

## *“Hearts and Minds” as a misleading misnomer*

To express wars of insurgency or counterinsurgency as a battle for the “hearts and minds” typically reflects a gross misunderstanding of what’s really important in these wars.

At a time when I struggle to educate the U.S. military to think of non-military solutions in these irregular fights, I hesitate to advance this discussion. According to David Galula, insurgency and counter-insurgency conflicts are 20% combat and 80% everything else (*Counter-insurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, New York: Praeger, 1964, p. 89). Since good strategy comprises diplomatic, informational, economic and military components, but 80-90% of the U.S. personnel involved in these conflicts are military, it is understandable yet unfortunate that military solutions represent the bulk of our efforts. Nevertheless, until the Departments of State, Commerce, Treasury, Interior, HUD, Justice, Education, and others obtain responsibilities and develop capabilities for deploying an appropriately-equipped combat force, the U.S. military must expect to play a significant role on their behalf. Strategically, we see lots of evidence that the U.S. military understands the non-military aspects of the fight. However, tactically there is little evidence that U.S. soldiers and marines are prepared, trained, or resourced for the non-military fight.

“Winning the Hearts and Minds” has become the mantra of enthusiasts whose intention is to get tactical level service-members to consider non-military options. At times, it has also dominated the lexicon of strategic thinkers and members of the media. I haven’t found any evidence of this slogan before the 1950s, but since then it has typified one paradigm of thinking in low-intensity conflict. While I also want soldiers at all levels to consider non-military solutions, I think that “winning the hearts and minds” misleads soldiers’ priorities on the battlefield: though one might consider the population as a center of gravity, popularity or likeability among the population is NOT a consideration.

In short, insurgency and counter-insurgency is not about being “Prom Queen” or “Homecoming King.” Successful efforts on either side focus on the population but not on popularity—being “liked” is insignificant. As evidence, history provides countless examples of both insurgencies and counter-insurgencies that leveraged extreme brutality against populations yet still succeeded. Even today, the FARC and the ELN use chainsaws and machetes against their fellow Columbians yet continue to thrive in certain areas of their country.

Instead of being contests about popularity, these conflicts are contests between systems. Insurgent’s attack regimes in order to challenge existing social orders or to reallocate power (*Special Forces Unconventional Warfare Operations*, FM 3-05.201, p. 1-4). Their first goal is to establish (or reinforce) the ineffectiveness of the current regime’s system of governance. Second, they want to offer their system of governance as an alternative. The regime’s focus is intuitively opposite: first reinforcing the strength and effectiveness of their system while de-legitimizing that of their opponents. The

victor is the one whose system emerges with “legitimacy” among the population in the end.

The easiest way to understand legitimacy is to ascertain how or to whom a citizen turns to solve his or her social, political, or economic problems. If citizens desire educational reform, and they rely on the government to fix that, then the government’s system has legitimacy (in so far as education is concerned, anyway). Similarly, if citizens have decided that the insurgent’s system will best provide land reform, then the insurgent has captured legitimacy from the regime. In the end, a citizen can choose which system overall best meets his or her needs. Some operations coerce or force citizens to legitimate certain systems. Mafia and drug cartels often use this methodology. For example, the Mafia may offer “protection” services to local businessmen. If a businessman declines, his business is subsequently thrashed by gang members that the Mafia arranges but denies, and then the Mafia reissues its offer for “protection.” Ultimately, businesses that continue to decline offers for protection are eventually run out of business or destroyed. Insurgencies employ similar tactics against citizens, but instead of focusing on business and money-making (though those are often involved, too), they focus on legitimacy of social, political, and economic governance. In many instances (the Viet Cong was a great example), terror, violence, and coercion are short-term “sticks” that the insurgency employs until the long-term “carrots” (solving citizen problems) validate their proposed system.

In the U.S., when most of us hear a “bump in the night” that we perceive we cannot handle on our own, we dial 911—the government—to rush to our assistance and solve our problem. If we have problems with education, social security, the economy, etc., we turn to our government for solutions in a variety of ways. Our government is legitimate in our eyes. The counter-insurgent should always assess to whom the citizen is turning when he or she hears a proverbial “bump in the night”—economically, politically, socially, etc. The counter-insurgent should also consider if citizens are turning to the insurgent’s system as a result of either choice or coercion.

In fact, searching for legitimacy for the U.S. system is tempting but also misdirected as well. The competition is between the insurgent’s system and the regime’s system; the legitimacy of the U.S. system inside another country is not as important as the regime’s system that the U.S. sponsors. Thus, we should focus on “working ourselves out of a job,” empowering indigenous legitimate sources of governance to solve as many social, political, and economic problems as possible and then assisting elsewhere as needed. In the early days of the counter-insurgency, the U.S., as a sponsor, will play a more direct role. Over time, successful COIN strategy should show indicators that U.S. direct intervention is required less and less while the functioning regime’s system is accomplishing more and more, from security, intelligence, and defense challenges to economic, education, and fiscal issues as well. The U.S. should take as little credit for success as possible in information campaigns, highlighting the regime’s contribution to reinforce its legitimacy amongst its own population. This humility includes military operations as well, including such big breaks as the capture of Saddam

Hussein. While some may understand this at the strategic level, soldiers at the tactical level must understand this as well.

Therefore, if “hearts and minds” means that the “hearts and minds” of the population are in support of the regime’s (vice the U.S.) system, then the slogan is an appropriate mantra for the counter-insurgent. Unfortunately, if the citizens “love” the counter-insurgent yet simultaneously rely, advocate, or support the system of the insurgent, the regime will soon fall. None of this is to say that U.S. forces should adopt immoral or brutal methodologies, but rather that they should focus on establishing a legitimate, functional system of government for the regime. A legitimate and functional governing system, not popularity, is the goal of successful insurgent or counter-insurgent operations.