Best Practices in Countering Insurgencies

Compressing the learning curve
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"Much has been written about low intensity warfare, but it remains an open question how much is understood. Of greater certainty is the fact that very little of what is understood has been applied effectively."
—*Caspar Weinberger*

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Mr. Weinberger made that observation in 1986, but the reader might be excused for thinking it applied to today's ongoing global insurgency and U.S. operations in Iraq. This article describes a research effort undertaken in the hopes of identifying key best practices that would enable Marines in their analysis of and planning for conducting future counterinsurgencies. The study synthesizes and builds upon other research efforts.[1] This project was designed to support ongoing efforts within the Marine Corps to help explore new concepts and update doctrine for irregular warfare. Because of Iraq and the long war, the nature of irregular conflicts is of particular importance to today's national security planners.[2]

The project examines nine insurgencies conducted by a variety of countries. These cases range across a half-century timespan and cover a variety of different political and demographic circumstances. These studies were undertaken with a focus on potential "best practices" selected from a variety of counterinsurgency experts. Subsequently, the cases were re-searched and analyzed to ascertain the importance of these identified practices to the success or failure of the counterinsurgency effort. Of course, all insurgencies are different in some way, and each must be analyzed within its own cultural context. Thus, this framework is offered only as a foundation for critical study and adaptation.

The Case Studies

A total of eight case studies were examined in detail. The cases were picked to afford a wide range of political, security, demographic, and geographic elements. The cases include:
• Vietnam. French counterinsurgency campaigns against the Communist Viet Minh of Vietnam, which ended after Dien Bien Phu in 1954.
• Malaya. British-directed program to counter the Communist minority Chinese from gaining control over Malaya during the period from 1950 to 1957.
• Kenya. The British-led counterinsurgency against the Mau Maus that ran from 1952 to 1960.
• Algeria. The French efforts against the native Algerian insurgency to achieve independence, which ran from 1954 to 1962.
• Vietnam. The subsequent American intervention in Southeast Asia, which ended in 1972.
• Oman. A British-advised counterinsurgency against a Marxist-fueled group in Dhofar from 1969 to 1976.
• Peru. This South American country's efforts to dampen the Sendero Luminoso or Shining Path from 1980 to 1992.
• Colombia. Colombia's efforts to counter the narco-sponsored and Marxist insurgency led by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) from 1964 to the present.

Best Practices or Campaign Components

Instead of examining the campaign through sets of principles or fundamentals, this study expressly uses practices or "campaign components" as the basis for analysis. Some of these represent specific techniques or procedures. Others reflect a much broader approach or what might be a major element or component in the overall counterinsurgency campaign. These elements are described as follows:
• Integrate civil-military mechanisms. How all government agencies were coordinated by command, by a

single individual, or by coordination committees.

• Governance/Political reforms. The degree to which government or political reforms were instituted to counter weaknesses or enhance the credibility of the state.

• Socioeconomic programs. The degree to which social development and economic projects were employed to better support the local civilian population.

• Integrated intelligence. The degree to which special intelligence organs were constructed or existing agencies integrated to deal with the insurgency.

• Special units for foreign internal defense (FID). The degree to which special units or local indigenous units were created as counters to the insurgents.

• Unique military training. The degree to which the counterinsurgent forces are uniquely trained to deal with an incipient or full-blown insurgency.

• Information operations. How the counterinsurgency employed psychological operations to isolate the insurgents or promote the government's themes.

• Population control. How the civilian population was isolated from the insurgents through security, identification cards, barriers, or forced relocation.

• Resource control. This factor accounts for efforts to limit or isolate the insurgents from food, weapons, or other forms of support.

• Discriminate force. The degree to which counterinsurgent forces limit the use of military power to the minimal degree necessary to avoid antagonizing the local population or to preclude collateral damage. (See Figure 1.)

In general we found a high correlation between all of the best practices and operational success. When governments and their supporting allies and partners used these elements as key components of their overall campaigns, they were generally successful. In almost all cases, some sort of learning curve was evident, and eventually policymakers and military leaders reassessed themselves and made numerous strategic or operational changes. Some adapted faster than others. Those who ignored history or underestimated the opponent fared much worse.

The best techniques identified in this research effort offer a framework for officer education and for planners studying and preparing Marines for a potential contingency. Most importantly, they are not a prescriptive list or a set of inviolable principles to be rigidly applied. In any case, "the devil will be in the details" of design and implementation.

	Vietnam (45–54)	Malaya	Kenya	Algeria	Vietnam (61–72)	Oman	Peru	Colombia
Integrated civil-military command and control	W	X	X	W	X	X	X	X
Governance reforms	W	X	X	X		X		X
Socioeconomic reforms		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Intelligence		X	X	X	X		X	X
Special units	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Unique training		X	X		X	X		X
Information operations		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Population control	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Resource control	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Discriminate force	W	X		W	W	X		

Legend: X = best practice, W = worst practice or misapplied with negative impact.

Figure 1.

Insights

Integrated civil-military mechanisms. This practice has a high correlation to successful strategies since comprehensive applications of all elements of national power are usually the sine qua non for success against an insurgency that seeks to depose an existing regime or create a counterstate. The evidence for this is most manifest in the Malayan case with the series of committees as integrating measures by GEN Sir Gerald Templer. Templer was vested with the authority and had the foresight to understand that all civil and military operations needed to be coordinated. It is also relevant to the belated American pacification effort in the early 1970s in Vietnam, as well as the Kenyan, Peruvian, and Colombian case studies. Colombia hosts one of the most persistent insurgencies and longest enduring narcocriminal enterprises, especially the FARC, which has conducted a four-decade-long insurgency. Under President Alvaro Uribe, Colombia established unique coordination mechanisms at the strategic and theater levels. The Centro de Coordinacion de Accion Integral (Coordination Center for Integrated Action) was created and physically located at the Presidential palace to maximize its influence and opportunity for strategic direction.

Conversely, the French failed to integrate their civil-military components but did usually vest authority in a single military commander. Whether integration is achieved by unity of command under an El Supremo or by tightly knit integrating mechanisms, the need for the holistic and integrated applications of both civilian and military tools is paramount. This lesson appears to be critical at the operational level for planning and assessment.

Governance reforms. This area attempts to capture how national or local political and government reforms were instituted to counter perceived weaknesses or to enhance legitimacy or credibility of the state. This is another area with high cause and effect relationships, particularly as evidenced in the Kenyan, Malayan, Omani, and Peruvian case studies. Frequently, in the case of colonial conflicts, this was accomplished by agreeing to eventually grant independence or providing for political freedoms. In other cases, it means negotiating with the enemy and granting concessions of some sort. Both the Algerian and the Vietnamese failures underscore the lesson for political or governmental reform. The American case history includes significant tactical success at the hamlet and village levels but was never translated into significant reforms at the national government or strategic levels. Vietnam may not have been "the wrong war at the wrong time," but in the words of one analyst, it was a war with the wrong allies.[3] The Americans could not induce the host government to make a better case for a free and democratic state.

Socioeconomic programs. Social development and economic projects are often employed to enhance support to the local civilian population and to undercut the ideological message of the insurgent. This correlates well with success, as seen in the Malayan, Kenyan, Omani, and Colombian case summaries. Economic reforms were critical in quelling resistance in Kenya. The Swynnerton Plan allowed the Kenyan Government to seize land from Mau Mau supporters and consolidate plots for award to loyalists or reformed insurgents. The plan replaced communal land ownership with a land tenure system and undercut the Mau Maus' principal political message.

The rapid implementation of economic aid to Dhofar substantially undermined the resistance in Oman and may be the best case on record of negating an insurgency early. Social and economic programs were at the core of the famous but belated and underresourced American-led civil operations revolutionary development sup-

port effort in Vietnam as well. In Vietnam, to address pacification needs, the French established mobile operational administrative units or GAMOs (groupes adminstratifs mobiles operationannels) to enhance local administration and to help provide food, medicine, and shelter. The GAMOs never had sufficient local militias to hold the cleared areas they were to pacify. In Algeria, the French innovated with the establishment of special administrative sections (SASs). These were designed to address social and political matters and worked to enhance Algerian infrastructure and institutions, including civil administration, local schools, medical services, and constabulary forces. The Marine Corps Combined Action Program in Vietnam drew upon these examples.

Integrated intelligence. This element examines how intelligence was emphasized and exploited. We looked for evidence of where special intelligence cells or means were constructed to deal with the insurgency and/or where efforts to fuse intelligence from various sources (law enforcement, military, etc.) were made to good effect. While unique and special intelligence organs were frequent, they were not the only evidence we found. Overall, the adaptation of existing intelligence to the unique cultural context of the situation and its timely exploitation were correlated with successful counterinsurgency. We found more than sufficient evidence in the Malayan, Kenyan, Peruvian, Colombian, and Vietnamese cases to underscore the conclusion that effective intelligence is the driver of operations in this mode of war. In Algeria we found extensive evidence of intensive intelligence collection (too intense in fact) and effective integration and rapid exploitation. The French assigned their best officers, and intelligence staff positions became, in effect, the key operational staff positions in battalion-level organizations and higher. Second, the French ensured that intelligence was tied tightly to the elite mobile forces. However, the interrogation process undercut French authority and energized the National Liberation Front's resistance in Algeria.

Special units for FID. This element examines the degree to which special units or local indigenous units were created as counters to the insurgents. The employment of indigenous personnel to either serve as home guards/local militia or special units serving as elite counterinsurgent hunter/killer groups was found to be significant to operational success. In almost all successful counterinsurgencies, trained indigenous personnel have been crucial to effective counterguerrilla operations.

French organizational initiatives include the Groupement de Commandos Mixtes Aeroportes, mixing French commandos with former Viet Minh fighters who were inserted in contested areas to work with tribes allied to the French. In Malaya the British created a home guard popular militia as well as the Special Operations Volunteer Force of repatriated rebels, while in Kenya a number of units were created from reeducated Mau Maus who easily infiltrated rebel held areas. Reformed insurgents under British leaders accounted for the capture of the vast majority of Mau Mau leaders.

The French understood the utility of trained indigenous forces in Algeria, forming local paramilitary elements for local security. As these Harki units gained proficiency they were given missions to prove themselves and then were assigned to replace French forces. The British did the same in Oman with firqats, tribal militia recruited with amnesty offers and cash and land grants.

Unique military training. The training foundation for counterinsurgent forces has also been identified as a potential core element to address an incipient or full-blown insurgency. Almost every case study highlights the unique and particularly stressing aspects of counterinsurgency operations. It is almost axiomatic that conventional forces need special training to become agile enough to deal with the complexities of combating a guerrilla force that is contesting for the support of a civil-

ian population for its government and its legitimacy. Each situation, but especially the French and American Indochina, Algeria, Peru, Colombia, and Intifada cases, reveal the initial weakness of using conventional forces that are doctrinally and educationally unprepared for unconventional forms of combat. In several cases, special forces and unique units were created to deal with particular demands. In particular, the British used special advisor units in all three examples they were involved with, as did the Americans and French in Vietnam.

Information operations. Inasmuch as insurgencies are generally won in the minds of the civilian population and its attitudes toward its government, information operations were expected to play a significant role in effective counterinsurgencies. We were not disappointed. The degree to which the counterinsurgent force employed psychological operations to isolate the insurgents correlated fairly well with success. British examples once again showed a sophisticated understanding of the use of various techniques, both simple and culturally astute. Great Britain tapped into the knowledge and expertise of a Chinese-trained expert to orchestrate their psychological operations campaign, as well as input from captured and reformed insurgents, which brought additional acute cultural knowledge to their efforts.

American psychological operations efforts in Vietnam were also extensive, but their overall effectiveness was never equal to the expended resources due to other factors, including inadequate numbers of cultural experts. As seen in recent conflicts, information operations by themselves may never be effective. Actions, in the forms of security patrols, humanitarian projects, and civil action programs, may also be sending messages as well. In fact, actions may speak louder than the leaflets and broadcasts.

Population control. Isolating and securing the civilian population from contact with the insurgents through security measures, physical barriers, or

relocation is another practice that appears with great frequency. This practice can also include checkpoints, national identification cards and censuses, ward or village captains, and mass relocations. Every case history in this study employed more than one form of population control. In some cases, like Kenya and Algeria, a massive scale of detainees and special camps was used. However, it proved difficult for the government to properly control and adequately meet the needs of the internees. These turned out to be counterproductive. Control measures that do not require massive dislocation appear more viable than creating temporary camps. Forced relocation has long-term costs that can be avoided with other forms of control. At the same time, population control features, vital for controlling the introduction of weapons and contraband, may also antagonize the local population and contribute to increased resistance. In some cases this hostility has been negated by using locally recruited units.

In Malaya, the British built up the Home Guards, local forces for local security of their model villages. More recently in Colombia, local Soldatos de mi Pueblo (Home Guards) have been established as an element of state presence and credibility in areas previously abandoned to the insurgency.

Resource control. Aside from isolating the population, this factor accounts for efforts to limit or isolate the insurgents from food, weapons, or other forms of support. Resource control is usually achieved by various forms of border security and population control. However, in some cases, measures to ration or control foodstuffs were used to limit the ability of the general population to support a standing guerrilla force. This was especially true in the Kenyan, Omani, and Vietnamese examples. Extensive efforts were made in Kenya and in Vietnam to limit the ability of the insurgents to draw food or other resources from the population. Like Templer in Malaya, GEN Emmanuel A. Erskine enforced food denial programs in Kenya to limit resources for his opponent and to incentivize cooperation. Other campaigns created extensive border security systems, as in Algeria, to block the introduction of weapons and materials. This practice may have greater relevance in rural insurgencies and may not apply or may be extremely difficult to achieve in 21st century urban counterinsurgencies.

Discriminate force. History and past experience strongly suggest that the best weapon in counterinsurgency is invariably *not* a weapon. Success is not achieved by attrition of the insurgent force; in fact, success may be in reverse proportion to the amount of force used. The degree to which counterinsurgent forces limit the use of military power to the minimal degree necessary to avoid antagonizing the local population is cited in both extant British and U.S. doctrine. This is also identified in the *Small Wars Manual*. It is possible to conduct a brilliant series of tactical actions with overwhelming force and firepower and lose the larger strategic goal. "In small wars caution must be exercised and instead of striving to generate the maximum power with forces available," advises the *Small Wars Manual*, "the goal is to gain decisive results with the least application of force and the consequent minimum loss of life."[4]

Firepower-intensive operations may antagonize both external and internal parties that are neutral, swinging support and additional resources to the opponent. Excessive collateral damage will undermine the credibility of external efforts to assist a host-nation and could make the counterintervention longer and more costly. The French experience in Algeria is one example of this concern, as were aspects of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In Algeria, the French employed raids, reprisals, and interrogations that produced a series of tactical successes but at the cost of the

support of the Algerian populace at the same time. The case histories in Malaya and Oman underscore the general lesson that kinetic force application must be measured and discriminate. Certainly, events in Iraq are reproving this fundamental principle.

Perspectives

A number of key perspectives have emerged from this analysis. The first is the importance of intelligence, especially an acute degree of cultural awareness. This perspective reinforces a point made in the *Small Wars Manual*. Solid intelligence was a precious commodity in past small wars, largely due to the remote nature of the host-country, the inadequacy of infrastructure, and the lack of familiarity with the native population.

Cultural awareness and understanding are critical to success. But understanding how foreign cultures view us and how they may perceive our actions is critical. It is impossible for U.S. forces to succeed in working within another society without an intimate appreciation of the local culture. This is true for all wars since wars are conflicts between and within societies and cultures. In general, but especially in irregular and counterinsurgent conflicts, "the roots of victory or defeat often have to be sought far from the battlefield, in political, social, or economic factors."[5] Counterinsurgencies and other forms of small wars often involve a contest for the popular support of a nation's citizenry, and as numerous conflicts have demonstrated, it is impossible to win the cooperation, let alone the hearts and minds, of the people without a thorough appreciation of their culture.

The second broad conclusion is the importance of history—in context. The study of history remains the best laboratory for thinking about future military conflict. A comprehensive study of past experience is the best defense against future challenges. But, once again, context matters, and commanders and their planners must consciously look for both similarities and distinctions in applying historical precedents. Templates are not useful and may even be dangerous. As one strategist recently exclaimed:

> Many try to borrow from past wars or historical examples as if a few simple lessons from one conflict could be transferred easily to another. Far too often, they trot out all the same old case histories without really examining how valid they are.[6]

Too often, inappropriate lessons from one insurgency are carried over and unconsciously laminated over an entirely different political conflict or socioeconomic context. The danger of oversimplification and shallow historical analogy is to be avoided. As stated in our own *Small Wars Manual*, ". . . to a greater degree is each small war somewhat different from anything which has preceded it."[7] Here the Marine Corps' initiative to establish a formal and comprehensive approach, including the establishment of a culture center at Quantico, will pay huge dividends.

The third most significant action involves the criticality of isolating the insurgent. Despite the wide range of case studies explored herein, the physical and psychological isolation of the insurgent was a key contributor to all successful examples. Isolation cuts off resources and other sources of support, from within the host-nation or from contiguous territories used as sanctuary. Physical isolation maximizes freedom of action within other domains, such as economic development and governance, by limiting the insurgent's opportunity to coerce indigenous personnel. From Hadrian's Wall in Britain to Israel's latest effort, physical defense barriers have been a regular feature in this mode of war. However, isolation in the ideological or political sense is also critical to neutralize both the insurgent's message and appeal. It also helps reduce intelligence gathering, recruiting, or funding. The classic experts, including T.E. Lawrence, Mao Tse Tung, and Col David Galula, have all underscored the use of information as a weapon. However, its mastery has proven to be elusive even to modern powers. Galula went on to add, "If there was a field in which we were definitely and infinitely more stupid than our opponents, it was propaganda."[8] The Secretary of Defense has admitted that the United States has struggled with this component of national power in Iraq.

This aspect of modern counterinsurgency could rise in salience as future irregular combatants continue to exploit modern Information Age tools to broaden their appeal and resource base. Winning hearts and minds may have a more global orientation thanks to the ubiquitous nature of modern communications techniques. The old *Small Wars Manual* noted the rapidity by which a revolution could develop due to modern communications technologies.[9] Today's continuous "24/7" news cycles and graphic imagery produce even faster and higher response cycles from audiences around the globe and offer powerful new "weapons" to those who can master them.

The final and most critical major conclusion involves operational adaptation. This historical analysis suggests that many countries were slow to recognize the potential of a growing insurgent movement, and that both civilian and military organizations went through a slow learning curve to come to grips with the necessary strategic, operational, and tactical adaptations required to win. In most cases, military and police forces were unprepared for the unique and often counterintuitive aspects of counterinsurgency. Few were willing to try different approaches and alter their actions as necessary. Oman was a noted exception, thanks to the experience of the SAS. They proved to be a true learning organization.[10]

Such operational learning or adaptation appears to be a useful characteristic in the past, and one even more valuable in the future in a world of protean or adaptive enemies. Some counterinsurgency experts have characterized insurgencies as "competitions in learning," a form of conflict requiring continuous evolution in procedures, structure, and strategy.[11] Today's adaptive enemies suggest that this will be an attribute of even greater value in the future. Increasing the velocity of organizational learning
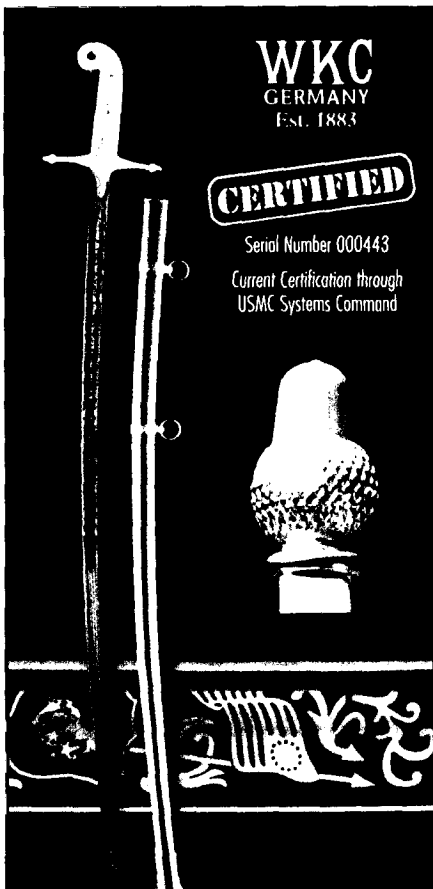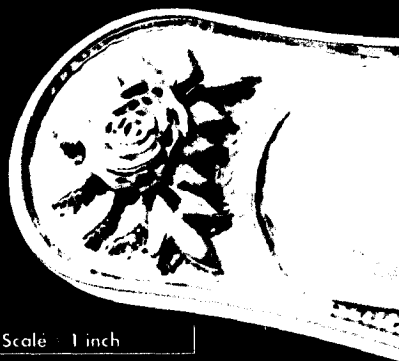
and adaptation may be a key element in future insurgencies.

Conclusion

The purpose of this effort was to identify best practices and key insights about counterinsurgency. As noted by T.E. Lawrence, there really is no excuse for not understanding this mode of warfare, given nearly 2,000 years of recorded experience. The critical study of history, the identification of common threads, and creating an ability to discover discontinuities are critical to gaining and exploiting this understanding.

As the *Small Wars Manual* of 1940 suggests, a study of the past is essential to an understanding of war and the complex nature of the contingencies the Marine Corps came to know as small wars. Today, under the rubric of counterinsurgency, irregular warfare, or hybrid conflicts, the Marine Corps faces a wide range of potential missions and interventions.[12] The Marine Corps' rich legacy in this form of warfare provides a solid foundation to build upon, but it cannot assume easy victories or complacent enemies. Today's threat is more dangerous and more lethal than the past, and the character of modern insurgency is different than the colonial wars or Maoist rural insurgencies of the past. But a detailed knowledge of the existing history of such interventions remains vital. History remains the best means for advancing our understanding of the problem and for developing the critical thinking skills that are the basis for comprehension and professional competence across the full range of human conflict.[13] With this greater level of comprehension, we'll continue to ensure that we both understand and effectively apply the fundamentals of counterinsurgency, no matter how unique the circumstances.

Notes

1. Hoffman, Bruce and Jennifer M. Taw, *Defense Policy and Low-Intensity Conflict: The Development of Britain's Small Wars Doctrine During the 1950s*," RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, R–4015–A, 1991, as well as the

exhaustive study conducted by Kalev I. Sepp, "Best Practices in Counterinsurgency," *Military Review*, U.S. Army, Fort Leavenworth, KS, May/June 2005, pp. 8–12.

2. See the Defense Department's Quadrennial Defense Review report, Washington, DC, February 2006.

3. Record, Jeffrey, *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, 1998, pp. 173.

4. U.S. Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual*, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1940, p. 1–17.

5. Howard, Michael, "The Use and Abuse of Military History," *Parameters*, March 1981, p. 14.

6. Cordesman, Anthony, H., *Strategic Lessons From Iraq*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, December, 2005, p. 11.

7. *Small Wars Manual*, p. 1–6.

8. Galula, David, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956–1958*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 1964 (reissued in 2006 with a foreword by Bruce Hoffman), p. ix.

9. *Small Wars Manual*, p. 1–13.

10. A key theme in *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife*, by John Nagl, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2005.

11. Comment attributed to Dr. Steven Metz of the Strategic Studies Institute, Army Strategy Conference, Army War College, Carlisle, PA, 13 April 2005.

12. Hybrid conflicts blend conventional and irregular forces and tactics in the same battlespace, James N. Mattis and F.G. Hoffman, "The Future of War: Hybrid Conflicts," *Proceedings*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, November 2005.

13. Echevarria, Antulio J., II, "The Problem With History," *Parameters*, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA, Summer 2005, pp. 78–90.

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