

## ***Insurgent and Counter-Insurgent Strategies: Decisive Points versus Tipping Points***

Decisive points are critical components to annihilation strategies, but within exhaustion strategies, they may not only be inapplicable, they may also be misleading. Is there an alternative?

Annihilation strategists seek decisive battles with quantifiable results as their endstates. To them, defeating the enemy's army marks the finality of war. Clausewitz wrote:

Therefore a deliberately planned great battle, according to its relations, is more or less, but always in some degree, to be regarded as the leading means and central point of the whole system.<sup>[1]</sup>

There is then nothing in War which can be put in comparison with the great battle in point of importance, and the acme of strategic ability is displayed in the provision of means for this great event, in the skilful determination of place and time, and direction of troops, and in the good use of success.<sup>[2]</sup>

Within these decisive battles are decisive points which mark a specific critical point that can determine victory against the enemy. Again, Clausewitz:

We think, therefore, that under our conditions, as well as in all similar ones, the superiority at the decisive point is a matter of capital importance, and that this subject, in the generality of cases, is decidedly the most important of all. The strength at the decisive point depends on the absolute strength of the Army, and on skill in making use of it.<sup>[3]</sup>

U.S. doctrine defines the decisive point as

**1.** A point, if retained, that provides a commander with a marked advantage over his opponent. Decisive points are usually geographic in nature but could include other physical elements, such as enemy formations, command posts, and communication nodes. **2.** A time or location where enemy weakness is positioned that allows overwhelming combat power to be generated against it. It could be an enemy weakness to be exploited or a time when the combat potential of the enemy force is degraded. **3.** Conveys to subordinates a potential point of decision that the commander has identified through his estimate process to apply overwhelming combat power.<sup>[4]</sup>

In short, the decisive point is a quantifiable and often predictable point in time, position, or enemy disposition that marks the opportunity for a friendly commander to win his mission.

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<sup>[1]</sup> von Clausewitz, Carl, *On War*, Original translation by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd in 1908, London: Penguin Books, 1968, 346.

<sup>[2]</sup> Ibid. 347.

<sup>[3]</sup> Ibid. 266.

<sup>[4]</sup> FM 101-5-1, *Operational Terms and Graphics*, p. 1-46.

As we have already discussed in past Irregular Warfare Messages of the Week, insurgencies typically refrain from annihilation strategies because of limited resources or other constraints.

Instead, they opt for exhaustion strategies, attacking their enemies in small, winnable engagements on the edges of enemy control, influence, and power such that the aggregation of those attacks deplete and ultimately exhaust their enemy's critical resources. These critical resources can be money, lives, or even more subjective assets like morale or national will. Their strategy is one that avoids decisive engagement at the strategic (and sometimes tactical) level(s), balancing maneuver (fleeing) with engagement (fighting).

Without decisive engagement, there can be no “decisive point,” and “decisive,” quantifiable results are difficult to achieve. And this makes sense: insurgencies are social and political organizations first and military groups second. Quantifying any social phenomena—of which insurgencies are one sort—is never an easy task. Therefore, strategists should never expect clean, easy, convincing results when dealing with the innumerable social variables that constitute insurgencies. As a result, looking for a decisive point can at best be characterized as reductionism. Notwithstanding, there is hope: Malcolm Gladwell's *Tipping Point*.<sup>[5]</sup>

Malcolm Gladwell established the term *tipping point* in his theory that explains social epidemics. Gladwell defines the tipping point as “that one dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything can change at once.”<sup>[6]</sup> He proposes that

the best way to understand the emergence of fashion trends, the ebb and flow of crime waves, or, for that matter, the transformation of unknown books into bestsellers, or the rise of teenage smoking, or the phenomena of word of mouth, or any number of the other mysterious changes that mark everyday life is to think of them as epidemics [*sic*].<sup>[7]</sup>

According to Gladwell, understanding the physiology of how a virus spreads inside the body is only a small part of preventing the virus's spread in society. A more complete analysis also examines how interaction among humans – the social factors – permits a virus to spread between humans. The tipping point theory explains how epidemics move – and perish – in social environments. Gladwell's biggest contribution is the understanding that epidemics, and the social methodology through which they spread and recede, are not limited to viruses. They can include other social phenomena, like fashion trends, crime waves, suicide rates, hit television shows, and more.

Thus, since insurgencies are social phenomena, Gladwell's theory of social epidemics can aid in the analysis of the spread and decay of insurgent movements as well. What comprises the tipping point? Gladwell writes that the tipping point has three characteristics: “one, contagiousness; two, the fact that little causes can have big effects; and three, that change happens not gradually but at one dramatic moment.”<sup>[8]</sup> He continues, “of the three, the third trait

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<sup>[5]</sup> Gladwell, Malcolm, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

<sup>[6]</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

<sup>[7]</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>[8]</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

– the idea that epidemics can rise or fall in one dramatic moment – is the most important, because it is the principle that makes sense of the first two and that permits the greatest insight into why modern change happens the way it does.”<sup>[9]</sup> When combating insurgencies, we can most easily envision the “tipping point” to be that “one dramatic moment” when that insurgency effectively collapses, incapable of continuing military, social, political, or economic operations any longer. Just as these three characteristics “define how measles moves through a grade-school classroom or the flu attacks every winter,” they can also explain how insurgency movements grow and collapse.<sup>[10]</sup>

Though Gladwell’s work can help us understand why insurgency movements succeed, it can also help us develop a strategy that precipitates their collapse as well. For example, consider this: “little causes can have big effects” is militarily analogous to small, winnable attacks on the periphery of the enemy’s control, influence, and power such that the aggregation of those attacks, especially against critical resources, facilitates the ultimate exhaustion—or collapse—of the enemy.

There’s much more that Gladwell’s work offers to the study of insurgency and counter-insurgency warfare. For now, please consider Gladwell’s tipping point as a more appropriate and alternative benchmark around which the success or defeat of an insurgency is perceptible. The social underpinnings and exhaustion strategies of insurgencies, in my opinion, make decisive points inappropriate goals that overlook the most important factors or irregular warfare.

<sup>[1]</sup> von Clausewitz, Carl, *On War*, Original translation by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd in 1908, London: Penguin Books, 1968, 346.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 347.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 266.

<sup>4</sup> FM 101-5-1, *Operational Terms and Graphics*, p. 1-46.

<sup>5</sup> Gladwell, Malcolm, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>[9]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[10]</sup> Ibid.