

Castles Made of Sand

Leites and Wolf *An Alternative Approach: Insurgency as a System*

Let it first and foremost be said that the *Alternative Approach* prescribed by Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf, Jr. in Rebellion and Authority: An Analytic Essay on Insurgent Conflicts is “generalization and theory.” Leites and Wolf were looking towards economic theory to fill in gaps in existing COIN theory during the 1960’s . As stated in the preface of the essay, “Rebellion and Authority is richly – perhaps prodigally – endowed with historical experience and empirical detail.” Given the current pace and application of our current Army, few would disagree with the fact that there are innumerable volumes written, and indeed being written on the events taking place in Iraq and Afghanistan; much as there were numerous volumes of the same nature appearing during the Vietnam conflict. However, the amount of real theory being written about insurgent and rebellious action today has not changed much since the time Leites and Wolf published Rebellion and Authority. As the authors put it in 1970, “[Insurgency] is a subject whose wealth of detail is accompanied by a poverty of theory.”¹

Unlike the other lessons or readings, the Rebellion and Authority contains a purely theoretical approach from the *supply-push side view* to understanding how and why insurgent movements live or die. The previous readings in this course examine insurgency as a sociopolitical phenomenon from the *demand-pull side view*, also known as the “hearts and minds” approach. These economic terms refer to the theory of consumer behavior. In the assigned reading, R will denote rebellious factions, or insurgent movements, and A will denote the formal authority of the state.

It is the belief of Leites and Wolf that the main body of insurgent theory too often neglects or misunderstands the importance of the supply conditions of the movement. The main argument for looking at the supply side rather than focusing wholly on the demand side of the system is that while the demand function must be addressed if a lasting solution is to be made; the supply side is more elastic in the short run. This means roughly that the supply side can be grasped in less time and acted on more quickly with

¹ Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf, Jr. in Rebellion and Authority: An Analytic Essay on Insurgent Conflicts. Rand 1970. Also found in Chewing Sand pp. 155-165

visible results than the often abstract demand side of the problem. If you can clearly understand the difference between the Leites' and Wolf's viewpoint of insurgency theory and the Taber/Lenin/Che approaches, you are on track. If you need a refresher, see [wikipedia's supply and demand page](#) for a review of market behavior and general economics.

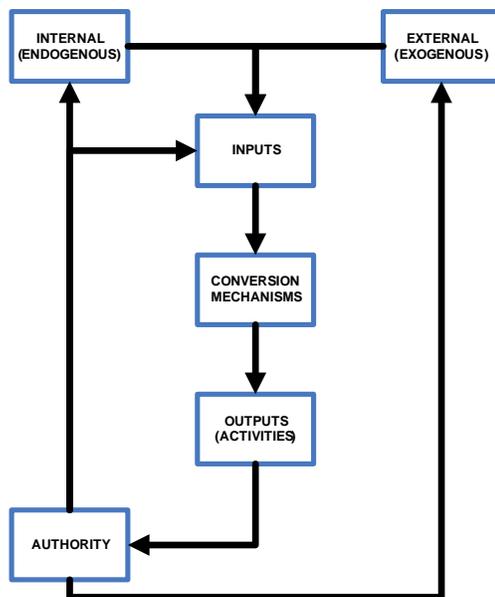


Fig. 1 The Insurgency as a system

In regards to the environment Leites and Wolf propose three characteristics of modernizing states that tend to provide the opportunities we have previously discussed that allow rebellion to appear. The first factor is the presence of cleavages and antagonisms. These include general class disparities, socioeconomic differences between urban and rural areas, and ethnic, religious, linguistic and racial group disparities. Other antagonisms include the presence of foreign elites and the

inherent stresses of modernization in a state. The second characteristic is the “mutual isolation” present in many underdeveloped nations. This refers to both the geographic and social distance between separate communities that form the state itself. The final characteristic that provides insurgents opportunities is really an aspect of the “mutual isolation.” The ability to gather, “timely information” is a critical function of the authority to defeat rebellion. To the rebellion, information usually is in abundance, and trustworthy, since they are most likely “of the people.”

The insurgent system, as shown below, acts like a pump. It is a model for understanding how rebellion takes resources (inputs) and converts them into actionable activities (outputs). Understanding the pump aspect is critical. The more successful operations the rebellion can pull off, the more resources they will have access to. Thus, the rebellion as an entity grows in size, power, influence, or authority by larger and larger steps. The final takeaway from this lesson is the relationship between the

behavior/conduct of the population and their sympathies/preferences, and how these affect the population's interaction with the insurgency. In the Leites and Wolf view, it is the population that plays a principle role in the inputs for both the rebellion and the authority. Understand that the individual or group under this mindset are assumed to be rational as we have previously discussed and that their choice of action will determine which side has the advantage at any given moment. The key to understanding the interaction between the rebellion, the authority, and the population is that ACTIONS (or the absence of such) are what determines popular support, not feelings.