

Running Heading: History Essay

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U.S. Counterinsurgency Operations in Panama and Mexico

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Abstract

The United States government conducts counterinsurgency operations (COIN) to shape the political atmosphere, economy, infrastructure, and security of other nations. A brief comparative/contrasting study of U.S. COIN operations in Mexico and Panama is representative of most of our nation's COIN efforts. The lessons learned during these significant COIN operations provide valuable tools to combat current insurgency in the Global War on Terror.

The U.S. learned significant lessons in tactics, diplomacy, and unconventional warfare while conducting counterinsurgency operations in Panama and Mexico. Independence, revolution, and U.S. doctrine were critical in shaping both nations. The tactical value of victory in Panama and Mexico to U.S. security was critical. Differing reasons for each insurgency, geography, and U.S. objectives impacted both counterinsurgencies.

In the early 1900's, while the U.S. was still a relatively young nation, a majority of other nations were in political turmoil. New governments were being established in many parts of the world and the application of insurgent violence against those governments was common. The assassination of key government officials by insurgents and bold attacks on the economy and infrastructure of many countries plunged the world into its first global conflict: World War I.

With the world at war, the security of the U.S. and countries whose stability furthered U.S. strategic goals were paramount. Two notable insurgencies during this period occurred in Panama and Mexico. The government of both countries was under attack by insurgent revolutionaries. The goals of both insurgencies were a threat to our nation's economy and future relations with Mexico and Panama. These insurgencies poised a threat U.S. national security and our country conducted COIN operations in an effort to stop the threat.

In the early days of 1900's, Mexico was at civil war. This war, the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), was bloody and often strayed into U.S. territory. Mexico's government was on unstable ground. Its president, Francisco I. Madero, had recently been assassinated and Victoriano Huerta had proclaimed himself as the country's leader. Huerta's rule over Mexico was met with strong opposition by many in Mexico. During this period Venustiano Carranza,

another powerful Mexican official, claimed that Huerta's self-proclamation as president was a violation of Mexico's Constitution. Carranza worked to overthrow Huerta in an effort to become president of Mexico.

At the time, Huerta controlled the Mexican Federal Army while Carranza enjoyed the support of several Mexican generals and their forces. The most notable of these generals was Doroteo Arango Arambula, more commonly referred to in history as Pancho Villa. Villa was in command of Mexico's northern armies and sought to overthrow his leader Carranza to become president of Mexico. Carranza was aware of Villa ambitions and through a series of events labeled him as a traitor and sentenced him to death. Villa briefly sought the support of the U.S. in his effort to overthrow Carranza but was turned away by President Woodrow Wilson.

President Wilson saw potential in Carranza and agreed with his vision for the future of Mexico and its relationship with the U.S. This relationship angered Villa and he started an insurgency in Mexico against both Carranza and the U.S. During this period, Villa and his army murdered many Mexican official and U.S. and Mexican Soldiers. President Wilson charged General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing with hunting down and capturing Villa. Additionally, President Wilson posted several thousand U.S. militia men on the border of Mexico to prevent Villa from entering the U.S.

Pershing pursued Villa into Northern Mexico and quickly fell victim to the terrain. History shows that Villa clearly had the advantage with regard to knowledge of the terrain and the experience of his men. Villa's familiarity with the geography of Northern Mexico allowed him to elude Pershing's forces and the hardness of his men enabled him to move great distances

without rest or need of additional supplies. Pershing was forced to negotiate terrain he was unfamiliar with and his men were soft. They frequently stopped for rest and consumed their supplies at an alarming rate.

Villa was committed to waging war against Carranza and the U.S. without regard to what was considered ethical or humane in warfare. His insurgency was given the advantage by a drive for potential rule of Mexico and lack of rules governing his men's conduct toward the enemy. Pershing unfortunately was not without these limitations. President Wilson had forbidden Pershing from attacking anyone he could not identify as a member of Villa's army and from traveling outside of Northern Mexico during his campaign. This crippled Pershing's efforts because he frequently encountered civilians sympathetic to Villa's cause. Additionally, Pershing encountered many of Carranza's forces during his search for Villa and was under strict orders from President Wilson not to attack any of Carranza's men. These encounters made Pershing's men hesitant when facing Villa's forces because they were often unable to tell who the enemy was. In the end, Pershing's effort to capture Villa was unsuccessful. Pershing was ordered to stop his COIN operations and deployed as commander of the American Expeditionary Force in support of World War I.

The root cause of President Wilson's failed COIN operation against Villa was the draw of forces World War I put on the U.S. Our nation was fighting a global war and required the deployment of men and equipment somewhere other than Mexico. Given time, Pershing would have probably been successful; however, time was not something the U.S. had on its side regarding the employment of Pershing, his men, and their equipment. Three critical factors that

ultimately led to President Wilson's failed COIN operation were U.S. policy, geography, and his objectives. U.S. policy limiting Pershing's actions against civilians and other armies in the area severely limited his efforts and hindered his men's ability to identify the enemy. This allowed Villa to use civilians, and the dress and practices of Carranza's army, against Pershing. Villa's in-depth knowledge of the geography/terrain of the area allowed his forces to move about undetected. Pershing's force was dramatically slowed by his limited knowledge of the area he was fighting in and his forces were not use to operating in the unforgiving terrain. Finally, Villa's objective was one that many armies have attributed to victory; they considered their cause a noble one and felt their nation's future depended upon their success. Unlike Villa, Pershing and his men were executing a military operation to further their countries political objectives in a nation many of them cared little about.

In 1903, Panama gained its independence by breaking free of Columbian rule. This was largely influenced by years of U.S. intervention in the area. Shortly after gaining independence, Panama and the U.S. signed the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty. This treaty allowed the U.S. to construct the Panama Canal. The canal was, and still is, a significant piece of terrain to the U.S. The acquisition of this terrain allowed the U.S. to rapidly deploy forces to both eastern and western naval fronts without having to sail around South America. When the construction of the canal was completed in 1914, the U.S. declared its right to defend the canal. Our nation established numerous outposts near the canal and committed naval assets to the area.

With a strong foothold in Panama the U.S. could thwart or significantly delay any military effort launched against it from South America or by any other nation's naval forces. In

addition to its military applications, Panama and the canal had significant value to the U.S. economy. The goods and wares transported through the canal were contributing significantly to the rapid growth being experienced in the U.S. Rubber and other textiles imported from South America were being used to build the U.S. military at a staggering pace.

U.S. intervention in Panama during the time spanning 1918-1920 can be viewed more as an occupation than a COIN operation. During this period, the U.S. occupied more than 4,184 acres of land in Panama and established either military posts or coal mining operations on the land (Lindsay-Poland, 2003, pp. 28-29). These military operations, were executed under the guise of providing security for the canal.

In 1918 the president of Panama, Ciro Luis Urriola, died after only a few months in office and the country experienced a period of political uprising. In response to his death, Panama announced it would go without presidential leadership for an unknown period. President Wilson ordered U.S. military forces, under the command of General Richard Blatchford, to occupy Panama City and Colon. In response, Panama elected Belisario Porras as president. Despite protest from the Panamanian government, the U.S. subsequently increased forces in Panama City and Colon. Additionally, U.S. forces occupied the Panamanian province of Chiriqui. Shortly after the elections in 1918, President Wilson ordered the U.S. military to return control of Panama City and Colon to the Panamanian government but increased forces in Chiriqui to quell civil unrest and small political uprisings by the people residing there.

The root cause of President Wilson's successful COIN operations in Panama was his willingness to commit forces to the area. With global turmoil on the rise, and the dawn of World

War I, he recognized the strategic value of controlling Panama. Three critical factors that ultimately led successful COIN operations in Panama were U.S. policy, geography, and clear objectives. The strategic value of Panama, and the obligations of our nation outlined in the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, committed our country to protecting its interests there. The geographical location of Panama in relation to the U.S. allowed President Wilson to quickly mass forces in the area whenever politics or insurgency in the area deemed military action necessary. Finally, President Wilson's objective in Panama was sincere one and critical to U.S. national security. He clearly understood that if the U.S. lost hold of Panama and the canal, the rest of the world would seize the opportunity to take control of the area. This would have a dramatically adverse impact on the U.S. economy and would provide foreign navies the ability to use the canal for quick passage to waters just outside the U.S.

Several lessons can be learned from the COIN operations waged by the U.S. in Mexico and Panama during the periods discussed. Many of these lessons have direct application to our current Global War on Terror (GWOT). The lessons learned in these COIN operations have direct correlation to the fight our nation currently finds itself in. Time passes, but the lessons learned about policy during war, the geography of the area being fought in, and the objectives of the operation are timeless.

The first lesson centers on policy. For any military action to be successful, it must be fully supported by the policies of the country taking action. President Wilson's COIN operations in Mexico did not commit the size of force necessary to achieve his objective in the area and the limitations he placed on his military commander all but ensured failure. This is similar to our

nation's approach to fighting the GWOT. Our leaders are reluctant to commit enough forces to the areas they have identified as strategic in value and have placed significant limitations on what military commanders are authorized to do in those areas. If the U.S. applied President Wilson's approach in Panama to its current efforts in the GWOT, our efforts would be much further along than they are now.

The second lesson, geography/terrain, is taught to all leaders but not one many fully grasp. During COIN operations in Mexico, one of Pershing's most formidable foes was his enemy's knowledge of the terrain. Counter to Pershing's experience in Mexico, President Wilson had geography/terrain on his side in Panama due to the large amounts of land already under control of the U.S. The amount of terrain currently controlled by our forces in the GWOT more closely resembles our COIN operations in Mexico than they do Panama. Currently, our enemies in both Iraq and Afghanistan have the advantage regarding geography/terrain. The insurgents indigenous to the area capitalize on their ability to moving in and out of local populations and across key terrain with little resistance from U.S. forces. U.S. control over larger areas of land in Iraq and Afghanistan would contribute to our success in the GWOT.

The third and final lesson, what is the objective, is one defined by the definition and commitment of the first two lessons: policy and geography/terrain. The U.S. objective in Iraq and Afghanistan is to stop insurgent operations while we establish more palatable forms of government. Unfortunately, the size of forces committed to both countries, limitations on our commanders, and effort to seize and control key terrain do not lend support to our objectives.

The lessons provided by U.S. counterinsurgency operations in Panama and Mexico were significant. Independence, revolution, and U.S. doctrine were critical in shaping both nations. The tactical value of victory in Panama and Mexico to U.S. security was critical. Differing reasons for each insurgency, geography, and U.S. objectives impacted both counterinsurgencies. The lessons learned during these significant COIN operations provide valuable tools to combat current insurgency in the Global War on Terror.

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