

WINNING THE HEARTS AND MINDS – KEYS TO COUNTER INSURGENT
OPERATIONS

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Abstract

Counter insurgent operations are waged by government forces that are fighting against a group in rebellion against a government's authority. The success or failure of counter insurgent operations relies on factors ranging from the support of the local populace to world perceptions. This paper will compare the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783) and the Algerian War (1954-1962) to see how tactical and strategic victories do not always equate to winning the war. This paper will then apply lessons learned to Iraq and Afghanistan.

The American Revolution and the Algerian War provide a retrospective view of counter insurgent operations and how important it is to earn and maintain the support of the local population and how the world perceives the forces involved. They demonstrate the importance of support where the conflict is at and how world politics and perceptions influence the outcome of the insurgent movement. Winning the hearts and minds of the local population and gaining world sentiment can greatly bolster either side of a conflict.

Insurgents require aid at the international level to battle government forces. Not only do insurgents need guns, ammunition, supplies, and money; they need some type of international support to combat the established government they are fighting. They need help to rally political intervention from other nations that are sympathetic to their plight. The American Revolutionists found support from France during the American Revolution and the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) found support from Muslims around the world. This support is critical as insurgents try to establish themselves as freedom fighters with a just cause validated by world opinion and not viewed as a national band of criminals to be dealt with by the governments they are fighting.

Foreign aid can come in the form of money, arms, and even troops. Many countries are politically motivated to help groups that are fighting their enemies. During the American Revolution the French and British were at odds with one another. The French played a critical role in the American Revolution by supporting the Continental Army (the insurgents). They provided leadership to the struggling American forces (Marquis de Lafayette and Count Rochambeau), supplies, ammunition, and guns. Eventually the French provided the naval power needed to equalize the British domination of the coastal cities.

The FLN received support from Muslims around the world in the form of monies and political sympathy. Due to continued terrorist attacks the French used torture to gather information vital to their counter insurgent cause. As the world learned about the torture, the FLN found the political support they needed to fight the French. Support for the FLN grew in Algeria, France itself, and the rest of the world.

During the American Revolution the British Army fought American colonists intent on separation from the England. The British navy was able to capture and control coastal cities and towns but due to the small number of ground troops was not able to reach into the interior of the colonies. The British were forced to stay close to the coast and only conduct raids into the colonies. American colonists were able to maintain the inlands and forced the British into using such tactics as burning down centers of perceived support to the Continental Army. During the process of denying the insurgent forces resources they needed, the British forces destroyed broad swaths of colonist's property. This move gave the Continental Army much needed support by creating British enemies because of the harsh tactics employed.

The French government, during the Algerian War, found itself under terrorist attacks by the FLN. As early as 1957 French forces, gained tactical intelligence through torture and killings. The use of torture created public controversy. This controversy caused the French to lose valuable support at all levels.

The Continental Army and the Algerian FLN have some things in common. Both groups were in colonies of a larger European country. They were both insurgent forces. They both had their roots in the belief of a government of self determination. The Americans wanted to be free of the British while the Algerians wanted an independent state. Both groups knew that in order to

win their struggle that they had to be able to fight against a much larger and better equipped military. In order to do this they needed to gain and maintain the support of the local populace. It is believed that at the beginning of the American Revolution the colonists were evenly split three ways between those wanting a new country, those loyal to the crown, and those who could go either way. What proved critical was the one-third who started out as neutral and then eventually moved to the side of the American Revolutionists. The French also learned that by isolating the local population, through fear and intimidation, that they only pushed support towards the FLN.

The British and French counter insurgent forces proved similar in some ways also. The British counter insurgent force was the British Army sent to quell the rebellion. The British were able to win victories in the northern colonies. Unable to move very far from the coast though the British then decided to move their forces south and again won decisive victories in Charleston and moved north into Virginia, always staying near their superior naval armada. The British however were not able to capitalize on coastal victories and push further inward. They resorted to harsh tactics and pushed many colonials that were originally sympathetic to the crown or undecided to the colonial side. They failed to win the hearts and minds of the colonials.

In the 1950's Algeria was a French colony. The French were adamant in keeping Algeria under French control. After riots and general disorder French Prime Minister Guy Mollet initially waged a campaign of pacification. Algerians who originally wanted a peaceful resolution soon began to call for Algerian independence due to the harsh treatment under French military rule.

Another important factor we find is that of international support. France played a critical role in the war for American Independence. As the British pushed north along the coast from the Carolinas the French Navy was able to push the British Navy out of the Chesapeake region in

Virginia and land French troops. In 1781, As General Washington moved on the British forces of General Cornwallis the French were able to pinch the British into an area that eventually led to the surrender of the British forces at Yorktown.

International support for the FLN started mainly in the form of Arab countries and Muslim support for an independent Algeria. The harsh accounts of French torture and tactics, especially in the Battle of Algiers, were made known and the French saw world opinion falter. Even the French people themselves became divided on the issue of a colonial Algeria. Although the France won the military war against the FLN world opinion turned. As anti-colonial sentiment grew around the world the French found themselves with a military victory in Algeria but no way to stall the eventual independence of the colony they had fought to maintain.

Two root causes for the failure of the counter insurgent operations were international involvement by the French in the American Revolution and the lack of popular support for the French during the Algerian War. It did not matter that the British forces in the American Revolution had many key victories or that the French military in the Algerian War won the actual battles fought. Military strength was not the key to success. As demonstrated, the insurgent forces leveraged international and local support for their cause and eventually both won independence from their colonial masters.

One common argument in support of insurgent movements is that time is always on the side of the insurgent forces. Insurgents do not win wars simply because of time. Although it is difficult for counter insurgent forces over a long period of time it is not an automatic victory if the insurgent forces simply hang on. As noted whoever wins the hearts and minds will eventually win the war.

The success or failure of the counter insurgent mission relies on both internal and external factors of the country or region. These factors include outside support from world governments, regional authorities, and even outside sympathies. Factors also include the support of the local populace and the ability of the counter insurgent force to maintain rule of law and create an atmosphere of prosperity. Lastly the counter insurgent force must realize that winning tactical engagements does not always equate to winning the war against an insurgent force.

Soldiers must realize that heavy handed tactics by counter insurgent forces, although may have a short term gain, will lead to future converts to the insurgent cause and loss of world support. In both Iraq and Afghanistan the population must be won over one person at a time. If we fail to convince the people whose home it is that we are there to help then we cannot win the war for the hearts and minds.

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