

Irregular Warfare Algebra...Less is More.

Here is an interesting question to consider: How is it that some insurgencies can control so much of the population and so much territory—if not an entire country—when they are significantly outnumbered by regime forces? —and sometimes WIN? In fact, if we assume that there are 5,000 insurgents working inside of Iraq, and we also assume that our troop strength in Iraq is a nice round number of exactly 150,000, then how can the greatest military in the history of the world even pause against an unprofessional, poorly-trained, and poorly-equipped insurgent force that is 1/30 its size? Of course, this number doesn't include our gracious allies, and it also neglects recently redeployed U.S. troops and those who are currently preparing to deploy. Moreover, there are thousands who are deployed in countries around the world supporting OIF in varying capacities.

For a second...*and I respectfully tread on very sensitive ground here...*let's consider Secretary Rumsfeld's position in the early months of 2003. He had just witnessed around 100 U.S. Special Forces soldiers simultaneously topple the Taliban throughout Afghanistan and rout al Qaeda at its roots—all inside of the same country that had just defeated a world superpower less than 13 years earlier. Meanwhile, one of his generals was testifying in front of Congress that it would take “hundreds of thousands” of troops to win in Iraq—a country whose military the U.S. had just crushed less than 10 years earlier. Some reports at the time even suggested that the general privately believed the number of troops would be over 400,000. Given the Secretary's vantage, I think it's reasonable for him to wonder why the numbers were so different.

Why can insurgencies that are otherwise poorly-trained and terribly equipped often challenge numerically and logistically superior forces that possess greater military capabilities?

There are definitely some advantages to being an insurgent. First of all, insurgents don't have to play by anyone's rules except their own. As we discussed in a past Irregular Warfare Message of the Week, inherent in being an insurgent is renouncing the system against which one fights. Thus, if the system doesn't apply, neither does its rules. The same is not true for the counterinsurgent. More than ever, the counterinsurgent must show that its system can handle challenges, else the regime validates the insurgent's claim that the current system is ineffective. Notwithstanding the moral ramifications of extra-legal alternatives, failing to follow the rules risks political suicide.¹

Second, insurgents don't always have as many demands on their political or military systems as regimes suffer. Successful insurgents only choose to attack when they have a high confidence of winning, and they more traditionally find defense in maneuver rather than in engagement. This “fight-or-flee” command approach is not limited to their military intentions: it also characterizes their political, informational, diplomatic, and economic ambitions from strategic to tactical levels. Insurgents only have to solve problems or provide assistance for the population when they feel like it, because—at least in the first or maybe second phases of insurgency development—blame for unsolved grievances rests with the regime, not the resistance. Such political flexibility helps insurgencies efficiently manage otherwise limited resources. In

¹ See <http://www.usma.edu/dmi/IWmsgs/FightingUnfairToLegitimize.pdf>

general, these conditions are not too far removed from what Robert Taber termed the “freedom of poverty” and the “embarrassment of wealth.”²

Finally, technology—at least in recent decades—can help. Technological developments in the last century offer insurgents increased lethality in smaller packages, regardless of whether it’s with conventional or other chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, or electronic (CBRNE) weapons.

However, it isn’t exactly easy for the insurgency. First, insurgencies have to conduct operations and sustain their organizations just like governments. In addition, they also have to *grow* their organization. Fundamentally, this assumes that the balance of inputs and resources must be greater than the costs of operations and sustainment. In layperson’s terms, the insurgency must be bringing in more stuff than is going out, otherwise it cannot pay for expansion. This particular condition has several interesting internal effects on the insurgency. In particular, insurgent commanders must constantly decide to allocate resources that support operations, sustain the organization, or facilitate expansion. In turn, the organization suffers from an increased competition among its members for scarce assets, which can be a less-than-preferred working climate for clandestine organizations. Since personnel are resources, these same issues apply. Since many insurgencies must expand significantly in order to challenge the larger and more well-equipped regime forces, growth requirements can put a significant demand on insurgent numbers.

Second, the advantages of selective engagement (fight or flee) only apply in the earlier stages of insurgency development. As insurgencies expand to control more territory and populations, they also incur more responsibility for those regions and its inhabitants. As its shadow government develops, governmental responsibilities expectedly follow. Most importantly, the resistance must constantly compete with the regime’s benchmark. If the shadow government cannot match or sustain the regime’s quality service to the governed, then the population may turn back to the regime, and the insurgency’s credibility as a viable alternative to the regime is forever suspect. Therefore, insurgencies that are forced to sustain their challenge against the regime can eventually experience at least the same demands for personnel as the regime.

As for technology, it works both ways. As insurgents have greater lethality in their technology, regimes have materiel advantages that can usually match that technology if not also surpass it. Plus, better technologies can increase precision, facilitating a surgical lethality that can limit collateral damage. Additionally, technological increases can assist the regime in surveillance and intelligence, which can help offset the information disparity between the two sides.

Therefore, while there are clearly a few advantages for insurgents, these benefits are hardly enough to account for the gross numerical disparity that sometimes develops between insurgent and counterinsurgent forces.

As with most challenges in irregular warfare, the answer rests in the population. In short, the insurgency *mobilizes* the population. Clausewitz wrote of the trinity in war: the state, the

² Taber, Robert. *The War of the Flea: A Study of Guerrilla Warfare Theory and Practice*. London: Paladin, 1965. Page 22.

people, and the army. However, in insurgency warfare, the trinity is very blurry at best. Any “army” that exists on behalf of the resistance must come from the “people.” The only other “army” available—unless co-opted by the insurgency itself—represents the regime, and is often loyal to it. Clearly, not all the “people” support the insurgency, but if citizens want to oppose a regime, they must win the people’s support and mobilize their participation.

Thus, the population supports the cause in a variety of ways. Some volunteer; some work part-time; some provide dual-use services; some press full-time; some offer materiel support; some confer moral support; some provide passive support; some provide opportunistic support; and still others are terrorized, manipulated, threatened, or coerced into support.³

I have seen nothing yet written about the early months of OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM that truly captures the nature of what occurred as U.S. Special Forces soldiers rapidly dismantled the Taliban government and clobbered its al Qaeda supporters. Most accounts myopically focus on commanders’ decisions, unit maneuvers, and bombs dropped. Some focus on beards, horses, crazy hats, communications architecture, or the Northern Alliance—as if it was the only indigenous group or organization that opposed the Taliban and al Qaeda, but I digress. At most, some authors acknowledge warlords or even humanitarian assistance, but none that I have seen discuss how around 100 Special Forces soldiers *mobilized* the Afghan indigenous population to expel the Taliban and kill al Qaeda.

Relationships were decisive, not bombs. Factions were united to build bigger units and extend regional influence and ties. Enemy armies woke sometimes to find that a third of their “force” had deserted overnight and that another quarter had outright defected to sit in an assault position against them. U.S. and indigenous allies created and sustained human intelligence networks to help locate targets and distinguish not just between friendly and enemy, but also between foreign and indigenous. Credit for humanitarian aid delivered to the population went to the “shadow government”—the U.S. choices for governing the population once the enemy withdrew, surrendered, or died. SF and indigenous leaders created local security forces—police, neighborhood watches, and militias—to secure citizens as soon as the enemy lost contact with the population. Taliban and al Qaeda forces in Qonduz outnumbered U.S. SF soldiers by at least 200 to 1, but the former surrendered in mass because SF soldiers mobilized as many as four or five factions in three different directions, laying siege to the city for days.

Legitimacy of the follow-on government, not the U.S. government, was priority. Schools opened, markets emerged, electricity returned, and sanitation was present, all inside cities with thousands of Afghans but only 12 American soldiers. SF soldiers did not solely use their engineering, medical, communications, operations, weapons, and intelligence MOSs. They relied heavily if not completely upon the pre-existing skills and trades of local Afghans. AFSOC dropped lots of logistics from the air, but much more moved on burrows and in local “circus”

³ Dual-use services are those who civilian capacities can also provide insurgent support, like a doctor who clandestinely treats wounded or sick insurgents in his clinic or the auto-mechanic who works on insurgent vehicles for a reduced cost. Passive support just means tolerating the insurgency—not stopping it, and not participating in it, but most importantly, not reporting it. Opportunistic support comes from those who may be ambivalent or undecided about the cause or the organization, but stand to profit from it on a personal or business level, including but not limited to criminals, politicians, and businesspersons.

trucks, many of which were either taken from dead Taliban or al Qaeda or rented from the population. SF soldiers slept in local villages and feasted during indigenous holidays, but rarely got ambushed, sniped, or car-bombed. Embraced by the population, they were NEVER mayors, but instead made sure that a solid local and respected indigenous leader was. Language skills, cultural awareness, and negotiating abilities brought in NGOs to help a destitute population, located citizens that fixed or built infrastructure, and identified population needs and grievances. If the air force had not been present, Special Forces soldiers would have trained additional guerrilla and underground forces from within the population until sufficient combat power could dislodge the Taliban and kill al Qaeda. Bombs just made it quicker, tipping the scales of relative combat power rapidly from the regime to the growing insurgent force. Sending a nine-line CAS request is not complicated, but knowing how to work with a population to find a priority target to bomb is critical.

These methods are not reserved for the insurgent. Counterinsurgents can use them, too, and have. Consider this: nobody could ever accuse twelve Special Forces soldiers living alone in a city of ten thousand Afghans of being an “army of occupation.” Look to El Salvador, where a communist insurgency, supported directly and indirectly by both Cuba and the USSR, failed against an economically-challenged regime with the support of just 55 American Special Forces soldiers. Study Laos, where the Pathet Lao communist insurgency received direct and indirect support from North Vietnam, USSR, and China but was held at bay by only a few hundred Special Forces and CIA operatives who worked with the indigenous population and government. Even as North Vietnam was reeling from a military defeat during Tet, threats to the Pathet Lao’s success forced it to send two regular NVA divisions to Laos to gain control of the situation.⁴

For that matter, these methods are not reserved for Special Forces. In fact, you will find “mobilization” to be a doctrinal term. It’s not Special Forces doctrine, and it’s not Army doctrine: it’s joint doctrine. JP 3-07.1 *Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Foreign Internal Defense* has an entire appendix dedicated to Internal Defense and Development (IDAD), within which “mobilization” is one of four principle functions:

Mobilization provides organized manpower and materiel resources and includes all activities to motivate and organize popular support of the government. This support is essential for a successful IDAD program. If successful, mobilization maximizes manpower and other resources available to the government while it minimizes those available to the insurgent. Mobilization allows the government to strengthen existing institutions, to develop new ones to respond to demands, and promotes the government’s legitimacy. Page B-3.

Moreover, IDAD is not new. References to “IDAD” in doctrine date back at least to 1986 in Army FM 90-8 *Counterinsurgency Operations*.

Platoons can easily establish neighborhood watch programs in multiple villages. Instead of getting caught up in *being* a mayor, company commanders can emplace multiple mayors and sustain good relationships with them. If brigade staffs are inundated with concerns over power plants and sewage treatments, then consider this: somehow those power plants functioned (to

⁴ Blaufarb, Douglas. *The Counterinsurgency Era. U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to Present*. New York: The Free Press. Pages 163-164.

some degree) and sewage was controlled *before* Americans arrived. Brigade staffs should instead locate those locals and empower them to work on the infrastructure.

DoD understands this to a large degree. A lot of this has occurred in a lot of places, and some units have performed without reproach. In particular, U.S. forces understand this idea when it comes to training the host nation's military and or police forces. As their capabilities improve, their ability to assume more and more responsibility for their own security and policing increases. In turn, our role decreases, and ultimately, our numbers decline. Unfortunately, it's not just in the military aspect in which we have to work ourselves out of a job. A secure country isn't enough to defeat an insurgency. Iraq's regime was very "secure" under Saddam Hussein, but it hardly lacked insurgency.

Thus, we must focus on all of IDAD's functions (balanced development, neutralization, security, and mobilization) as well as its principles (maximum use of CMO/PSYOP, maximum use of intelligence, minimum use of violence, unity of effort, and responsive government). And, as mentioned in another Irregular Warfare Message of the Week, "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 [at the tactical level], the U.S. military must expect to play a significant role on their behalf."⁵ Insurgencies think, plan, and operate on military, diplomatic, economic, informational, and social planes at the tactical level, and so therefore must successful counterinsurgents against them.

Most important to mobilization, though, is not that it reduces our numbers in irregular warfare algebra. More important is that as it empowers indigenous persons to control their own environment, it also makes them stakeholders in the government's system. As they assume jobs and receive pay, both their livelihood and their sense of service improve. Additionally, they now have a "stake" in the success or the failure of the government. Not only have they made an investment of time, resources, and (potentially) security by participating, they have also achieved a status quo which is guaranteed only if the government succeeds. Should the government fail, their fate is undetermined, if not also jeopardized by subsequent insurgents who may assign penalties against previous participants. So, mobilization works for our battlefield calculus, but it also tethers the population to the government's future and success, which is a critical principle of representative governments. Mobilization increases stability and security. In large part, then, when it comes to irregular warfare algebra, less is more. After all, it's their country. Empower them to run it.

Read all past Irregular Warfare Messages of the Week at http://www.usma.edu/dmi/iw_message.htm

⁵ See <http://www.usma.edu/dmi/IWmsgs/Hearts-and-Minds.pdf>