some remote jungle where they are safe from observation and attack. They must be able to live in the midst of hundreds of witnesses and potential informers. If the people support the guerrillas' cause, are neutral, or have been alienated by government actions, the guerrillas will be able to survive. If, on the other hand, the people can be persuaded to actively support the government's campaign against terrorism in the cities, the guerrilla threat will be contained.

Obtaining popular support for efforts against the guerrillas is a government objective just as mobilizing the masses against the government is an objective of the guerrillas. The government must out-mobilize and out-organize, not just out-fight the guerrillas. The campaign against urban guerrillas should have all the elements of a political campaign aimed at gaining public support. Policework itself cannot be delegated to the public at large, but the people could cooperate in a

variety of ways as persuaders against violence, as anonymous informers, as cooperative witnesses, perhaps as people's representatives on committees established to supervise and monitor government programs.

Like the guerrillas, the government must coordinate its actions to maintain the allegiance of the people with its actions against the guerrillas. The hard-won support of the people once obtained cannot be squandered. In its offensive against the guerrillas themselves, the government must above all maintain the rule of law and use only minimum force. Where risks of collateral damage or of alienating the people are great, the government may choose to even follow a policy of deliberate inaction.

Of course, the specific measures I have described will not be equally appropriate to cities in modern industrial nations as to cities in Third World countries, nor for that matter, equally appropriate to all Third World countries. There is not likely to be any universally applicable formula for meeting the threat of urban guerrilla warfare any more than there is a single pattern of urbanization or urban growth. Different demographic, economic, political, social, and cultural factors have sometimes produced marked differences among the cities of a single nation. The diversity of urban environments, however, would not seem to invalidate the basic outline of a government strategy which emphasizes preemption, cooption, and the mobilization of popular support.