

Counterinsurgency Operations

Counterinsurgency (COIN) operations are actions taken by the existing government of a nation to contain and defeat an insurgency seeking to destabilize the government.

History of COIN operations by the United States

Since the Korean War, a common theme in most American ventures overseas has been some element of Counterinsurgency. It's no coincidence that this period has been plagued with less than stellar results militarily.

America's experience in counterinsurgency operations is more than one hundred years old, dating from our involvement in the Philippines after the Spanish American war. US President William McKinley justified the American presence as follows.

"When I next realized that the Philippines had dropped into our laps I confess I did not know what to do with them... And one night late it came to me this way...

- 1) That we could not give them back to Spain—that would be cowardly and dishonorable;*
- 2) That we could not turn them over to France and Germany—our commercial rivals in the Orient - that would be bad business and discreditable;*
- 3) that we not leave them to themselves—they are unfit for self-government—and they would soon have anarchy and misrule over there worse than Spain's wars; and*
- 4) that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow-men for whom Christ also died."*

Insurgent Emilio Aguinaldo had other plans, as did other ethnic groups throughout the islands, and the US spent the next 14 years pacifying the archipelago.

The changing nature of warfare in the twentieth century

It's a truism that militaries typically train to fight the last war. The advent of the nuclear battlefield permanently changed the way wars are fought. World superpowers moved from national wars that culminated in World War II to fighting through proxies in local economical/political conflicts.

The end of WWII left the United States in a unique position that the founding fathers could never have envisioned. The American military had boots on the ground across three continents, occupying ruined countries that had little or no functioning governments. In a perfect world, the US presence would have been custodial until governments were formed to take over the reins of government. This may have involved overseeing infrastructure improvements necessary for a modern government to function. But there was a fly in the ointment

in the form of international communism, subsidized in the most part by Soviet Russia. Soviet agents were at work throughout the world attempting to subvert the post-war reconstruction to further a communist agenda. The United States could not, in good conscience, turn a blind eye to this and act as if nothing was happening. To do so would have effectively capitulated to communism and allowed much of the world to be enslaved.

The US stayed neutral in the Chinese civil war and watched as our ally Chiang Kai-Shek was forced out of mainland China by Mao's communist revolution, and the subsequent deaths of millions of Chinese as the communists consolidated their power.

COIN and the Communist Movement

The Communists attempted a conventional approach to taking power in the Korean War which failed badly for them. After that, they realized that the Western powers could not be engaged in a conventional fight, but could be worn down through low intensity insurgencies.

The slow transition from post-war occupiers and custodians to guardians against communist expansionism caused a slow mission-creep change in the way US military, diplomats and politicians thought. It became a matter of US policy to counter communist interference in developing countries. This led to the US supporting some rather sketchy characters in these countries, tin-pot dictators, bastards by all accounts, but at least they were *our* bastards. Slowly, American military doctrine – mainly geared towards a war with the Soviets in Central Europe - accepted a role in low intensity conflicts around the world. Our involvement in counterinsurgency operations caused a mindset to develop that America was the self-appointed policeman of the world.

Post Soviet Collapse

The world has undergone a paradigm shift since the collapse of Soviet communism, but the mindset of the American diplomatic and political establishment has not relinquished the idea that America is responsible for getting involved and solving international disputes—which again usually involves COIN.

The advisability of these interventions has been mixed. Occasionally, American interests were directly affected, such as Desert Storm where we went to war to prevent a dictator from taking over the bulk of the World's strategic oil reserves. In other cases, such as the war in Kosovo, there was no compelling American interest at stake, and a case could be made for the US unnecessarily meddling in a conflict that didn't concern it. It's become an unfortunate fixture of American public perception that conflicts throughout the world require American intervention to restore the peace.

COIN and Public Opinion

History clearly shows that the American public has little patience for a protracted conflict where there is no clear definition of victory and typically no visible signs of victory. Unfortunately, this is the quintessential definition of a counterinsurgency operation. Counterinsurgencies lack tangibility; they typically don't involve large battles or the capture of strategic places. The objective of COIN is not to defeat the enemy, because by definition the enemy is

comprised of small dispersed groups normally driven by ideology and or serious grievance with the existing power structure. They are not a formal group or political entity. Thus, the objective of COIN is to contain and discourage the enemy and keep them from any appearance that they might be anywhere close to gaining an advantage, until they become irrelevant.

Because COIN rarely has a clearly defined path to victory, it doesn't take long before the American public starts asking pertinent questions that involve why our soldiers are fighting and dying in a foreign land; if the foreign land is worth the cost America is paying; and why our foreign allies can't do the job themselves. This debate typically emboldens the insurgents.

Other legitimate questions are also asked, such as how Americans would feel if foreign soldiers were in our country, suppressing our population and conducting operations against suspected civilians that clearly violate the constitutional rights we hold dear. When viewed this way it is understandable how an argument could be made that our very presence in COIN operations makes things worse, not better.

Is COIN a Viable Strategy?

It's a fact of history that no representative style of government was ever born without serious resistance from the entrenched ruling class, which usually results in bloodshed. One cannot impose democracy on a people from the outside unless they remove all vestiges of the prior power structure and cultural obstacles first, such as was done in post-war Japan and Germany. The United States should not be placed in the position of winning the hearts and minds of people, particularly in different, hostile cultures—something usually demanded by COIN operations.

The US politicians and diplomats need to take heed that American-style democracy simply will not work in many cultures of the world, because such a government requires a reasonably well-educated populace that has a cultural disposition towards respecting the rule of law. A civil war in a foreign country is insufficient reason to employ the US military into a COIN operation. Since the Western democracies have neither the will nor the moral authority to do such a thing in today's world, any attempt at nation building is doomed to eventual failure.

Based on the US experience, one could reasonably conclude that counterinsurgency is a loser's game. This isn't necessarily so. The British demonstrated in the Malaysian War of the Running Dogs that successful counterinsurgency operations are possible and winnable. The British used small, independent commands, closely associated with the local counterinsurgents to advise and guide military operations, keeping the tone of the operation local and native, thus bypassing the problems of being seen as a foreign invader or colonial power.

How America can do better if we must fight COIN operations?

The US military is primarily a traditional conventional army. The bulk of our military trains to fight conventional wars against a conventional enemy. To use such a force in a COIN operation would be a misapplication of the capabilities of our soldiers. COIN is not won by a preponderance of military might, but by developing a climate in the disputed region that's toxic to the insurgents. This means a very light military presence on the ground that

operates in tandem with native forces to deny the insurgent the sympathy of the people. The only US military units with the necessary training for this are the US Special Forces.

Better Education

American senior Military command needs to be better educated in the use of Special Forces in “irregular” conflicts. Special Forces experience is not normally an avenue of career advancement for officers seeking senior command positions. Commanders with conventional warfare experience will naturally gravitate towards conventional military solutions to problems, which, in COIN, may only make things worse.

Conventional forces are very well equipped to break things and kill people, to take ground and hold it. They are not equipped to fight an enemy that can fade into the population at any time.

Because of protracted nature of COIN and increasing public concern, politicians are often pressured to commit conventional ground forces to accelerate the resolution of the conflict. This is the worst thing that one can do in such a situation.

Know when to stop

Should a conflict escalate such as the Iraqi civil war did after the fall of Saddam Hussein, American politicians need to ask if there’s an overriding American interest in trying to quell the violence, and if there’s not we should just withdraw our forces to a position of sanctuary and let the indigents fight it out. Our government leaders must understand that the USA does not have a charter to impose peace and democracy on the rest of the world—and for many reasons it would be a bad idea even if such a charter existed. An international outrage is not necessarily a circuit breaker to trigger American involvement. The international community needs to learn how to resolve such differences without American involvement.

In the rare case where it’s in the interests of the USA to fight a counterinsurgency operation in some strategically critical place in the world, the scope of the conflict should be kept in perspective, the small portion of our military specifically trained for the mission should be employed, and the overall footprint of American involvement should be kept light and low-key. The model of the British success in Malaysia should be studied and replicated.

MilitaryValues.org Principles and Mission

The content of these topical white papers from MilitaryValues.org is aligned with the organization’s principles and mission statement. At the core is the protection of America and the founding principles—mainly summarized by freedom and liberty for citizens and a federal government with limited and enumerated powers. All of this is made abundantly clear in our Constitution and the founder’s many writings. The US military’s role to protect this is made very clear by the oath that is taken by military officers today:

“I, [name], do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same;

that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon which I am about to enter. So help me God.”

For details on the MilitaryValues.org principles and mission statement go to www.MilitaryValues.org.

About MilitaryValues.org

The effectiveness of the United States military has been significantly compromised over the last 20 years by social engineering and politically driven decisions. This is especially true and serious with military units that face front line combat duties. In stark terms, this problem has unnecessarily cost the lives of our front line men and women—while many more suffer various combat-related physical and mental traumas. And there are untold tangents of pain and loss suffered by families, fellow soldiers, and others.

Combat units, and those that support them, greatly benefit from a culture in which there is a focus of effectively prosecuting missions and wars—and rejects unnecessary risk to the military personnel. This culture creates trust and increases effectiveness and loyalty—which is truly critical for the best shot at success in the complex and dangerous endeavor called combat. However on the other hand, if a military is constantly beat down by forces that do not care about its well-being—then a culture of distrust, failure, and despair will increasingly result. This second culture is what we have today in America's military.

MilitaryValues.org exists to educate millions of citizens on what has gone wrong and how it can be reversed. We hope you will continue to our website and learn more!