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RETHINKING INSURGENCY

Steven Metz

Insurgency has existed as long as people have used violence to resist states and empires but its strategic significance has ebbed and flowed throughout history, increasing when conventional war between great powers was unlikely and states were ineffective at defeating it. During the Cold War, nuclear weapons diminished the probability of direct warfare between the superpowers, leading them towards proxy conflict. Combined with the crumbling of European colonial empires and the political mobilization of the peasantry in many parts of the world, this increased the strategic significance of insurgency. The refinement of insurgent methods by the Chinese, Vietnamese, Algerians and others led to its ‘golden age’. A type of conflict that previously festered at the periphery of global statecraft then moved to the fore.

One result was the emergence of an insurgency industry in the West, centred not only in militaries, government agencies and intelligence services, but also in segments of academia, journalism, research institutes and, to some extent, security-related corporations. This first appeared in European nations involved with anti-colonial insurgencies, particularly the United Kingdom and France. But once decolonization was complete, the United States dominated. This industry shaped not only the way that states and their militaries undertook counterinsurgency, but also the way insurgency was understood in the academic world and among the wider public. And because American and European ideas about insurgency were considered ‘modern’, they influenced non-Western nations, particularly those keen to obtain outside support. Many of them sent their best officers to the United States and Europe for professional education, allowing them to absorb Western ideas about insurgency.

In the 1990s a number of nations in South America and Asia remained involved in insurgency-based conflicts but the insurgency industry collapsed in Europe and North America. In the United States, particularly within the military, involvement in counterinsurgency was considered unlikely. If it did happen, thinking went, the United States would only provide limited advice and support, primarily by the small US Army Special Forces community. No new doctrine emerged; insurgency faded from the curriculum in the military’s professional education system. A generation of officers gave it little thought. Research institutes and defence contractors abandoned counterinsurgency and instead embraced multinational peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention, both elevated from strategic insignificance to significance by conflict in the Balkans and sub-Saharan Africa. Interest among academics also faded. Insurgency persisted in Colombia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Peru, Burma, the Philippines, Nepal, Uganda, Sierra
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Leone, Liberia, South Africa, India, Chechnya and, perhaps most importantly, Palestine. But, for the West, these were the death throes of the old security system, anachronisms which did not merit new thinking and serious attention. In most cases, the states confronting the insurgents were happy to have it that way.

Then Iraq and Afghanistan rocketed insurgency back to a position of strategic significance for the West. In short order, the insurgency industry was reborn. Academics and think tank analysts rediscovered the topic. It exploded in the military educational systems. New – or apparently new – concepts and doctrine blossomed. This process followed the normal pattern for reviving dormant topics: just as the European Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was based on classical learning, the insurgency industry dusted off old theories, models and concepts from the Cold War, and applied them with only modest revision. Cold War-era thinkers such as the French officer David Galula, US Army colonel John McCuen, Central Intelligence Agency official Douglas Blaufarb and British officer Robert Thompson were once again all the rage (Galula 2006; McCuen 1966; Blaufarb 1977; Thompson 1978). Even new analysis relied largely on Cold War case studies (Nagl 2005).

The problem is that the basic conceptualization of insurgency – the stock-in-trade of the industry – arose from and reflected the Western tradition as applied through colonialism. It is based on a model of politics and development which is culture specific and – importantly – only partly applicable to those parts of the world susceptible to insurgency. It demanded a re-engineering of the political, economic, security and even social systems that was possible only through colonialism, at least in nations not part of Western culture. Thus the orthodox conceptualization may not be wholly inapplicable in the contemporary security environment, but does not fully reflect reality in conflict-prone regions. In one sense it is correct: insurgency is a symptom of deeper social, economic and political shortcomings. The problem comes from assuming that encouraging a state to emulate the Western political model is the cure, or that insurgency is distinct from other dimensions of the deeper pathology. The solution is a broad reconceptualization of insurgency.

The orthodox conceptualization

The dominant Western conceptualization of insurgency – call it the orthodoxy – reflects more general Western notions of politics and history. It was shaped by colonial attitudes and conflicts, forged and refined in Cold War conflicts, and adopted very nearly intact to twenty-first century conflicts. It was based on ideas about civil society and politics born of the European Enlightenment. These hold that government should be ‘of the people’, with the ‘the people’ defined by citizenship in a nation. A ‘legitimate’ government is, from this perspective, one that seeks the best interests of a majority of its citizens. When a government does not represent the interests of ‘the people’, conflict and violence may occur. Political and economic systems should distribute rewards based on individual merit rather than affinity and affiliation. A legitimate government establishes rules and laws to assure that this happens and then executes them. If it does not, it loses legitimacy and becomes prone to instability and conflict. Governments which reflect these principles are stable, offering no political space for organized violence to coalesce.

The idea arose from the European Enlightenment that the logical and inevitable path of development is from parasitic political systems where the state is simply a tool by which an aristocracy or elite controls the peasantry and extracts resources from them to a ‘modern’ political system based on a social contract. States which govern in the public interest and provide services (including security) equitably and according to formal rules are legitimate. The population accepts the state’s authority and its monopoly on the exercise of force since this is done for the
general benefit. Conflict – which can, under some circumstances, take the form of insurgency – occurs when states do not evolve in this direction, do not evolve fast enough to satisfy the demands of the politically mobilized segments of society, or threaten to disempower a particular group such as those based on a particular ethnicity or a traditional elite. This suggests that counterinsurgency must deal both with insurgents directly through military and police actions and undertake reform to better reflect the Western notion of legitimacy. The curative to insurgency, in the orthodox conceptualization, is controlled and correctly paced modernization – defined as the institutionalization of the values, ideas and institutions that emerged from the European Enlightenment (Marshall 2010).

Because the advantages – the correctness – of a system based on these values, ideas and institutions was so evident, opposition to it was attributed to evil or at least misguided people. The solution was to eradicate the evil and educate the misguided. This was the core of counterinsurgency. Hence to Westerners who became involved in counterinsurgency or counterinsurgency support, \(^3\) it was both war – the use of violence to destroy or disempower those with opposing ideas – and programmes to win over misguided people who had been beguiled by the evil through a combination of psychological action and good deeds, particularly the provision of goods, services and infrastructure. At least that was the theory.

Following the Second World War, insurgency emerged from the combination of nationalism and anti-colonialism, peasant unrest, leftist or communist ideologies which exploited and organized this discontent, and, in some cultures, a tradition of banditry and raiding. There were two main currents: conflicts based on opposition to outside rulers, particularly the European colonial powers, and class based conflicts (some with ethnicity elements) against local elites. The latter were most common in Latin America and the Philippines (where the power system still reflected the Spanish colonial tradition). Of the colonial counterinsurgents, the British, Dutch, Belgians and, somewhat later, Spanish and Portuguese developed approaches reflecting imperial stabilization. Policing was central; local issues and grievances were paramount. The French understanding of insurgency-based conflict was the most holistic, stressing its revolutionary nature. The theorists of guerre revolutionaire ‘assumed a flexible, fanatic opponent who had outmaneuvered an army that was both naive in the ways of subversive war and received insufficient backing from the government and people back home’ (Paret 1964: 7).

The emphasis on ‘an army’ was important. Where the British saw counterinsurgency as akin to colonial policing and thus stressed the synthesis of police and military efforts, the French (and later the Americans) considered it to be more like war than policing. Eventually this perspective dominated. Even non-colonial states facing insurgency adopted it. This made sense: being the victim or target of war did not imply that a state was flawed or culpable. Facing rebellion did. Eventually insurgency came to be understood within the Western conceptualization of war which, as articulated by the nineteenth-century Prussian theorist Clausewitz, is viewed as purposeful behaviour with a rational, policy-focused dimension intermixed with passion and chance. For instance, Roger Trinquier, one of the primary French writers on guerre revolutionaire, called it ‘a new form of warfare’ which included ‘an interlocking system of actions – political, economic, psychological, military – that aims at the overthrow of the established authority in a country and its replacement by another regime’ (Trinquier 2006: 5, italics in original). Traditional armed forces, Trinquier continued, ‘no longer enjoy their accustomed decisive role. Victory no longer depends on one battle over a given terrain. Military operations, as combat actions carried out against opposing armed forces, are of only limited importance and never the total conflict’ (Trinquier 2006: 5) This idea persists – the first sentence of chapter 1 of current British counterinsurgency doctrine states, ‘Counterinsurgency is warfare’ (British Army 2010: 1–1).
The idea that insurgency was a variant of war dominated American thinking. President John Kennedy, who initiated US efforts in counterinsurgency, called it another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin – war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of combat; by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him.4

Seeing insurgency this way allowed American presidents to mobilize domestic support for involvement by portraying it as an act of aggression by evil people but it hindered US effectiveness at counterinsurgency. The American strategic culture traditionally considers war an episodic and unusual condition. When it occurs, military efforts move to the fore. The objective is the decisive defeat of the enemy and a return to normalcy – ‘not war’. The conflict is, in current terminology, ‘enemy centric’ rather than condition centric. This left the United States psychologically and organizationally ill equipped for protracted and ambiguous conflicts, particularly those involving insurgency. Since war in American strategic culture was caused by evil people rather than the behaviour of those who were attacked, it was difficult to grapple with the idea that insurgency reflected deep systemic and even cultural flaws. American counterinsurgents understood the importance of systemic re-engineering but remained most comfortable with defeating the enemy. The thinking was that the local elite and political leaders would undertake the re-engineering.

While most Western nations have clung to the notion that insurgency is war of a peculiar variant, this idea has not been universal. Some strategic theorists such as Ralph Peters, Edward Luttwak, Martin van Creveld and Michael Scheurer argue that it is more like war than not, and hence the objective is the use of force to defeat the enemy (Luttwak 2007; Peters 2006; Scheurer 2008; van Creveld 2006).5 This follows a long tradition. Throughout history, many practitioners of counterinsurgency, from Rome to the Soviet Union and contemporary Sri Lanka, took this track, treating insurgency as an enemy-centric conflict where decisive military victory was attainable (so long as one was not squeamish about the application of force). From this perspective, the appropriate response is force directed at insurgents and their supporters – to ‘out terrorize the terrorists’. It also suggests that it is primarily a military activity, and that decisive defeat of the insurgents should be the goal. Despite the logic of this idea the norm, as codified in Western doctrine, has been to attempt an uneasy blend of war and political and economic (but not social and cultural) re-engineering. This addresses the symptoms of pathological systems but largely leaves the foundation of the conflict intact.

The difference between conventional war and counterinsurgency arose from the triangular nature of the conflict. Conventional war sought to destroy the enemy’s armed forces or at least render them ineffective. At times, this was done indirectly by eroding the armed forces’ support, whether psychologically by crushing the will of the enemy population (e.g. strategic bombing) or physically, by destroying the enemy’s industry and agriculture. But even actions directed at something other than the enemy’s armed forces were undertaken because of the effect on the armed forces. The assumption was that the enemy population supported its armed forces. This support could only be shattered by force or the threat of force.

In the orthodox conceptualization of insurgency, the population – or at least most of it – was seen as ‘swayable’. It might support the insurgents either willingly or under duress, but could be enticed to end this support by the provision of goods and services including political and economic opportunities, security and physical infrastructure. This reflected the market logic of Western political theory which saw politics as rational, value optimizing activity. In the historical
context which gave rise to the orthodox conceptualization, this made some sense. Throughout
what was then known as the ‘Third World’, previously quiescent segments of the population,
particularly the rural peasantry, were awakening during the twentieth century. Their loyalty was
up for grabs. Insurgent leaders capitalized on this and attempted, with mixed results, to use
popular support to compensate for their weaknesses in numbers, money and arms. The ortho-
dox conceptualization thus saw insurgency as a violent competition for public support in a
political market where leaders and ideas competed for support. ‘At the heart of any counterin-
surgency (COIN) campaign’, according to a paper written to augment British counterinsur-
gency doctrine, ‘lies one basic requirement – the population of the territory concerned should
form the perception that the government offers a better deal than do the insurgents’ (Crawshaw
2009). As befits the Western tradition, it was all a matter of rational choice and optimizing out-
comes, reflecting the idea that politics, like the economy, should reflect a moderated but open
market. As is often true, French theorists took the point even further. Trinquier, for instance,
contended that victory in counterinsurgency (or ‘modern warfare’) required ‘the unconditional
support of a population’ – something that no government on earth has ever or will ever attain
(Trinquier 2006: 6).

The official definitions of insurgency used by Western nations reflect their broader political
ideas: it is a form of war used by insurgents in pursuit of political objectives, often to seize state
power and become the state (and thus attain a monopoly on sanctioned violence). The leftist
revolutionary insurgencies of the twentieth century were considered paradigmatic. In an
important 2008 study from the RAND Corporation, for instance, David Gompert and John
Gordon characterized insurgency as ‘war by other means’ composed of ‘organized movements
to overthrow existing ruling structures by a combination of force and popular appeal’ (Gompert
and Gordon 2008: xxix). Such ideas also permeated official thinking. The US military’s first
post-Vietnam counterinsurgency doctrine defined insurgency as ‘an organized, armed political
struggle whose goal may be the seizure of power through revolutionary takeover and replace-
ment of the existing government’ (US Army 1990). Current US Army counterinsurgency doctrine – written in response to the conflict in Iraq – states that ‘Political power is the central
issue in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies; each side aims to get the people to accept its
governance or authority as legitimate’ (US Army 2006: 1–1). Joint US doctrine defines insur-
gency as ‘the organized use of subversion and violence by a group or movement that seeks to
overthrow or force change of a governing authority’ (US Army 2009: I-1). Australian doctrine
defines it as an ‘organised, violent and politically motivated activity conducted by non-state
actors and sustained over a protracted period that typically utilises a number of methods, such
as subversion, guerrilla warfare and terrorism, in an attempt to achieve change within a state’
(Australian Army 2008: 2–1). The Indian military considers it ‘an organised armed struggle by
a section of the local population against the State, usually with foreign support’ (Indian Army
2004: 16).

Conceptualizing insurgency as a variant of war (albeit with a few different features than con-
ventional state-on-state war) propels strategy and policy in a particular direction. For instance,
it makes the response primarily or, at least, heavily military. While the United States, at least, has
sometimes used the word ‘war’ euphemistically (the ‘war on poverty’, the ‘war on drugs’), it has
always been more literal in the realm of insurgency and counterinsurgency. Logically, if insur-
gency is war, then the military should be the leading organization. And since the military’s
organizational ethos remains, despite efforts to alter it, enemy centric, few if any counterinsur-
gency campaigns have transcended this notion. For Western nations and those influenced by
Western ideas, conceptualizing insurgency as a variant of war also focused efforts to counter it
on the national state. As many scholars have noted, the modern territorial nation state became
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the dominant type of political organization in large part because of its effectiveness at war (Tilly 1992; van Creveld 1999). Treating insurgency as a form of war meant that the solution was strengthening the national state, to include augmenting national security forces, both military and police. And treating it as war meant that ‘victory’ – defined as the destruction of the enemy – was the goal. Systemic factors which allowed the emergence of conflict might be addressed (as began to happen with conventional wars in the twentieth century), but this was to follow the defeat of the enemy or be part of such a defeat.

Ultimately the orthodox conceptualization of insurgency, arising out of Western political concepts and twentieth-century anti-colonial and leftist insurgencies, reflected an array of assumptions:

- insurgents want to become the state or to split a nation and become the state in some part of it;
- insurgency is caused by bad people willing to pursue their political goals outside the existing political and legal system;
- because they are weaker than the state, the insurgents need popular support;
- popular support is up for grabs; the public acts according to the Western notion of rational choice – seeking to maximize benefits; they will support the side that offers the best deal;
- legitimacy is based on a market logic – assumes that ‘the people’ expect the state to provide goods and services;
- the ‘people’ as a whole are politically salient; the side that gets the most support wins (as in an election);
- the solution to insurgency is for the state facing it to become more ‘developed’, defined as more Western-like.

As interest in insurgency revived in the early twenty-first century, there was little effort to re-examine these assumptions.

The counter-orthodox conceptualization

The principles which emerged from the European Enlightenment are not the norm in much of the world. Nor are they likely to be in the near term. Instead politics and political economy are a spoils system. Rewards are distributed based on control of the state and affinity or affiliation with those who control it. Elites use the political system to extract the maximum resources. The concept of ‘the people’ as it emerged from the European Enlightenment – defined by national citizenship – is weak or absent. The elites do not seek a revolutionary transformation of the political and economic systems even though this might result in less conflict. Conflict is simply a business expense – the cost of sustaining the system. Instead elites seek the perpetuation of systems that benefits them and their clients, undertaking only the degree of reform necessary to prevent the collapse of the system and, if possible, keep outside assistance flowing. There is, then, a need to transcend the orthodox conceptualization of insurgency which considers it a form of traditional war caused by variance from the political and economic model which emerged from the European Enlightenment. This would have two tracks: a redefinition of insurgency and a different conceptualization of its context.

One way to avoid common (and largely useless) debates over whether a particular organization or a particular conflict is or is not an insurgency and to move beyond the notion that anything which does not replicate the state-centric, revolutionary conflicts of the twentieth century is not insurgency, is to think of it as a type of strategy that can be used in many types of conflicts.
by many types of organizations (Duyvesteyn and Fumerton 2009). This avoids many of the common distinctions which encumber the orthodox conceptualization. Analysts often debate whether an organization is an insurgency or a terrorist movement. For instance, Namrata Goswami illustrates the common thinking when she distinguishes the two by arguing that insurgents desire to control a given area and terrorists do not, instead using violence against non-combatants ‘for political signaling’ (Goswami 2009: 69). It is more accurate to treat terrorism as a tactic or operational method which can be used in a variety of strategies, including a strategy of insurgency. ‘Pure’ terrorist movements are nearly always ones which are incapable of implementing a full scale strategy of insurgency. Insurgents often use terrorism heavily in the initial stages of their strategy, hoping that it will gain attention and draw support which can then be used in a more general campaign using a strategy of insurgency. It is to ‘awaken’ potential supporters.

Another distinction sometimes used by both scholars and military or government officials is between insurgency and civil war. A civil war is simply a violent conflict within a nation – the antagonists share a citizenship. If there is a significant asymmetry between the antagonists, the weaker may resort to a strategy of insurgency. Often they do so because they lack the power to undertake a strategy based on conventional combat. But an insurgency is not analytically distinct from a civil war. One concept deals with how an organization uses its resources; the other with the identification of the antagonists.

As a strategy, insurgency is adopted by a weak organization against a power structure and the organizations which dominate it. It is most often used by a non-state organization against a state but may also be used by a non-state organization against a transnational power structure (e.g. al-Qaeda), or by a nation (e.g. Iran). The weak organization may seek specific political objectives or, in some cases, control of and a total transformation of the power structure. The strategy of insurgency uses or threatens the use of violence. Non-violent movements may adopt a strategy which has some of the characteristics of insurgency but is not actually insurgency.

Within the strategy of insurgency, the weak organization seeks to postpone resolution of the conflict while it adjusts the power balance in its favour. Thus the strategy deliberately seeks to extend the conflict. An organization using insurgency assumes that postponing resolution will lead to a shift in the power balance in its favour because it has superior will, coherence and sense of purpose. Some of the most effective movements using insurgency have a teleological ethos, believing that the laws of history or divine will are on their side and will eventually remedy their weakness. Insurgency involves diminishing the importance of realms of conflict or ‘battlespaces’ where the weak organization is inferior, particularly the conventional military one, and emphasizing ones where its inferiority is less, such as the psychological realm. Phrased differently, the strategy seeks to make the conventional military realm non-decisive. This is one of the most important points on which insurgency can differ from traditional war. In addition to surviving and taking actions which weaken the power structure or state, a strategy of insurgency entails actions and activities designed to augment the strength of the movement or organization using it – again as part of shifting the power balance. This may involve building alliances or partnerships or directly augmenting the strength of the movement or organization by recruitment, fund raising, acquiring weapons or other tools, training, and developing more effective organizations and operational methods.

Organizations and movements can attempt the strategy of insurgency anywhere but it takes roots and, on rare occasions, succeeds in certain types of political-economic systems. States vulnerable to insurgency tend to be ones where the key prizes – the things which determine control of the nation – are the capital and regions which produce the resources which fuel the
modern sector of the economy, often by exports. The modern sector of the economy seldom dominates the daily life for most people. Vulnerable states always have a modern sector along with grey or black economies and informal sectors which are larger in terms of their impact on the population. So long as the state controls the national capital, other major cities and the resource-producing regions, it is willing to tolerate limited or even no control over the hinterlands, urban slums, and the informal or grey and black economies.

Patronage is the lifeblood of politics in these systems, as also discussed in the contribution by William Reno in this volume (Chapter 12). Elites which dominate the state and the modern sector of the economy develop a web of patron/client relationships, sometimes based purely on personality but often with an overlay of family, clan, ethnicity or sect. Political power takes the form of concentric circles. The inner ring is the national leader and his closest patrons — often family. The rings consist of others with declining affinity the further from the core. The fusion of political and economic power means that the patronage of the state is lucrative and used to buy support or, at least, political passivity. Patronage based systems do not focus their attention on the population as a whole, but on individuals or groups who could pose a challenge to the system. These are bought off or, if necessary, repressed. Potential opponents of the system are played against each other.

Most states throughout history have followed this model, as do many, probably most, nations today. Citizens or occupants of the state did not expect extensive services from the state other than some degree of protection from invaders or bandits and, in some societies, maintenance of infrastructure, often having to do with waterways and irrigation. The social contract which serves as the foundation of legitimacy is much more limited than the type that emerged from the European Enlightenment. More importantly, the notion that development invariably moves towards an Enlightenment-style social contract may not be totally false, but evidence suggests that it is very different than the sort of linear progression which many Western theorists — including some contemporary ones — expected. There is a social contract of sorts with those with the power to challenge the system or those geographically close to the capital or resource-producing regions. But the further removed from power or sources of power, the weaker the social contract.

Such systems are brittle and prone to conflict. Rulers misjudge threats. They may not be able to extract enough resources to fuel the patronage system. Elites do not care about conflict by people or places removed from the centres of power. Thus rebellion, secession and organized banditry are common. But, for the elite, they are tolerable unless they threaten the core of the system. Most of the time, the conflict in such systems does not take the form of insurgency. But in the twentieth century a number of factors gave rise to politically based conflicts based on insurgency. One was the political awakening of previously apolitical segments of societies, particularly rural peasants. While history is replete with peasant revolts, this awakening melded with an ideology, developed and refined by non-elite urban intellectuals, based on socialism and anti-colonialism. Like the nationalist and anti-feudal revolts of the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this gave the discontent of excluded but mobilized segments of society a focus other than purely local grievances, thus making it more powerful and dangerous. Anti-colonialism blended with new forms of political discourse on the left in the Western world and the organization of anti-authoritarian politics among the youth to glamorize political insurgency. Western college students did not wear T-shirts with a picture of bandits or leaders of localized peasant revolts, but did sport the image of insurgents like Che Guevara. Within the nations where insurgency-based conflict occurred, to be an insurgent was seen as noble, a gesture of self-sacrifice, thus appealing to the idealism which was particularly powerful among the youth as they looked for new
frameworks of identity and order to replace traditional ones crumbling in the face of urbanization, increased communication, expanded education and wider economic change. It was a perfect storm of factors spawning a golden age of insurgencies.

Global politics amplified this trend by making the means of insurgency – particularly weapons and knowledge – readily available. In part this was a result of the massive amount of armaments and military expertise left over from the Second World War. But, more importantly, it was the result of the Cold War, as the two ideological blocs, constrained from direct military confrontation by nuclear weapons, turned to proxy conflict. Initially the Soviets, their allies and the Chinese armed and trained insurgents while the United States and other Western powers armed and trained counterinsurgents. By the 1980s, both sides aided friendly insurgents and counterinsurgents. The United States saw Nicaragua and, especially, Afghanistan as strategic successes arising from support for insurgents.

The key point is that systems based on patronage rather than on a permeable market for talent and ambition are prone to pathologies, whether political violence or other forms such as organized crime. Youth bulges, urbanization and the breakdown of old methods of order – and the accompanying anomie – amplify the problem. In any society, the weaker the system for distracting and disciplining the youth, particularly young males, the greater for violence of all kinds, including the political. If the pathologies are not organized politically using a strategy of insurgency, they will simply manifest in some other form, at least in the absence of systemic re-engineering and a major change in the political and economic culture. This is sustained because those with the power to re-engineer the system have a vested interest in it. Their objective is to preserve the system as much as possible while staving off challenges that might destroy it and their ability to extract reward from it. Often the optimal situation is a controlled, isolated or contained insurgency-based conflict which is organized around an ideology capable of attracting support from outsiders for the state and the elite.

The idea that a fragile or challenged elite benefits from political violence is important. Organized violence has always played an important role in creating nations and in legitimizing a system which avoids defeat. The psychologically liberating effect of political violence has been a recurring theme among French thinkers like Georges Sorel and Frantz Fanon (Sorel 1961; Fanon 1963). The United States, as Michael Vlahos notes, was created and re-created by its Revolutionary War, Civil War and participation in the world wars of the twentieth century (Vlahos 2009; Wilson 1966). In the modern security environment, few states can undertake a traditional war against another state so sub-national violence serves as a surrogate, justifying the regime and the system.

Finally, war economies become an important part of insurgency-based conflicts. Internal wars ‘frequently involve the emergence of another alternative system of profit, power, and protection in which conflict serves the political and economic interests of a variety of groups’ (Berdal and Keen 1997: 797). Hence the insurgents, criminals, militias or even the regime have a greater interest in sustaining a controlled conflict than in attaining victory. As Paul Collier notes:

> various identifiable groups will ‘do well out of the war’. They are opportunistic businessmen, criminals, traders, and the rebel organizations themselves. The rebels will do well through predation on primary commodity exports, traders do well through the widened margins on the goods they sell to consumers, criminals will do well through theft, and opportunistic businessmen will do well at the expense of those businesses that are constrained to honest conduct.

*(Collier 2000: 103–4)*
Within this context, movements or organizations which utilize a strategy of insurgency vary in three dimensions. The first is their functional focus. All such movements simultaneously generate resources (people, money, arms, information), they undertake violence and they pursue political goals. Their priority among these varies according to both conditions and strategic choices. An insurgent movement which feels that time is against it or the balance of power between it and the state has shifted in its favour will focus on violence and political objectives. A movement which feels that time is on its side or is still too weak to directly attain its political objectives will focus on resource generation. A common pattern is for insurgency-based movements to eventually lower their emphasis on both violence and political objectives and concentrate on resource generation. They become, in effect, criminal enterprises with a veneer of politics.

A second dimension is organizational coherence. Movements using a strategy of insurgency fall along a continuum. At one pole are formal organizations with internal specialization and a command hierarchy. They evince strategic behaviour – balancing ways, ends and means, and adjusting the strategy as conditions change. In many ways, they emulate the state and may administer areas they control in a state-like way. Insurgencies using a Maoist approach see the progression towards such formality as the logical evolution of their movement. At the other end of the continuum, insurgencies are informal. They are composed of semi-autonomous cells or bands, sometimes with a loose degree of cooperation among them (but not formal command). Their armed actions take the form of swarming. Such movements are less likely to become state-like, but are more survivable than formal ones since there are no critical nodes or centres of gravity which can cause the movement to collapse if destroyed. The point, though, is that formality and informality are not binaries. A movement is not one or the other. Rather, insurgencies fall somewhere between formality and informality, and may shift along the continuum during their lifespan and the duration of a conflict.

The third dimension is objective. Again, this is best conceptualized as a continuum. At one end is simple survival; at the other are teleological objectives such as replacing the state or even sparking a transnational revolution which alters the balance of power across a region or many regions. While the orthodox conceptualization of insurgency, with its roots in the Maoist movements of the twentieth century, is based on the idea that all insurgencies want to replace the state, in the modern context many want the power of the state but not the responsibility. In other words, they seek only to augment their ability to extract resources, including both power and money. They seek to alter the players in a parasitic or patronage-based system, but not the system itself. Many of the insurgency-based movements in sub-Saharan Africa take this form. For example the Lord’s Resistance Army in northern Uganda gives little indication of wanting to assume administrative responsibility for their region, much less the country as a whole, but instead to be a more effective parasite (Vinci 2005). Under such conditions, the Western notion of legitimacy, which undergirds the orthodox conceptualization of insurgency, is nearly meaningless.

A key part of an insurgency-based conflict is the struggle by the antagonists to portray what is taking place. The more that the insurgent movement can make the conflict about affinity, identity and justice, the greater the advantage for them. Involvement by outsiders which support the state facilitates this. The state, by contrast, gains by portraying the conflict in terms of legality versus illegality, or as external aggression. Ultimately the battle of portrayal is not, in itself, decisive, but it is very important for the outcome of an insurgency-based conflict.

**Implications**

Because the Western notion of counterinsurgency is derived from the Western authored, orthodox conceptualization of insurgency, it concentrates on strengthening the state which exists in
a patronage-based, often parasitic, political context. Thus it seldom leads to a decisive outcome in terms of permanently stabilizing the system, instead simply making the state more effective at fending off challenges, distributing patronage and extracting resources. Afghanistan under Hamid Karzai is a perfect illustration. At times the Western style of counterinsurgency does help quell an insurgency – Iraq for instance. But so long as the system remains deeply flawed, the pathology simply takes other forms. The insurgency in El Salvador ended in the 1990s but today that nation is nearly paralysed by organized crime and gang activity. Often entities other than the national state remain the primary providers of security and justice; the economy remains divided into a formal sector which does not serve most of the population and an informal sector which does. For outsiders involved in counterinsurgency support, this may be enough: the conflict moved from the front page of the newspaper to an afterthought. But this is not victory if it is defined as creating a stable national state with a near monopoly of force. Like health problems in a society or crime, the violence may be controlled or pushed into a less destructive form, but it persists.

States vulnerable to insurgency are those which fall into a grey area. They are patronage-based, parasitic and closed but not fully effective at repression. Patronage-based, parasitic closed systems which are effective at repression like North Korea, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Iran, China and Syria do not allow the space for insurgency to coalesce and strengthen. Only when such systems begin to lose their ability or willingness to repress does the space exist for insurgency to form. In the spring of 2011, Libya seems to be such a state; Zimbabwe may become one.

In the contemporary security environment, the resources for insurgency-based conflict – arms, money and information – remain available. The only question is whether the motivation also persists. During the twentieth century insurgency sometimes appealed to individuals and organizations excluded from power in patronage or parasitic systems or ones ruled by outsiders because it seemed to offer a feasible and appealing method for the weak to confront or vanquish the strong. Today interconnectedness and information technology help provide alternative methods as the wave of popular rebellions that swept the Arab world in 2011 showed. If a dictator can be overthrown relatively quickly by ‘people power’, there is little incentive to undertake the arduous and dangerous insurgency approach. Egypt is a perfect illustration: insurgency failed there in the 1990s while popular uprising worked in 2011. At the same time, the insurgencies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and dozens of other places have not succeeded, at least in the way their architects intended. All of this suggests that insurgency-based conflict may again be ebbing. Certainly patronage-based, parasitic systems will continue to experience high levels of violence but it is likely to take other forms – perhaps the criminal warfare of Mexico – rather than traditional political insurgency. As insurgency ebbs, it will flow again in the future. When this happens viewing it as a strategy and reconceptualizing its dynamics and context will help scholars and governments better understand it.

Notes

1 I do not use the word ‘industry’ in a value-laden, pejorative sense (a tendency derived from the Marxist intellectual tradition) but simply to mean a range of organizations and individuals filling the demand for counterinsurgency analysis and actions.
2 I was typical, writing nothing on insurgency or counterinsurgency between 1995 and 2004, instead focusing on what was called the ‘revolution in military affairs’.
3 A foreign state undertakes counterinsurgency support when the primary counterinsurgent force is local. For instance, the United States and the United Kingdom undertook counterinsurgency in Iraq through 2004, and then shifted to counterinsurgency support.
Rethinking insurgency

4 President John F. Kennedy, Remarks at West Point to the Graduating Class of the US Military Academy, 6 June 1962.
5 It is no coincidence that all of these works appeared during the height of frustration over the conflict in Iraq.
6 In part, the admission that insurgencies may have aims more limited than taking over the state was a result of the fact that the United States was itself supporting or had recently supported insurgencies in Nicaragua, Angola and Afghanistan while the doctrine was being written.
7 The pioneering work on ‘hydraulic’ states or empires was Wittfogel (1957).

Recommended readings


References

Fanon, Frantz (1963) *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove.