

Reading the Tea Leaves[®]

Every unit does it in an insurgency, tally up the insurgents killed and detained and the number of weapons captured. Producing these lists provides concrete data as to what the unit has accomplished. The numbers appear as quantifiable results, but is it a true measure of success? The inherent problem with these numbers is interpreting what exactly they mean. The lack of a set order of battle in an insurgency prevents intelligence analysts from comparing numbers to an order of battle in order to determine enemy strength. If there are no templates to assess the data, what can such statistics of enemy killed, captured and equipment seized tell a commander?

To answer this question, four elements of a counterinsurgency are examined in relation to each other. Three of these elements are known, and by interpreting these, the fourth is determined. The goal of the fourth element is to determine if the insurgency is growing or declining in strength. This fourth element will then provide the starting point for discussing the interpretation of data in counterinsurgency. This discussion only examines the physical number of guerrilla soldiers and is acknowledged as a superficial account of the strength of an insurgency.

The first element is the guerrilla. Unlike traditional militaries, the insurgent guerrilla's barracks are his home which is also the battlefield of the conflict.¹ Mobilization of the guerrilla soldier is when he is activated by his cell leader. The guerrilla is always at war. This very elusive nature of the insurgent is why counting guerrilla soldiers will never tell full story of the enemy insurgents, but it does provides one view of the overall health of the insurgent movement.

The second element tracked is the number of government troops. The number of troops on the ground assists in determining the amount of violence suppression and interface with the local population. If the number of government troops on the ground is

¹ Evans, Edward and Spies, James. "Insurgency in the Hood" Unpublished thesis. Naval Postgraduate School, June 2006.

constant, and the missions stay the same, this number remains a constant.² If the number of troops performing administrative functions decreases in relation to the number of troops patrolling, the interface with the civilian population increases in a commensurate manner. The end result is an increase in the number of human intelligence reports.

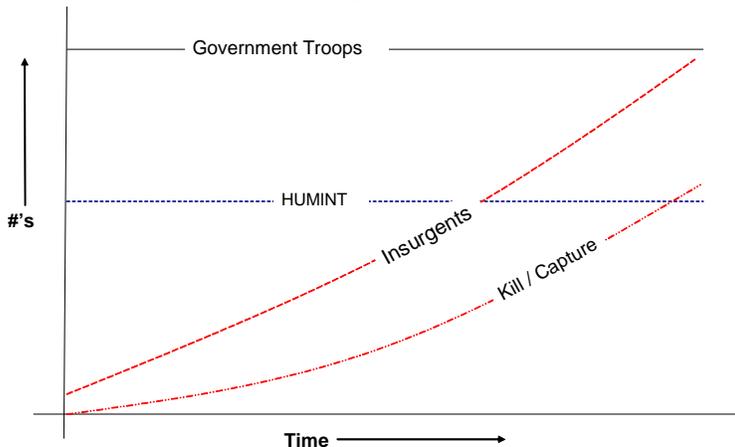
This brings about the third element examined, Human Intelligence (HUMINT). It would prove far too simplistic to state that the number of HUMINT reports matters. The HUMINT report should be examined in terms of the quality, depth and quantity. If the number of reports has remained constant, but the quality of the reports has increased the result is an increased ability to target insurgents. In a similar manner, if the reports increase, along with an improved ability to target insurgents, there also exists an improvement in the HUMINT reporting.

The number of enemy killed and captured provides the rest of the information for this discussion. This number, like the number of government troops and HUMINT reports, is used to derive the growth curve of insurgent strength. The variable in determining the number of captured or killed insurgents lies in the inability to discern between combatants and noncombatants. Common to most insurgent wars, especially in the early stages of the conflict, is the lack of formal military structure or identifying uniforms by the insurgents. The insurgent's operating technique of staying within the

civilian population until a chosen time and place for attack, ensures that the numbers of killed or captured insurgents recorded by government troops will always be skewed.

Determining the trends in insurgent troop strength may appear

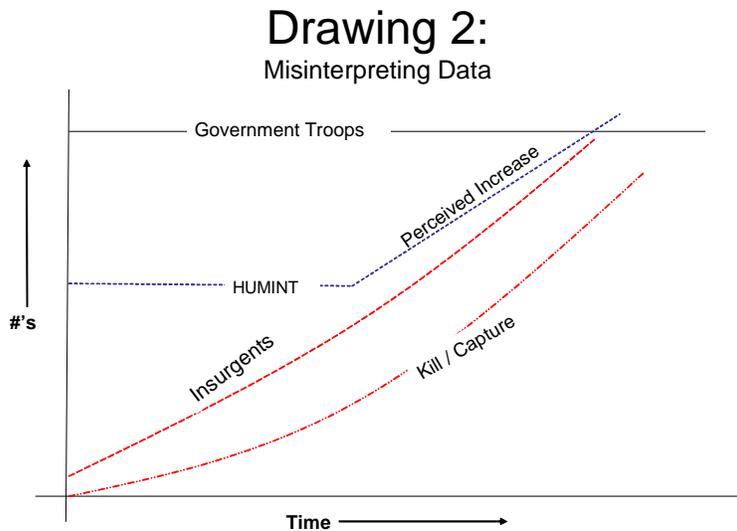
Drawing 1:
Losing the fight



² The term government troop refers to all forces the government can utilize in its fight against the insurgency. This should include a robust civil defense group or constabulary.

tantamount to reading tea leaves. With little hard evidence, an intelligence analyst feels like they are being asked to predict the future when the question arises of whether a turning point has been reached. In reality, if Government troop strength, HUMINT reports, and enemy killed and captured are tracked, a general understanding of insurgent strength is possible. Using the chart below, the relationship between these three is demonstrated. The chart demonstrates the growth of an insurgency over time. If the government troops remain at the same strength, and there is no significant change in the quality or quantity of HUMINT reporting, then an increase in enemy killed and captured equates to a rise in insurgent capabilities. This is the opposite of a commander’s initial perception of the situation. Examining the number of enemy killed or captured without taking into account the level of intelligence that led to the target results in a false sense of accomplishment.

There are multiple shortcomings to this analytical model. The first problem is that the insurgent reserves most of the initiative concerning when and where to expose himself to the government forces. This ability to manipulate the time and place of engagement can skew the number of killed and captured. This was seen in Iraq during the elections of 2005 ³ where a faulty interpretation of insurgent activity led to a false sense of accomplishment.

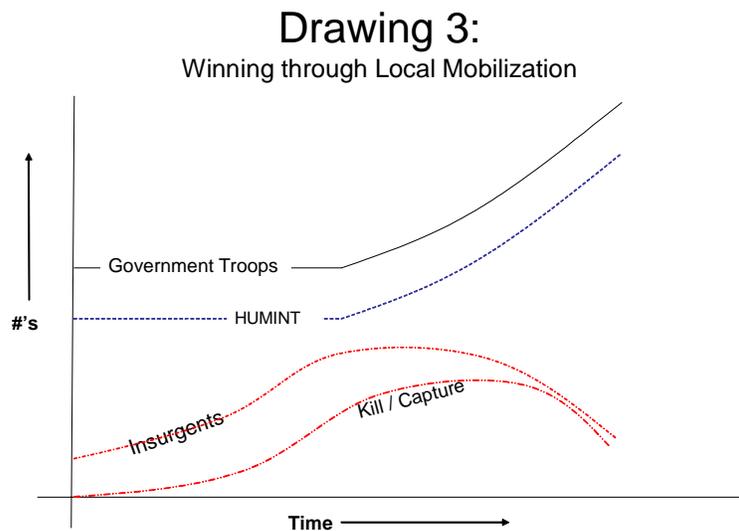


The importance of HUMINT is critical to overcoming this problem of skewed interpretation. It is nearly impossible to determine the depth and breadth of HUMINT penetration into the insurgent movement. The result is that government forces have no real concept of the value of their

³ Bensahel, Nora. Gauging Counterinsurgency. *Baltimore Sun* on August 9, 2005

intelligence. If the quality of the intelligence is over-valued while the kill and capture rate is on the rise, the government troops may actually be losing when they perceive themselves to be achieving their objective. Drawing No.2 demonstrates the danger of overestimating the value of HUMINT. Just because a HUMINT asset has been in place for a long period does not mean it has increased in quality.

So what constitutes, “Winning an insurgency?” The reality is that if the local population is being properly mobilized and a local constabulary is formed and



intelligence reports are on the rise then the government troops are winning.

If local defense units are included in the calculation on government troops, a rise in troop strength is in turn annotated on the chart. This local troop strength brings with it

more HUMINT and at the preferred local level. The quality and quantity of HUMINT reports take on the role as most important statistic to track. An increase in HUMINT reporting is indicative of an increase in the legitimacy of the government’s cause.

In counterinsurgency, kill ratios have little meaning. An insurgency is a sociopolitical phenomenon that has a militant side output. The root cause, and therefore the root solution, is sociopolitical and not military. Rhodesian Defense forces were proud of their 26:1 kill ratio. Similarly, the French in Algeria maintained a 7:1 ration.⁴ The British troops in Kenya maintained a 20:1 kill ration but in Malaya attained a meager 3:1 ratio. The fact that Rhodesian and French counterinsurgency efforts were ultimately

⁴ These numbers are derived from multiple sources and in every case are the average taken between these sources. Although not attributed to a specific source, these ratios are within the mean of historical documentation of these conflicts. The figures become skewed when attempting to determine which casualties were civilian and which were combatant. The counterinsurgency in Mozambique provides a good example of this problem. In Mozambique the kill ratio could be determined as low as 3:1 or as high as 23:1 depending on how many civilians are counted as combatants.

unsuccessful and the British had such varied kill ratios between two successful endeavors demonstrates that the number of enemy killed or captured has little to do with winning the counterinsurgent fight. These statistics should give pause to any commander when attempting to determine the success or failure of his operations based on the numbers of killed, captured and seized. The statistics provide little value in projecting trends in success and failure when examined out of context.

Instead of reading tea leaves to determine the effectiveness of the counterinsurgent fight, a commander is better served by polling the sense of security of the local populace. If the local populace has a general sense of ease and is willing to talk to government troops this should be taken as a good indicator that the population is not under the control of insurgent forces and is willing to work in conjunction with government forces. Answering the call to resolve sociopolitical problems in the society will provide the long term solution to the insurgency.