

# Counter-insurgency: INTERNAL WAR: The new Communist tactic

Hilsman, Roger

Marine Corps Gazette (pre-1994); Jan 1963; 47, 1;

Marine Corps Gazette & Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines

pg. 50

# Counter-insurgency:

## INTERNAL WAR: The new Communist tactic



**Mr. Roger Hilsman**

is Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State. He is a graduate of West Point (1943) and holds a M.A. and Ph.D. in International Relations from Yale. During WWII he served in Burma with Merrill's Marauders. Later he served with OSS, commanding a guerrilla unit operating behind the Japanese lines. He was on the OSS mission to Mukden, Manchuria to liberate US POWs (one of whom was his father, an Army officer, who had been captured in the Philippines). His career includes teaching and research at the Center of International Studies of Princeton and at the School of Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins. From 1956-58 he was Chief of the Foreign Affairs Division of the Legislative Reference Service, Library of Congress, which does research for Congress. He has written a number of articles and books on various aspects of foreign affairs and national defense. His article here was adapted by the GAZETTE from a speech made at The Institute of World Affairs in San Diego, Calif.

**By Roger Hilsman**

THE Cold War with Communist Russia has been with us for 16 years. And each year, the Communist tactics are more subtle and complex. In the 1940s, it was simple: the Soviet policy of expansion and the American policy of containment. The threat of direct Communist aggression remains, but new, more sophisticated tactics are added every year.

To most Americans, the basic danger over the past decade has been the threat of all-out thermonuclear war. The threat remains. It does and should demand our careful, constant attention.

Next there has been the threat of "limited war"—old-fashioned, foot-slogging fighting on the ground—with artillery, machine guns, and grenades. This is the dirty, bitter business of direct, personal killing, as we knew it in Korea.

Limited wars and total war are closely linked. A limited war can be the escalator carrying the world

right up to the mushroom clouds.

But even as we have pondered this connection—and have tried to prepare for both eventualities—the Communists have found what they regard as a new chink in our armor. The new tactic is internal war—using military force not across national boundaries, but inside them. This newest concept is guerrilla war—or, to use a more accurate term, *internal war*.

It was this that President Kennedy had in mind when he said:

"We face a challenge in Berlin, but there is also a challenge in Southeast Asia, where the borders are less guarded, the enemy harder to find, and the dangers of Communism less apparent to those who have so little. We face a challenge in our own hemisphere."

Thus even while reheating the Berlin crisis, Khrushchev has stressed this third approach of internal war over and over again this past year. He sees the possibilities for internal wars in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as the best way of using force to expand the Communist empire with the least risk. He argues that

nuclear war is too disastrous even for Leninists. Apparently he has begun to have his doubts about even limited war on the Korean model.

We can take some credit for Khrushchev's change of heart. Our strategic force to deter nuclear war has paid its way. Our efforts to build ground forces, our alliances, and our sacrifices in Korea—the fact that we stood and fought—have all paid off.

In retrospect, we can be proud of all this, though our pride should not lead to overconfidence. Moreover, we must beware of thinking that these different tactics were separate or unrelated.

Even in the early stages of the Cold War, the Soviets manipulated internal wars in Southeast Asia, Indonesia, the Philippines, India, Guatemala, and in vulnerable states in the Middle East. The Soviet leaders, bred as they were in an atmosphere of urban-based intrigue and revolutionary plotting, were pushed further in their thinking by the success of Mao Tse-tung's peasant-based Chinese Communist revolution.

The result is that internal warfare has recently gained a new prominence in Soviet dogma. What Khrushchev



UPI Photo

calls "wars of liberation" or "just wars" are now considered the most promising paths to further expansion. The theory enables Moscow and Peking to manipulate for their own purposes the political, economic, and social revolutionary fervor that is now sweeping much of the underdeveloped world. Since many governments are weak, since some are corrupt, since there is much injustice in the world, and since the Communist conspirators are well trained and supplied, it is usually fairly easy to start or take advantage of an internal war and to claim that years of blood and terror are in the people's interest. Even when a government tries to undertake reform and keep the peace—as in Venezuela or Colombia—the Communists chant that the government is "repressive" and redouble their efforts.

A second development is the flexibility and sophistication in tactics of guerrilla terror and subversion. The Soviets continue to sponsor Communist rebellions overtly wherever possible. They also do their best to infiltrate nationalist movements against colonialism. They try especially hard to capture the extreme nationalists like Lumumba. They sponsor radical nationalism

wherever they can find it, for the more violence there is in a country, the greater the Communists' opportunity.

If a democratic nationalist government is in power, Communists will advise that it separate itself from the West and permit the Communists to have "equal democratic rights"—that is, positions of power in the government, freedom to propagandize, and the right to officer regular forces or their own militia.

If a colonial or reactionary government is in power, the Communists direct efforts along the entire spectrum of subversion. They foster discontent in the cities, leading to demonstrations and strikes, perhaps to riots and mob action. Here their targets are student groups, labor unions, and Left-wing intellectuals. In the countryside, they establish guerrilla forces in inaccessible regions, move to peasant areas, and, through a judicious mixture—on the Chinese Communist and Castro Cuban patterns—of social reform, administration, and sheer terror, establish a base of political rule. Whenever possible, in both urban and rural sectors, they endeavor to create "people's militias" as a device for organizing mass support to supplement their full-time combatants. Thus they operate continuously to undermine an unfriendly government, and differ in their handling of popular nationalist regimes only in the degree of their effort to influence the government directly and infiltrate its power centers.

Let me repeat that this new Soviet emphasis on internal war does not mean that we can forget about the other, greater levels of war. Moscow's willingness to raise the Berlin issue indicates that their so-called "peaceful coexistence" does not rule out manufactured crises that run the risk of conventional or even nuclear war. In fact, they could not get away with internal war, except for the inhibitions imposed by these other two possibilities.

The great advantage of internal war is that it is less risky and less conspicuous than the more violent wars. It also involves techniques that the Communists feel they have mastered and we have not. We must also remember that Khrushchev is using his recently increased capacity to wage the more violent kinds of war to expand his freedom of maneuver in guerrilla war and to threaten escalation if we try to stop him.

In short, the so-called nuclear stalemate has not served to inhibit violence. If anything, it has enabled the Communists to resort to a wider variety of force. Their new strength in nuclear weapons makes them all the more tempted to adventure with internal war.

How can we help stop the Communists from destroying independent states from within? At President Kennedy's direction—as outlined in his second "State of the Union" message—steps have been taken in several parts of the government to meet this threat. The people in the Pentagon and we in the State Department have devoted special attention to it.

Let me take up the question of how we stop the Communists from destroying independent states from within under three headings: military security; modernization and reform; and other political factors, especially those unique political factors undercutting a regime's stability.

Here we must be very hardheaded—for there are

several all-too-popular misconceptions.

In my judgment, it is nonsense to think that regular forces trained for conventional war can handle jungle guerrillas adequately. Yet in spite of some very hard lessons—Magsaysay in the Philippines, the British in Malaya, and the French in Indochina and Algeria—we have been slow to learn.

Regular forces are vital to resist external aggression. But we must not be deluded by the desire of local generals for "prestige hardware" or by the traditionalists' belief that well-trained regulars can do anything.

Regular forces are essential for regular military tasks. But guerrilla warfare is something special. Conventional forces with heavy equipment in field formation tend to cluster together, centralizing their power on terrain that allows rapid movement. They rely on roads, consider strong points and cities as vital targets to defend, and so, when they do disperse, it is only to get tied down in static operations. In combat, rigid adherence to the principle of concentration keeps units at unwieldy battalion or even regimental levels, usually with erroneous stress on holding land rather than destroying enemy forces.

It is ironic that we Americans have to learn this military lesson again in the twentieth century. Have we forgotten that we were the ones who had to teach the British regulars "Indian fighting" back when we were still colonies? Have we forgotten that we taught the British regulars another kind of lesson in "Indian fighting" during our own revolution?

Counter-guerrilla operations must cause minimum harm to the people, lest they become antagonistic to the government. The troops must be highly disciplined to respect civilian rights and property. They should

offer help (ranging from field repairs to actions like Magsaysay's offer of legal services in the Philippines). Cargo planes should carry in supplies, so that the forces do not have to live off the countryside. The onus for anticivilian behavior should be diverted squarely to the guerrillas themselves. They are the ones who are compelled to take to repressive measures, seizing rice or conscripting men in their desperation. As they lose popular support, they will have nothing to fall back on when they suffer military defeats.

I hope that this last point indicates my awareness of how important it is to have popular support in conducting an internal war. Many observers argue that stability and physical security are basically political issues, depending on the popularity of governments. To this they add that economic development is the key to popular support and the criterion by which regimes will be judged.

In the long run, popular support is essential for stable governments and a stable world. And there is no question that economic development, modernization, and reform are key factors in creating popular support and stable governments. But in my judgment, it would be mistaken to think that guerrillas cannot thrive where governments are popular and where modernization, economic development, and reform are going forward. And the usual corollary to this thought—the notion that the existence of guerrillas is proof positive that the government is unpopular and therefore not worth supporting—is even more mistaken. It is, in fact, defeatist. We need modernization, economic development, and reform to defeat guerrillas. But other things are also needed.

The ideas that guerrillas thrive only where the government is unpopular may apply to the more developed parts of the world. But in many parts of the world, states are underdeveloped in the political-administrative sense as well as economically. The number of people are few who have the training to perform the standard civil-service jobs that we take for granted. Lacking that "steel frame" in which India takes such just pride, a government appears as a weak and distant entity to most villagers, except when it serves as a burdensome tax collector. In most lands, at least half the people are indifferent to the government. Even the active elements, ranged for or against the regime, are not too set in their political commitments.

In these circumstances, maintaining the bare minimum of national services is enough to determine a nation's fate for the short run. In the Congo, the collapse of two supports—the military Force Publique and Belgian technical service—revealed how far the state has to go before becoming an administrative entity.

By contrast, the Somali Republic, which gained its independence at the same time, also faced a potentially difficult situation—keeping newly joined regions and powerful tribal groups satisfied. As matters developed, no pseudopopular manifestation of discontent emerged, thanks in part to a small but efficient Western-trained civilian police force.

As for modernization, although essential for the long haul, it cannot help much in a counterguerrilla program. Modernization inevitably uproots established social systems, produces political and economic disloca-



UPI Photo

Counter-insurgents must respect civilian rights and property, offer help where and when needed.

tion and tension, and cannot deliver results quickly enough to relieve these short-term pressures.

However, there is mounting unrest in rural areas all over the world. What peasants increasingly crave is social justice and reform—at a minimum, the old way of life with the cruelties removed.

This includes reform of land-tenure arrangements; reasonable rent, credit, and market facilities, and simple modern tools. They may see ahead to the value of urban centers that buy their produce—instead of importing from abroad and forcing them to raise crops for exports—and, in turn, manufacture for their simple needs. Finally, they crave peace and physical security.

Yet there is a growing link between urban and rural unrest. As modernization begins, the poorer farmers drift to the city, there to form the hard core of the unemployed slum dwellers who overtax the rudimentary metropolitan facilities. These unfortunates form the recruits for the city mobs that Communists and demagogues have been turning out in the Middle East and Latin America for the past fifteen years. The political link between the two becomes clear when we see how the very poor are used as recruits for guerrilla forces in the rural areas and for "people's militia" in the urban regions. Communists have long made use of the former in sustaining a rebellion; Castro and "Che" Guevara have become adept at using both groups to support the present Cuban regime. In Latin America alone, Venezuela, Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru come immediately to mind as countries where the combined urban-rural problem exists.

What is required first is a program of social reform. Very often the conservative element in a community

will struggle irrationally against all reform. As a consequence, we have encountered in several parts of the world the amazing and suicidal spectacle of conservatives giving secret aid to the Communists in order to undermine modest reformist efforts.

Equally important is the need to indicate some effort and progress on the long path to modernization. Small results, if they prove the intent of a regime, can inspire faith that will outlast the distress of early change. Finally, where these efforts are combined with democratic government and mass party organization, the government can broaden its base of physical power.

To summarize my feeling on popularity, reform, and modernization: (1) they are important ingredients but are not the determinants of events; (2) their role must be measured more in terms of their contribution to physical security than we generally realize.

Let me refer briefly to several other variations on the theme of internal security—the political factors that threaten the stability of new states. So far we have noted primarily the nature of the Communist threat and the issues of good government and economic developments. Unfortunately, on top of these universal problems, most states have to grapple with specific difficulties that create further divisions, induce tensions, and propel even the best-intentioned regimes to violence. Among these difficulties are the following:

- **Antagonisms between underdeveloped states**—The familiar pattern of rivalry between neighbors, as old as history itself, exists with even greater intensity today because so many new states have suddenly sprung into being. Territorial claims and other sources of friction are still fresh, as in the Persian Gulf or India's north-



**President Kennedy participates in ceremonies at La Morita, Venezuela where the Venezuelan Agrarian Reform Institute has re-settled 86 families on eight-acre farm plots of their own.**

ern border regions. Such difficulties generate tensions, arms races, and nationalistic fervor, which Communists try to exploit.

● **Internal disagreements**—I am referring here to friction between regions of a state or between a region and the center. The issues of regionalism in India, separatist movements in Indonesia, and tribalism in the fragmented Congo are examples of serious challenges to governmental authority and stability.

● **Social-class antagonism**—It is characteristic of established economic elites that they feel themselves threatened from below and refuse to countenance the very reform that would ease the real dangers that they face. The great failures of old regimes in France before 1789 and Russia at the start of this century are but the outstanding instances of this historic problem that presents itself on almost every continent today.

● **Intense disagreement over foreign policy**—Iraq's adherence to the Baghdad Pact despite internal opposition and disapproval by all other Arab states is a case in point. Radical-nationalist African states accuse their neighbors of following a colonial, subservient line. In trying to get them on a comparable course, radical states engage in clandestine operations to subvert neighboring regimes or support opposition factions whose ideology resembles their own.

● **Traditional political rivalries within a social class**—Colombia offers the leading example of two parties that, without basic social or ideological differences, became embroiled in a long civil war, so bitter as to cause over 250,000 casualties. The war literally superimposed itself on all the other problems of security that normally confront a developing state. The army had to act to keep that situation from fragmenting the country.

● **Lack of popular belief in the state as a sovereign entity**—In large areas of Africa and the Middle East, normal loyalties follow either tribal and provincial lines or grand dreams of regional African or Arab unity. The state does attract some loyalty because it is a going concern, one that can be used as a lever of power at both of these other levels. With this overlapping of loyalties, it is only too easy for a government to meddle in the affairs of its neighbors and further weaken their internal cohesion—always, of course, in the belief that its cause is just.

● **Ethnic or racial issues**—Rebellious tribesmen are constant drains on national military power in various states throughout Asia and Africa. The Communists found in Malaya's Chinese community ready hands for their bloody insurrection, partly because of interracial political rivalries. Indians in some Latin American countries are living at very low standards, are beginning to stir, and are potential bait for a Communist ethnic-economic appeal. Central-African pagans have strained relations with Moslem Arab northerners in a crossroad land that is beset by outside pressures.

● **Banditry**—This is a cultural inheritance in many parts of the world. Bandits (or armed rural gangs) that flout the authorities and exploit local neighbors have long existed in many parts of the world—colored perhaps with varying degrees of political or ideological

overtones, but essentially dedicated to violence. One thinks of recent illustrations in the Philippines, of traditional sporadic outbreaks in Java, of troubles experienced by the new state of Burma. These actions impoverish the peasant, ruin the government's authority, paralyze public morale and open the path to similar Communist tactics or, conversely, to establishment of Communist authority in that region.

● **Constitutional crises**—Unconstitutional extension of presidential power, so often exemplified in the history of Latin America, is one example of a constitutional crisis that may lead to political turmoil when such excesses are traditionally resented and countered by violence. The seizure of power by a military junta is another.

There are other obvious factors, such as the outburst of nationalism that may follow independence, proximity to Sino-Soviet territory, the existence and strength of a Communist Party and its orientation toward Moscow or Peking, and, of course, revolts against colonial rule and white-minority rule in certain areas. The addition of just a few of these special hazards to the basic difficulties I described earlier places a tremendous strain upon a government's staying power. You can see clearly why I am saying that internal security is a problem in its own right and not simply a function of good government or economic growth.

There are many things we can do to help responsible and friendly governments attack this problem all along the line. I have already illustrated how the training of armed forces can be better geared to the specific war against guerrillas. Equally important is the training of police and other forces to cope with the lesser manifestations of violence, not only in detection and surveillance, but also in handling actual outbursts. We may find ourselves encouraging reformers to organize mass parties, and in certain tense circumstances we may need to help create citizens' militia forces. We are seriously interested in broadening the will and capacity of friendly governments to augment social and political reform programs as a basis for modernization.

We must also look for ways to ease the access of beleaguered states to outside assistance. The Communists use the concept of state sovereignty as a device to seal off a land from "intervention" once they have made sufficient inroads. They use international law, appeals to neutralist neighbors, the unpleasant reactions to what is called "Western imperialism," and the threat of force in this effort. We must foster the growth and use of international organizations as sources of help—help on all the problems I have mentioned, and help that can be on the scene and in action before the crisis reaches its peak. In this way, we may ward off a showdown or at the very least have elements there to indicate outside support in being and on the way.

In any event, the United States must be prepared to become deeply involved. This effort may be costly, but careful and early involvement is far less expensive or dangerous than a crash program. The Communists are already committed everywhere, and unless we approach the problem in a systematic way, with considerable thought, we will simply be paving the way for Mr. Khrushchev in his new and potent tactic—internal war.

USMC