Development of Modern Counterinsurgency Theory and Doctrine

James S. Corum

Insurgency, the effort to overthrow the government of a state carried out by internal groups using violence, has been with us since organized states have been in existence. Although insurgency has been one of the most common forms of conflict, no theories of counterinsurgency appeared until the end of the nineteenth century. To well into the twentieth century insurgency was commonly seen as a military problem which simply required the government to send troops to defeat the insurgents. However, as states, societies, and economies grew in complexity and organization, so did insurgencies.

Historically, most insurgencies have failed due to the military and political weakness of the insurgents when facing substantially larger military forces and economic resources of the ruling state. However, some insurgencies have been spectacularly successful and enough have succeeded so that it remains a reasonable option for a group wishing to overthrow a government. Yet, although insurgency has remained one of the most common forms of conflict, the literature on the subject is surprisingly thin—especially when one compares it to the vast literature on conventional war. Still, enough theoretical work has published to provide a foundation for analyzing this highly complex form of conflict. This essay will focus on the development of counterinsurgency theory and doctrine among the Western powers from the late nineteenth century to the present.

The Beginnings of Counterinsurgency Theory

Sometimes insurgents have adopted the organization, strategies and tactics of conventional states and armies and fought in a highly conventional manner—the American War of Independence is a good example of this. However, in most cases, insurgents have been forced by necessity to fight the war of the weak and eschew
conventional tactics and organization, and employ irregular or guerrilla warfare against the government. But insurgents can still win by employing a better strategy than the defending government. One effective strategy is to engage in a prolonged war in which the insurgent succeeds simply by wearing down the government’s will to the point where a political settlement is possible. Insurgents have often employed guerrilla tactics to wear down government forces and force the government to spend far more in money and resources than it can reasonably afford.

General Carl von Clausewitz briefly addressed the subject of “people’s war” with the example of Spain before him. In 1808 Napoleon overthrew the Spanish kingdom and replaced it with a puppet regime headed by his brother. This inspired a spontaneous revolt of thousands of Spaniards who organized irregular forces to fight a guerrilla war [from the Spanish, meaning “little war”] of ambush and harassment against the French forces. While the Spanish guerrillas were too weak to fight major battles, they nevertheless inflicted a large number of casualties by their constant raids against rear garrisons and supply lines. Eventually, the French were defeated by the British and Allied armies on the battlefield, but not before being greatly weakened by guerrilla war. For Clausewitz this irregular form of warfare could, under the right circumstances and given strong popular support, be highly dangerous for the forces of a conventional power.

Although Clausewitz addressed the subject only briefly, he recognized that a conflict fought by non-state forces against conventional armies constituted a different type of war than one fought between conventional states and armies.\(^1\) The great theorist of war understood that war between state and non-state forces required its own theory, but never followed this line of thought further. Despite numerous military operations in their colonial empires throughout the nineteenth century, there was no theory of insurgency and counterinsurgency until the end of the century. The first author to seriously address the issue of conflict with non-state enemies was British Major General C.E. Callwell in the book *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, published in 1896. Callwell’s book went through several editions and was popular reading in the British Empire, where the military and political leaders had to deal with numerous rebellions in the colonies.

Callwell defined small wars as “campaigns undertaken to suppress rebellions and guerrilla warfare in all parts of the world where organized armies are struggling against opponents who will not meet them in the open field.”\(^2\) The forms of conflict that Callwell described would be classified today as insurgencies. In Callwell’s study the enemy consisted mainly of “irregular forces,” which included everything from semi-organized armies to tribal levies and bandits. Callwell’s method was

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\(^1\) Clausewitz’s main discussion of guerrilla war is found in Book 6, Chapter 26 of *On War*. He touches on aspects of insurgency in Book 3, Chapter 5; Book 5, Chapter 17; and Book 8, Chapter 3. For the best edition of Clausewitz in English see Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

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highly historical and he cited many colonial military operations conducted by the major powers to illustrate his points. Callwell emphasized that the nature of the enemy and the politics that drove the conflict made a “small war” a fundamentally different kind of conflict. He began his study by describing the many different forms that irregular warfare could take. But the conditions of small wars are so diversified, the enemy’s mode of fighting is often so peculiar, the theatres of operations present such singular features, that irregular warfare must generally be carried out on a methods totally different from the stereotyped system [meaning state on state warfare].

One of the most important differences between Callwell’s small war and conventional warfare was the greater role of intelligence in fighting irregular forces. Not only did the counterinsurgent power have to find the military forces of the rebels, but it also had to understand the whole of the society that it was dealing with—from the economy to the tribal organization. The counterinsurgent power had to thoroughly understand the groups and factions of a region in order to win their open support, or at least their neutrality, in an irregular conflict. Callwell’s description of the difficulties of intelligence collection and analysis still rings true in today’s conflicts. Callwell’s book was a useful first step towards helping Western powers to understand counterinsurgency. It is foremost a practical book and was highly influential in its day. Leaving the strategy to the politicians, he concentrated on the operational and tactical side of counterinsurgency campaigns.

When American troops occupied the Philippines after the 1898 war with Spain they became embroiled in a campaign to suppress Philippine nationalists and had to quickly develop a counterinsurgency doctrine. Although the Philippine Insurrection (1899–1908) was America’s first major colonial war, the US Army was not completely devoid of useful experience to serve as a guide. American commanders drew upon their experience of fighting the Indians as well as the British experience of colonial warfare as recounted by Callwell. The US military leaders adapted quickly and developed a sophisticated strategy to defeat the Filipinos. While waging an aggressive military and police campaign to defeat rebel forces in the field, US military commanders also stressed the non-military aspects of the campaign. American regional commanders established local self-government, and began civic action programs such as schools and medical care that visibly improved the lives of the people. An important part of the American strategy was a policy to co-opt rebel leaders by granting amnesty to those willing to lay down their arms and recognize American sovereignty. Former guerrillas were readily accepted into the ranks of the local and regional governments once they had proven their loyalty. Although not formally codified in regulations, the US

3 Ibid., pp. 21–42.
4 Ibid., p. 3.
5 Ibid., pp. 43–56.
strategy included a “hearts and minds” campaign that addressed the causes of discontent among the population.  

Transition from Rebellion to People’s War

The first insurgency that can properly be described as a “people’s war” in the modern sense was the rebellion of the Irish nationalists against British rule from 1916 to 1922, during which the Irish waged a guerrilla war of small raids and skirmishes across Ireland. Small groups of rebels assassinated British officers and agents, raided police stations and ambushed army patrols. Clumsy sweep operations by conventional forces failed to clear areas of rebels, as the IRA columns evaded the British conventional forces and chose battle only on their terms. Though the Irish inflicted little damage to the British military, they created enough casualties to cause dissatisfaction in Britain over the cost of holding Ireland in the Empire.

In the Irish nationalist strategy the establishment of an underground government—complete with finances, law courts, and an underground press—was just as important as their military operations. Rebel violence forced the British governmental authorities to retreat into protected enclaves so that the day-to-day managing of the country, especially in the rural areas, was taken over by the well-organized, nationalist civil authorities. Eventually the Irish nationalists were accepted by the majority of the Irish as the legitimate government, while the British were seen as foreigners lacking true legitimacy. Although the Irish nationalists never won any major military victories, they won the war by simply staying in the field.

While the British failed in Ireland, they also fought a series of successful counterinsurgency campaigns in the colonies, the largest of these being the suppression of a major revolt in Iraq in 1920. For Britain and the European powers the insurgent threat in the colonies consisted mostly of poorly organized nationalist factions that attempted to fight a conventional war against their foreign occupiers. The European powers, equipped with the latest technology and able to deploy well-trained and well-supplied forces, had an insurmountable advantage against rebels when it came to fighting in Syria, Morocco, the Sudan and elsewhere. Because the European forces possessed such huge military advantages over irregular forces, little effort was made by European armed forces to develop a more sophisticated counterinsurgency doctrine. The counterinsurgency thinking that did occur was almost all in the military and tactical realm.

In contrast, the American military developed a relatively sophisticated doctrine for counterinsurgency in this era. The US government carried out numerous military interventions in the Caribbean and Central American region between 1914 and 1934, with the intent of creating stability and propping up pro-American

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regimes rather than imposing direct colonial rule. The US Marine Corps, which served as the primary American intervention force in the Caribbean and Central America, developed new doctrines that brought the counterinsurgency and military occupation missions to the level of high art. For one thing, the American thinking focused on a more comprehensive approach to counter irregular enemies. In the administration of Haiti (1914–1934), during the interventions in Nicaragua from 1925 to 1933, and in other interventions, the Marine Corps gained considerable experience in conducting a variety of missions against irregular enemies. Marine Corps operations included fighting insurgents, supporting pro-American indigenous governments, training local constabularies, building local infrastructures, and even administering small countries. This experience was collected and edited by a group of Marine officers and published in 1940 as the *USMC Small Wars Manual*.

The *Small Wars Manual* has long been considered one of the classics of counterinsurgency literature. While some sections dealing with the specific tactics of infantry operations are dated, most of the *Small Wars Manual* deals with fundamental issues of military operations and strategy that have remained largely unchanged. Sections of the doctrine deal with coordinating the civilian and military arms of the US government, the requirement for US political leaders to set clear political objectives, and linking military operations to the political objections. The *Small Wars Manual* discusses the conduct of intelligence operations in counterinsurgency, the training of local forces, and even organizing the military occupation of a country. Throughout the Marine doctrine there is an emphasis on conducting operations within the framework of international, American, and local law. Developing and maintaining good relations with the local population is held to be an essential part of successful operations. The *Small Wars Manual* reminds the reader of the importance of establishing the political legitimacy of US-supported local government and institutions. The *Small Wars Manual* also rules out a heavy-handed approach toward counterinsurgency. The minimum practical amount of force is recommended, with the understanding that maintaining good long-term political relations with the local inhabitants is always the paramount goal.

Mao’s Model of Revolutionary War

Mao Tse Tung, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party, developed a comprehensive theory of insurgency as he fought the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-Shek during the 1930s and 1940s. It was a quantum leap forward in establishing a practical theory for an insurgent. In a series of essays written over a decade, Mao developed a “people’s war” strategy to enable the militarily weaker insurgents to defeat superior government forces. Mao’s model was drawn from

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classical military and Marxist theory, military history, and an analysis of China’s conditions. Mao’s theory of people’s war has influenced, and continues to influence, insurgent groups throughout the world.\(^8\)

Mao’s theory assumes that revolutionary wars are likely to be protracted wars. Even where there is widespread dissatisfaction with the government, revolutionaries are rarely strong enough in terms of the military forces or economic resources needed to mount an effective military campaign early in the insurgency. Mao believed that the revolutionaries’ best hope was to develop a superior political organization, to win the mass of people to their side, to build up “liberated areas” as bases for continued operations, to continually attrite and weaken government forces by guerrilla war and, finally, to defeat the government by force once the measures of relative strength favored the insurgents.

Mao put his priority not on building military forces, but in first building a strong revolutionary organization. With a strong central organization the insurgent could gain control of the populace, no matter how strong the government was in terms of military power. For Mao, military power was an outgrowth of a strong civil organization and in revolutionary warfare it was the population, not the armed forces, which provided the centre of gravity. For Mao, the revolutionary organization had to be continuously expanded and nurtured by propaganda and education. Well-organized insurgents could absorb military setbacks and still prevail in the long run as long as the organization was preserved. Mao’s victory in the Chinese civil war was largely due to his brilliance in building a powerful organization.

Many post-World War II insurgencies followed a variation of Mao’s “people’s war” model and the Maoist model was found to be a highly effective means for conducting insurgency in countries whose populations consisted mostly of peasants. The Vietnamese insurgency against French rule (1946–1954) provides a good example of adapting the Maoist model to local conditions. Truong Chinh, a Vietnamese communist theoretician, understood the necessity for a protracted war to defeat the French, but disagreed with Mao’s concept of guerrilla forces. Truong Chinh developed a particularly Vietnamese strategy of a “war of interlocking,” in which both guerrilla and regular insurgent forces would conduct simultaneous operations against the French government forces.\(^9\)

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8. The most useful overview of Mao’s works on revolutionary warfare theory in English is found in the *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking, 1963).

New Models of Counterinsurgency

After World War II France, Britain and other European powers faced a variety of insurgent challenges by nationalists eager to overthrow colonial rule. In other cases weak, pro-Western governments such as those in Greece and the Philippines were threatened by communist revolutionary insurgents with support from the Soviet Union. The post-war wave of insurgencies was a greater threat than anything the Western powers had faced within their empires. The successes of Mao’s revolutionary insurgency theory and its variants compelled the non-communist powers to find an effective counterinsurgency doctrine. With the start of the Cold War, defeating local insurgent movements took on an international significance.

Among the first challenges to be faced by Britain and the United States was the communist insurgency in Greece between 1944 and 1949. Greece had been devastated and impoverished by the world war and had a large and dissatisfied rural population with legitimate grievances. Such a population provided many willing recruits to the Greek Communist Party, which had used the wartime occupation to organize and arm itself. By the end of the war the Greek Communist Party possessed a large military force and controlled much of Greece. To help the newly established pro-Western Greek government, Britain and the United States provided considerable military and economic support. Britain and the United States sent military advisors, trainers and equipment to help the Greek government build an effective army. President Truman understood that it was essential for the Greek government to address the economic privation of the Greek populace, so along with military support the Americans provided hundreds of millions of dollars of financial aid to help the Greek economy. In Greece the British and American strategy proved successful. British and American military equipment and training gave the Greek armed forces the necessary superiority to defeat the communist forces in the field and US economic aid helped the Greek government meet the basic needs of the populace.

In the Philippines a communist rebellion challenged the newly independent Philippine government from 1946 to 1954. As in Greece, the insurgency had its roots in long-standing social problems, notably in the high level of poverty among the peasant laborers. The Philippine Communist Party and its military arm, called the Hukis, developed from wartime resistance movements and were well-equipped and prepared to launch an insurgency at the end of the world war. The initial reaction of the Philippine government was a heavy handed military campaign against the rebels, which only served to further alienate the rural peasants and win more recruits for the insurgents. By 1949 the insurgency was growing rapidly.

As in Greece, the United States provided military advisors, trainers and equipment to improve and enlarge the Philippine military. The American military advisor to the Philippine defence ministry, Lieutenant Colonel Edward Lansdale, USAF, worked closely with the highly capable Defence Minister Ramon Magsasaysay to craft a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy. Realizing that the key to success lay in winning over the rural peasantry, the US financed development programs in the countryside where the insurgency had its roots. The Philippine
Army combined military operations with civic action activities that visibly improved the lives of the Filipino peasants. Magsaysay demonstrated inspired leadership as he worked tirelessly to visit the rural people and address their most pressing issues. Land reform ensured that many formerly landless peasants were granted title to plots of public land. An amnesty program not only encouraged the guerrillas to surrender, but also provided them with financial help to get started as independent farmers.10 As the government addressed many of the concerns of the rural populace, the insurgency receded.

In the British colony of Malaya, post-war disorder and the rise of the Malayan Communist Party during the world war set the stage for a major insurgency that broke out in 1948. At first, the British dealt with the insurgency by military action. Forty thousand army troops were committed to Malaya, the 10,000-man police force was increased to 40,000, and tens of thousands of Malayan home guards were recruited to guard the mines and rubber plantations that produced Malaya’s wealth. Yet, even with the massive application of military power, the insurgent army continued to grow and had reached more than 10,000 fighters, backed up by many thousands of active sympathizers, by 1951.

A new cadre of military and civilian leaders sent out in 1952 quickly turned a bad situation around. The new governor general and military commander, General Gerald Templer, made political and economic reform the key elements of the British strategy. Another key element of the British strategy was to Malayanize the conflict by training an effective Malayan army and reforming the police.11 Large unit sweep operations that had little effect against the insurgents were replaced with a military plan centred on small unit offensive operations and a major effort to provide basic security for the population. The British defused the nationalist issue by promising independence to the Malayans and systematically preparing the Malayans to take responsibility for their own security. More than anything else, the British effort was based on a program of building sound Malayan institutions. The British strategy quickly turned the situation to the advantage of the government and by 1955 the insurgency was fading quickly and was virtually gone when Malaya became independent in 1959. Although Britain lost a colony much earlier than expected, the newly independent Malaya had a pro-Western and anti-communist government. Strategically, it was a good outcome for Britain.

In the aftermath of insurgencies in Greece, Malaya, and the Philippines, a major conflict was heating up in Vietnam that featured both an internal insurgency and an outside conventional attack by North Vietnam. Largely to meet the challenge of insurgency in Vietnam, several of the most successful British and American practitioners of counterinsurgency wrote books that discussed the


strategic, operational, and tactical lessons learned in recent campaigns. Sir Robert Thompson, who had served as a senior civilian in Malaya, wrote several important books dealing with the basic principles of counterinsurgency operations. Colonel Lansdale, who had served in the Philippines, wrote his memoirs of the campaign and described the development of a successful strategy. Taken together, the works of these British and American practitioners amount to a comprehensive theory and doctrine model for counterinsurgency operations against insurgents employing variations of Mao’s revolutionary warfare strategy. Some of the basic principles outlined by the American and British authors were:

1. The civilian population is the centre of gravity in an insurgency. One cannot defeat insurgents without winning the support of the population. Counterinsurgency strategy should be geared to driving a wedge between the population and the rebels. 2. Successful counterinsurgency requires a comprehensive strategy that combines military and police operations with social, political and economic action. Since insurgencies grow out of large-scale dissatisfaction with the government, the social, political and economic problems that provide the fuel for insurgency need to be addressed. 3. There needs to be a unity of effort by the government forces, that is, close coordination between the military and civilian agencies at every level. 4. Effectively fighting the insurgents, who usually live among and draw support from the civilian population, requires good intelligence. Military and police action without good intelligence is largely a wasted effort. 5. Military and civic action campaigns need to proceed simultaneously, and be coordinated with each other. 6. The government needs to wage an effective media campaign to reassure the population and undermine support for the insurgents. 7. Military and police power needs to be applied carefully and with discrimination. A “heavy-handed” approach is wasteful and can cause discontent among the populace.

As the British and Americans carried out their post-war counterinsurgency campaigns the French fought two major campaigns in Indochina (1946–1954) and Algeria (1954–1962). To address the conditions posed by these conflicts several French officers developed their own line of counterinsurgency theory. One of the most important French works on the subject was written by French Army

Colonel Roger Trinquier and published as Modern Warfare in 1961. Trinquier, who had served in several counterinsurgency campaigns, outlined some useful tactics for dealing with urban rebellion, including a discussion of how to seal off a city district, collect comprehensive data on the population, and register the population as a means to limit the ability of insurgents to move within the country. Trinquier’s doctrine differed from the British/American model on several points. First of all, Trinquier viewed counterinsurgency primarily in military terms. Establishing a military presence and crushing the insurgents by force was his first priority. In contrast to the British and American view that military action should be carried out simultaneously with civic action programs, Trinquier argued first for military action to crush the insurgents. Only then would the government carry out its civic action programs. Whereas British and American theorists of the 1950s and 1960s believed that building up a legitimate civilian government and supporting indigenous institutions were key elements of counterinsurgency strategy, there is little of this in Trinquier’s work. Essentially, Trinquier believed in strong-arming the population into compliance with French rule.

A French counterinsurgency specialist with an approach closer to the British/American views was Lieutenant Colonel David Galula, who published several important works on counterinsurgency in the early 1960s. Galula had extensive service in Algeria and described the French army tactics that had been generally successful in winning control of most of the Algerian countryside from the FLN rebels. For Galula, presence was essential and the French civic action teams of the SAS provided an effective model of bringing a positive government presence to rural Algeria. For Galula, the essential thing for the soldier was to work closely with the population. As the campaign in Algeria progressed, local home guard groups proved highly effective in defending the villages from FLN influence.

Although Galula’s theory of placing the priority of effort in winning over and protecting the population proved to be a sound approach to counterinsurgency, the French campaigns in Indochina and Algeria ultimately failed because the French strategy of trying to maintain a colonial empire in the post-World War II world was simply impossible. Excellent operational techniques and tactics could not substitute for a national strategy that never had a chance for success. Britain in Malaya followed a more realistic strategy of allowing independence, but ensuring that the independent Malaya would be stable and pro-British.


America’s Failure in Vietnam

In Vietnam from 1961 to 1973 the US government and military signally failed to apply lessons from recent successful counterinsurgency campaigns. While there were many unique aspects to Vietnam many were also remarkably similar to the conditions in the Philippines and Malaya. In all these cases the counterinsurgent was working with similar rural societies and the rebel forces had a similar ideology, organization and tactics. In the early 1960s Edward Lansdale, now an Air Force general, and Sir Robert Thompson, appointed as chief of the British advisory mission to Vietnam from 1961 to 1965, urged the US military to undertake a concerted counterinsurgency campaign in that country. They argued for a comprehensive civil/military strategy based on the model of the campaigns in Malaya and the Philippines and a strategy that would enable the South Vietnamese to defend themselves rather than rely on US military forces. Un fortunately, US military leaders at the time could only think in terms of large-scale conventional war. Starting with the introduction of American combat divisions to Vietnam in 1965, the counterinsurgency side of the conflict was largely ignored by the American military as it concentrated on the big battles against the North Vietnamese Army. While the US was usually successful in the battlefield, such success failed to support the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese state or provide security to the peasant villagers of South Vietnam.

In 1969 Thompson told the US military commanders that their conventional war strategy was “a failure” and argued that the US should have concentrated on building up the South Vietnamese Army from the start. Thompson, along with several American experts, pointed to the US Marine Corps program of training local defense forces in the northern sector of the country. The USMC policy of putting small detachments to live among the Vietnamese villagers and to train local home guard forces had made the rural areas of the north secure from Vietcong activity. Although such a program would have increased the security for the rural population in the south, the conventionally-minded General Westmoreland


17 Thompson’s sharp critique of American strategy in Vietnam is found in No Exit from Vietnam, pp. 122–144. However, Thompson also pointed out that some potentially effective counterinsurgency programs were weak because the effort was too thin and spread out and that programs to build the economic and social infrastructure lacked coherence. See pp. 152–55.
would hear none of it. Westmoreland, the US military commander in Vietnam from 1965 to 1969, had no interest in operations that did not rack up impressive body counts and refused to deploy army forces for activities such as securing the rural population. When Thompson argued that the Malaya strategy of clearing and pacifying one district at a time was also appropriate for South Vietnam he was again ignored.

In 1969 General Creighton Abrams replaced General Westmoreland as American commander in Vietnam and dramatically changed the American strategy. Where Westmoreland had focused on fighting a conventional war against the North Vietnamese units, Abrams made securing the South Vietnamese rural population the primary American mission. Under Abrams rural economic development under the CORDS program became a top priority. The new strategy, aimed at undermining the Vietcong insurgency, soon showed dramatic results. Vietcong insurgent presence in the countryside diminished as the rural areas became more secure and more prosperous. By 1972 the Vietcong insurgency in the countryside was essentially defeated. But the Abrams strategy came too late to change the course of the war. American public opinion had turned against the Vietnam War by the summer of 1968 and the American public was insisting on reducing the US forces in Vietnam. In taking over direction of the war effort in 1965, the Americans had ignored the vital mission of helping the South Vietnamese build sound institutions. When the Americans pulled out of Vietnam in 1973 the South Vietnamese government and military were not strong enough to resist the North Vietnamese. In April 1975 South Vietnam fell, not to the Vietcong insurgents, but to a conventional armoured Blitzkrieg carried out by North Vietnamese conventional forces.

After the Vietnam War most of the American military leaders—the same leaders that refused to employ a counterinsurgency strategy in Vietnam—took away the false lesson that counterinsurgency strategies did not work. The prevailing attitude in the US military and government was “no more counterinsurgency wars.” The many positive lessons of Vietnam, such as the effectiveness of the rural pacification policy from 1969 to 1972, were forgotten in the mainstream military as it focused its attention on developing conventional war doctrine to oppose the Warsaw Pact. Counterinsurgency courses were cut out of the curricula of the American military staff colleges, and the study of the subject was relegated to the Special Forces and a few military academics. The key parts of the military essential

18 Thompson, No Exit From Vietnam, pp. 122–39.
19 Ibid., pp. 197–8.
22 US Army Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl argues that the US Army in Vietnam was not an effective learning institution. See John Nagl, Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife:
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for counterinsurgency operations were gutted. Special operations forces were greatly reduced and the human intelligence expertise, the most important form of intelligence for counterinsurgency, was drastically cut as money and personnel were transferred to high-tech intelligence systems best suited for conventional war.

A Counterinsurgency Success

In the aftermath of Vietnam, a remarkable counterinsurgency success in El Salvador went almost unnoticed in the US military establishment. From 1981 to 1992 the US provided military advisors and trainers to El Salvador, as well as several billion dollars in military and economic assistance, and helped that country defeat a strong Marxist insurgency. The small group of American military and State Department personnel who served in El Salvador developed a strategy that generally followed the classic British/American doctrines of counterinsurgency—all of which were validated by the outcome of the war.

At the start of their involvement the American advisors determined that the Salvadorans had to initiate broad reforms in the military and civilian spheres; that the economic problems of the nation had to be addressed; that Salvadoran security forces had to be retrained and reformed; and that an emphasis had to be placed upon civic action and human rights throughout all levels of government—something alien to the tradition of military dictatorship that had long prevailed in El Salvador. After Vietnam the US Congress would not allow the US military to commit large conventional forces to the conflict, so the US support to El Salvador was restricted to advisors, trainers, equipment and supplies. The military advisors and State Department officials on the ground used American aid as a lever to push the Salvadoran government to accept the changes that were needed to defeat the insurgents.23

The El Salvador experience added to the corpus of Western counterinsurgency theory.24 Max Manwaring, who served for several years in El Salvador helping to craft a comprehensive strategy for the Salvadorans and Americans, argued for a “new people-oriented model. Every policy, program, and action—military, political, economic, opinion making—must contribute directly to the maintenance or enhancement of political legitimacy. As much must be focused on pre-conflict and


post-conflict periods as on the conflict itself.” Manwaring was mainly restating essential principles of counterinsurgency that had been forgotten after Vietnam. Manwaring argued that the war in El Salvador was not just about military action but equally about social, political and economic reform: “The ultimate outcome of any effort to deal with a given conflict is not primarily determined by the skilful manipulation of violence in one of the many military/police battles that might take place.” El Salvador was compared with other insurgencies and a useful matrix was drawn up outlining the many tasks that a nation needed to address in order to successfully defeat the insurgents. While the success in El Salvador led to a renewed interest in counterinsurgency among a small group of American military officers, the mainstream US military leaders still expressed little interest in such conflicts.

It should be noted that at the same time that some Americans were learning lessons in El Salvador, the British military was gaining broad experience in counterinsurgency in Northern Ireland. Tactically and operationally it was a very different kind of war from the campaigns recently fought by British troops in Aden and Oman. In Northern Ireland the British forces had to operate in an urban environment and develop a sophisticated human intelligence system capable of tracking down the small IRA terrorist cells.

### Insurgency Evolves

While the Maoist model of insurgency still remains common—witness the ongoing Marxist insurgency in Colombia—groups in the Middle East developed a new insurgent strategy and organization to carry on the fight against Israel during the 1980s and 1990s. In 1987 Palestinians in the territories occupied by Israel rose up in a rebellion called the *Intifada*, which has been conducted at varying levels of intensity ever since. In contrast to the highly centralized leadership of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), some of the Palestinians developed a new and very loose form of organization. The *Intifada* became a popular rebellion organized through a network of small local groups. The local committees and the leaders of the United National Command of the *Intifada* followed a different path than the guerrilla leaders in the past who emphasized personal charisma and leadership. Handbills produced by the local committees were simply signed “UNC” (United

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26 Ibid., p. 54.

27 See Max Manwaring and John Fishel, “Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency: Toward a New Analytical Approach,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* (Winter, 1992), 272–305. The authors provide a matrix of requirements needed to oppose insurgency successfully.

National Command) and Intifada leaders chose to remain anonymous. With an insurgent leadership that was difficult to identify, the usual Israeli tactic of arresting the local and national PLO leaders failed to cripple the organization. The new form of guerrilla organization proved highly resilient against all the Israeli efforts to suppress it. The Palestinian rebels also showed a new sophistication in their ability to work through various media to publicize the Palestinian cause to the world and to place Israel under intense international pressure. With only a few regular fighters and little chance of striking any serious military blows against Israel, the Palestinian insurgents have had considerable success in winning legitimacy in the eyes of the world.

After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon to defeat the PLO in 1982, the Israelis faced a new style of insurgent group in the form of Hezbollah, the organization of the Lebanese Shiites that led the resistance to Israel in the occupied zone of southern Lebanon. Hezbollah was originally organized around Shiite clerics, and based its popularity on being a combination of an ethnic and a religious organization. As with the Palestinian Intifada, Hezbollah is loosely organized into many semi-independent cells under a large central council. Military activity is kept on a small scale, with most military raids against the Israelis carried out by no more than a squad. Beginning in the early 1980s, Hezbollah pioneered the use of suicide bombers as a standard tactic against the Israeli forces. The decentralized nature of the Hezbollah organization also made it difficult for the Israelis to strike any decisive blows against the leaders or military forces. After 18 years of desultory warfare in southern Lebanon, the Israeli public was frustrated with the ongoing conflict and in 2000 Israel simply pulled its forces out of Lebanon. Hezbollah was left in effective control of the southern third of the country. The conflicts in the Middle East inspired a small group of thinkers within the US military to analyze the new tactics and strategies developed by Hezbollah and the Palestinians. One of the leading thinkers looking at the changes in insurgency conflict was Colonel T.X. Hammes, USMC, who described the new, loosely-organized forms of insurgency as “fourth generation warfare” in a series of articles in the Marine Corps Gazette. In 2004 Hammes refined his analysis in The Sling and the Stone, which laid out the challenge of modern insurgency as that the US and Western powers are facing today in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Counterinsurgency Lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan

After taking down the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001 and Saddam Hussein’s army in Iraq in 2003 the United States armed forces found themselves singularly

unprepared to fight insurgents or irregular enemies, or to carry out any operation other than a high-tech conventional war. From 2001 to 2006 the US military leadership was generally slow to respond and adapt to the challenge of fighting insurgents.

After the remarkable victory over Iraq during the Gulf War of 1991 there appeared a kind of euphoria among many of the top US military leaders. The rapid and decisive victory over Saddam Hussein’s large army was won through the application of superior technology and at a price of less than 200 fatalities on the American side. Decades of training and preparing for the high-tech conventional war had paid off handsomely. For most of the US military, and most of the American public, the Gulf War seemed to prove that American technology presented such an overwhelming advantage that the US could apply the same formula to defeat almost any potential enemy quickly, efficiently, and decisively — and at minimal cost.\textsuperscript{31} Richard Cheney, secretary of defense during the First Gulf War, was highly impressed with this vision of warfare and commented shortly after the Gulf War: “This war demonstrated dramatically the new possibilities of what has been called the ‘military technological revolution in warfare’.”\textsuperscript{32} Through the 1990s the limited conflicts in Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999 seemed to confirm that technology was the primary factor in warfare. Claims were made by the top officers in the US military that high technology had fundamentally changed warfare; that modern technology had overcome the fog and friction of the battlefield that Clausewitz described as the normal condition of war.

Largely because such fallacious thinking was so prevalent in the US military in the 1990s there was little planning for the occupation of Iraq. After the US and coalition forces won the conventional victory against Saddam Hussein’s forces in 2003 Iraq quickly descended into chaos and civil war. For a long time after the start of the insurgency, the US military and civilian leadership failed to understand the conditions in Iraq.\textsuperscript{33} Despite the recent experience of the interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s, when large forces on the ground had been necessary to stabilize the situation, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Myers insisted upon occupying Iraq with a force far too small to establish order.\textsuperscript{34} The view of many in the American military

\textsuperscript{31} On the US military’s lessons from Gulf War One and the belief that the conflict represented a fundamental change in the nature of war, see James S. Corum, \textit{Fighting the War on Terror} (St Paul: Zenith Press, 2007), pp. 51–82.

\textsuperscript{32} Cited in Thomas Keaney and Eliot Cohen, \textit{Revolution in Warfare?} (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), p. 188.

\textsuperscript{33} There are many recent accounts of the failure of US strategy and leadership in Iraq. For one of the best accounts see Thomas Ricks, \textit{Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq} (London: Penguin, 2006).

\textsuperscript{34} On the historical troop requirements needed for interventions and stability operations, see James T. Quinlivan, “Force Requirements in Stability Operations,” \textit{Parameters} (Winter, 1995), 59–69. Quinlivan points out that Northern Ireland, Malaya, Bosnia, and a host of other stability operations required as many as 20 soldiers per 1,000 civilians to effectively control the population. The US force ratio in Iraq from 2003 to 2005 was less than five soldiers to every 1,000 of the population.
leadership was that America’s high-tech advantage made numbers on the ground unnecessary. What they forgot was that successful counterinsurgency requires constant human interaction, and that requires troops on the ground rather than sophisticated space surveillance or airplanes at 30,000 feet.

Failing to stabilize the situation, various factions in Iraq had the freedom to organize and initiate violence against each other and the coalition forces. With no plan or strategy the US and coalition forces failed to build effective Iraqi institutions and security forces. A few intermediate commanders showed some talent for counterinsurgency, the most notable being General David Petraeus, commander of the 101st Airborne Division in Iraq in 2003 to 2005. Promoted to lieutenant general in 2005 he took over the US Army Combined Arms Command and organized a specially selected group of Army and Marine Corps officers and civilian experts to develop a new, comprehensive counterinsurgency doctrine to respond to the challenges facing the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan. In late 2006 the Army and Marine Corps published their first comprehensive counterinsurgency doctrine since the Vietnam War, Field Manual FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency.

FM 3-24 was published as capstone army doctrine, that is, one of the six primary manuals upon which all army doctrine is based. Over 220 pages long, the manual is essentially a book-length treatise on the theory and practice of counterinsurgency. It begins with a chapter on the principles of counterinsurgency, which are essentially the same as the principles established in British and American doctrine in the 1960s. The techniques of intelligence are discussed in detail and extensive advice is provided on the techniques of building host nation institutions and security forces. Most of the work follows the well-known and highly effective counterinsurgency techniques of the past and all the points are illustrated by brief historical vignettes. What is new about the doctrine in FM 3-24 is its emphasis on understanding the new, networked type of insurgent organization. The doctrine contains an extensive annex written by a sociologist to provide the counterinsurgency planner with a basic social network analysis model. Most importantly, the doctrine stresses the importance of a comprehensive strategy for counterinsurgency in which the military is only one of the elements—and perhaps not the most important one. Basically, the doctrine more than adequately fulfills its purpose of providing practical guidance for the commander and staff planner.

While FM 3-24 is a big step forward for the American military, one still wonders if the US and its allies will continue to develop their understanding of what is likely to be a prevalent form of warfare in the twenty-first century, or whether the institutional preference of the civilian and military leadership for the high-tech conventional war approach will derail the progress made in counterinsurgency theory and doctrine. Even at the time of this writing (2008) there is considerable resistance within the US military leadership, notably in the US Air Force, to
abandoning the high-tech/minimal manpower strategy that failed to live up to its promise in both Afghanistan and Iraq.35