

A comparison in Counterinsurgency Campaigns between the American Civil War and the U.S.

Indian Wars of the West and the practices used to fight the insurgency

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Abstract

Counterinsurgency operations have played an important role in numerous U.S. military campaigns from 1775 to today; currently in support of Overseas Contingency Operations. Throughout this period, U.S. leaders have learned to develop, apply, and confirm counterinsurgency techniques by evaluating success or failure during an event; then analyzing and adapting the lessons learned in order to shape the desired outcome of current or future operations. This method has assisted the U.S. Army, today, in updating tactics and writing doctrine for instruction at military institutions. This essay will not address every insurgency; however, it will compare the counterinsurgency during the American Civil War and U.S. Indian Wars of the West by outlining three similar counterinsurgency practices that contributed towards each ones strategic goal.

During the American Civil War and U.S. Indian Wars of the West there were three similar counterinsurgency factors that would contribute towards the success of each campaign. The three factors were: counterguerilla measures, experimentation with new techniques, and pacification measures. Therefore, in order to gain a better understanding of these three factors, the first several paragraphs will address the insurgency problem from the perspective of both the U.S. Army and insurgency.

During the American Civil War from 1860 to 1865, insurgency played a major factor in the Federal Army's ability to exercise its control in the disaffected Southern states in order to attain the strategic goal of restoring the Union. Despite the North having advantages in both technology and military strength throughout the war, the South held one unique advantage; guerilla warfare.

What made the Southern guerilla or bushwhacker unique was that they were not enlisted in the Confederate Army. Instead they were comprised of local civilians that had the uncanny ability to hide and maneuver in their familiar rugged terrain and towns that supported them. Therefore, they assisted the Confederate regulars by harassing the Federal soldiers where they were vulnerable; usually, where security was the weakest. Thus, "by compelling the Army to concentrate the majority of its resources on the conventional battlefield, the Confederate Army ensured that the U.S. Army would never have enough troops to firmly secure its rear" (Birtle 41).

As a result, in order for the North to deal with the insurgency, the Union Army was forced to tie up their troop strength with rear security in order to defend against them; often at times when they were needed on the front lines for important campaigns. Unfortunately, for those that were sent, "many of the troops were second-echelon units that were poorly trained,

badly equipped, and deficient in morale” (Birtle 41). The more experienced soldiers were kept at the front-lines where their experience was deemed more important.

Unlike the Southern guerilla, the Northern soldier was not adept or skilled at being in the woods; most soldiers came from the North where they were not raised in a country environment. Furthermore, the Northern soldier, especially a new recruit, was not well trained or versed in military discipline, drill, marksmanship and counterinsurgency techniques.

Perhaps, the worst thing that faced the U.S. Army with the insurgency was in regards to the guerillas having the ability to easily exploit their security and immediately after attacking they would quickly blended back into the local population without a trace; “fed, clothed, housed, and informed by civilian sympathizers, the guerrillas assumed a chameleon-like quality, a trait enhanced by their frequent adoption of civilian dress” (Birtle 40). As a result, Union soldiers who took after them often returned empty handed and frustrated.

During the Indian Wars of the West from 1865 to 1899; the Western Indians also conducted an insurgency campaign against the U.S. Army as it expanded through Western America. The Indians felt threatened as their land was being settled upon and often conducted small sized raids on convoys, patrols, pickets, and forts to deter and repel the white man’s encroachment on their territory. The U.S. Army was entrusted with the strategic goal of opening up as much western land as possible, while providing security, in order to allow white settlement towards the West; however, to do so with limited fighting in dealing with any Indians along the way.

The major issue the U.S. Army faced was it did not have the troop strength to cover the vast mileage that encompassed the West. Immediately after the Civil War, the Army decreased in size significantly. One of the reasons was “as line of communication and transportation

expanded, the ability to react more quickly increased. Railroads made it possible to rush to different parts of the country, lessening the necessity for so many permanent posts in the West” (McDermott 26). However, as it reduced in numbers it also decreased in counterinsurgency experience from the post Civil War veterans. Furthermore, newly assigned soldiers were not properly trained in drill and marksmanship. One advantage the military did have was technology; the weapons and equipment were far superior in the beginning compared to the bow and arrow and hatchet in which the Indians used.

Training in general, for new recruits and veterans, was a problem that was complicated by the Army’s large expansion from East to West; logistics (ammunition) had to travel long distances to get to the many dispersed forts. Furthermore, even if training was a priority for a commander, it would have a low priority task, given his limited manpower, with other essential daily chores on the installation taking precedence. “Even if time had not been a problem, financial constraints limited the U.S. Army to allocating ten rounds of ammunition per man per month for target practice, hardly enough to turn unskilled shooters into marksmen” (Birtle 59).

Like the guerillas of the South, the Western Indians were excellent outdoorsmen who knew their terrain, surroundings and how to hunt. Furthermore, they were also skilled in the art of war from fighting other Indian tribes. The biggest mistake U.S. Army leaders made was that they classified the Indians as savages and did not take their capability into account because they were viewed as inferior beings. In actuality, the Indians were far superior warriors compared to a U.S. soldier; they were highly disciplined, motivated, and skilled in tracking, hunting, and war. Indians chose to strike their enemy on their terms only after observing and understanding their opponents patterns; especially their weaknesses. The U.S. Army did not take this into consideration in the beginning; therefore, the Indians were able to exploit the U.S. Army’s

vulnerabilities and then quickly disperse back into the forest or plains in which they came. These issues, just like with the Southern guerillas, would once again challenge the U.S. Army at the beginning of the U.S. Indian Wars of the West.

Now that we have a basic understanding of the two conflicts, in regards to insurgency, we will now examine three similar factors that assisted the U.S. Army in attaining its strategic goals for both the American Civil War and the U.S. Indian Wars of the West. These three factors are counterguerilla measures, experimentation with new techniques, and pacification measures.

During the American Civil War, several counterguerilla measures were used throughout the five year time span of the war. “The Army’s most common counter guerrilla technique was to establish small posts in the major towns of a disorderly region, with mobile reserves stationed at county seats and other key locations” (Birtle 41). The purpose was to establish a base for patrols to operate from in order to hunt down and destroy the bushwhackers.

One may well doubt the success of this measure, due to the urgent need for seasoned troops on the front lines, and the lack of experience of second echelon troops, including lack of skills to defend themselves. However, the reality was, for the posts that were established, as long as each one was manned accordingly to the threat and the commander balanced his troop strength between defense of the installation and the patrols he sent out; they served their purpose well. This measure worked especially well when the commander took the initiative in dealing with the local area insurgency. “Never the less, the fortified posts did prove to be of some utility, and throughout 1864 their tiny garrisons repeatedly beat off guerrilla attacks” (Birtle 41).

Another favored counterguerilla techniques was the use of static defenses to protect railroads, bridges, and other areas of interest. “Some of these defenses evolved into extensive networks of stockades and outposts all carefully connected by systems of patrols” (Birtle 41).

Furthermore, the U.S. Army used armored trains on the railroads and depending on the terrain, gunboats also assisted along the rivers; both serving as additional security and firepower.

Despite this technique, one may dispute again it took numerous soldiers away from the front-lines and was conducted by inexperienced soldiers. The reality is that it did indeed take numerous soldiers to accomplish, whether experienced or inexperienced, and it did not stop all railroads, bridges, and key areas of interest from being attacked by guerillas. However, it did prove relative success and also lead to the development of other effective measures. For example, the U.S. superintendent of railways, Herman Haupt, acknowledged that it was impossible to protect all railroads from bushwhackers; “instead, he perfected rapid repair techniques that enabled the government to reopen damaged facilities quickly” (Birtle 41). This procedure ensured the main transportation for the U.S. Army was not out of commission for very long. . Therefore, “Federal counter-guerrilla operations were successful in reducing the impact of Confederate guerrilla warfare” (Wikipedia 1).

In regards to the U.S. Indian Wars of the West, the U.S. Army once again used counterguerilla measures in order to defeat the Indians who waged war or attacked the military with their bands of men and horses. Although, the measures discussed in reference to the American Civil War are points to consider, they will not be relevant to the points that will be discussed below. Only the idea of “counterinsurgency measures” will be similar.

In the U.S. Indian Wars of the West, one of the counterguerilla measures the U.S. Army used was to coordinate their major offensive operations before fall time in order to disrupt the Indians hunting season and food stocks prior to winter. However, if this was not feasible, the U.S. Army would attack in early spring in order to disrupt the feeding of their ponies and livestock in order to ensure they remained weak after a long winter; depriving the animals of

fresh vegetation as their winter supplies became exhausted. Therefore, by taking away the Indians food supplies, the U.S. Army hoped to break the Indian's will and force them into submission.

In this case, one could contend that the Indians were always mobile and could still elude the military despite the soldiers' best efforts. However, the truth was the U.S. Army did have success and at the same time some of the tribes were able to evade the soldiers. Therefore, "consequently, the U.S. Army took to launching its major offensives during the winter, when the Indians were most vulnerable" (Birtle 67). By doing so, this allowed the U.S. Army to make one of it's weakness into a strength – logistics; "for it was the Army's ability to assemble large quantities of food, clothing, and animals which allowed it to campaign at a time when the Indians were relatively dormant" (Birtle 68). Utilizing this technique, the U.S. had better success.

A second counterguerilla measure the military used during the U.S. Indian Wars of the West was to employ Indian scouts to assist with their patrols. The U.S. Army was challenged with tracking down the bands of raiders who eluded them in their familiar terrain. However, the soldiers did not have the experience to be very effective with this. "Consequently, in 1866 the War Department obtained congressional authorization for the inclusion of up to 1,000 Indian scouts as part of the regular establishment of the U.S. Army.

Despite the oddity of employing an Indian into the U.S. Army for scouting purposes it would be easily arguable for one to disagree by pointing out that the Indians could not learn to act or think like soldiers nor be trusted. In spite of this thought, what occurred was exactly the opposite; commanders did not want to change the way the Indian operated and thought. General Crook wanted his commanders to build a rapport based on admiration and trust. "Above all, he demanded that officers not stifle the scouts individuality" (Birtle 69). Furthermore, the Indians

were trusted by their commanders and were often sent out to conduct independent missions.

Overall, this technique proved extremely valuable and greatly assisted the military throughout the campaign; “rare was a column of regular soldiers that had successfully made contact with a band of hostile Indians without the aid of at least a few Indian guides” (Birtle 69).

The second counterinsurgency factor that contributed towards the success of both insurgencies was experimentation with new techniques throughout each conflict. During the 1800s up to World War II, “the U.S. Army lacked an extensive, formal, written doctrine for the conduct of small wars” (Birtle 5). “Nor did the U.S. Military Academy or army journals deal with the subject of Indian warfare” (McDermott 60). Therefore, most commanders took it upon themselves to recount and rely on past experiences in order to develop techniques to fight the insurgency.

During the American Civil War, there were numerous techniques that were attempted; some with great success. One of these techniques was the use of small groups of soldiers to aggressively and incessantly track and hunt down the bushwhackers. Through the use of Union guides through unfamiliar territory, they would gather intelligence on the enemy’s location and once the insurgents’ whereabouts were known they would ambush them.

The success of this technique could easily be doubted due to the lack of experience from the soldiers. However, the reality is that the men were often hand selected from the best available and led by assertive and creative commanders. “Nevertheless, there were many resourceful and aggressive officers who rose to the challenge and turned creditable performances during the counterinsurgency war. Some were veterans of prewar Indian campaigns, while others learned from trial and error” (Birtle 42). Therefore, by applying these principles, actually allowed this

technique to be relatively successful and perhaps more importantly, also served as a basis to develop new and up to date techniques as they encountered new challenges.

Another experimental technique that proved its merit was to create special counterguerilla units. Despite shortages for this type of service from the Federal Army's front-lines; "one of the most common adaptations was the creation of mounted infantry to make up for the Army's perennial shortage of cavalry" (Birtle 44). This technique would enhance the counterinsurgency capabilities by provide additional manpower to assist in rooting out the insurgency.

Although the technique may appear solid, one may oppose this by addressing the original tasking was to have been outfitted by the Army's inexperienced cavalry; however, it was adding another handicap by conducting the operations with Infantry. "For the most part mounted infantrymen were handpicked and exempted from normal infantry duty. Instead, they devoted themselves exclusively to reconnaissance escort, and counterguerilla work, providing their regimental commanders with an elite, mobile strike force" (Birtle 44). This technique did provide success and at the same time contributed to a solution for the shortages of cavalry and establish a base for some of the other similar techniques that followed later on in the war.

The last factor to be discussed will be the pacification measures that were used during both the American Civil War and the U.S. Indian Wars of the West. "In the broadest sense, *pacification* encompassed all actions taken to establish or maintain peace, order, and government authority in an area that was either openly or potentially hostile" (Birtle 4). One will now see how both campaigns used pacification to in dealing with not only the local populace, but how it also pertained to the insurgency.

During the American Civil war, the U.S. Army used pacification measures that were initially established by President Lincoln. However, several military leaders deemed the President's early pacification measures, such as simple arrests, fines, and loyalty to oaths, too "soft". One of those leaders was General Sherman. His principle was the "hard war" approach. "Sherman realized that the Army was "not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people, and must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war"" (Birtle 36). Therefore, in other words, if the Southerners would not love the federal Army then they would fear them. These harsh measures included destruction and confiscation of property and complete removal of populations from troubled areas in order to break their will.

This pacification method could be argued that in adapting these pacification methods the Federal Army was being cruel and inhumane by burning homes and displacing populations. What actually occurred was that in the beginning of the war lighter measures were taken. "The Army had begun confiscating or destroying private property in retaliation for guerrilla activities in 1861. Initially it destroyed only well-defined targets, such as the houses of know guerillas or buildings from which sniper fire emanated" (Birtle 38). Therefore, because these "softer" measures were not deterring the insubordinate Southern population, later in the campaign General Sherman took this pacification policy to a new level. Eventually, "as commander of all federal armies in the West, he cut a swath of devastation through the heart of the Confederacy, destroying anything that could conceivably be of use to the rebel military, both to weaken the confederacy materially and to demoralize the population which formed the underpinning of the insurgency" (Birtle 39). Therefore, due to harsher measures, General Sherman's pacification policy greatly contributed to making the support of the sympathizers much more difficult.

In regards to pacification measures for the U.S. Indian Wars of the West, the U.S. Government wanted to ensure that the Indians were eventually indoctrinated into Western culture. Therefore, much of the pacification policy (Indian policy) was directed by the U.S. Congress. However, the U.S. Army realized that there were more complicated dynamics involved in effecting culture change. Furthermore, leaders also realized they would need to consider traditions and values as they carefully dealt with all of this.

This pacification measure is arguable by addressing that it is difficult to take a culture and convert it to another in a short period of time. This is a true statement and the Army leaders realized this; furthermore, they disapproved of the way the government wanted them to handle it. The government's policy basically called for the destruction of the Indians' way of life in which the military leaders knew the Indians would not support. Therefore, "before any progress could be made, reasoned Army leaders, it would first be necessary to break the Indians' will to resist" (Birtle 79). This they were able to do. Eventually, Indian tribes were contained and elements of Western culture such as farming, ranching, and trading were introduced. Although, success was limited and short lived the U.S. Army eventually accomplished its mission of suppressing the Indians; however, it could not meet the personal challenge of reforming the tribes to Western culture the way it wanted.

However, despite the outcome, it did create an important foundation for the Army. It identified three basic principles that would play roles in future military campaigns when dealing with a population that was not from a Western culture. Those three principles are: the need of civil-military coordination in a military campaign, establishment of a firm and fair government, and the introduction of economic and educational reforms.

In summary, despite the American Civil War and U.S. Indian Wars of the West having two different strategic goals, both events shared the use of similar counterinsurgency practices by the military during the insurgency. The American Civil War insurgency was aimed at disrupting the Federal Army's ability to bring the Union back together; however, the Federal Army would eventually contain the insurgency which would allow the front-line soldiers to defeat the rebels and restore the Union. On the other hand, the Western Indians who partook in guerilla warfare against the U.S. Army, as it expanded West, were determined at astringing and causing harassment against the encroaching white man they felt threatened by. The goal of America at this time was to expand West; in order to do so, the Army needed to provide security in order to accommodate the hopeful travelers and at the same time they needed to bring the Indian tribes into submission. Despite the large time period from 1865 to 1899, the military would accomplish its mission.

In conclusion, counterinsurgency has played an important role in U.S. military operations for over 234 years. Throughout this time period, leaders have come to realize that by documenting and capturing lessons learned it will provide them with information as a basis for updating tactics, writing doctrine, and instructing military leaders and soldiers in order to meet the needs of future U.S. Army missions; the most current in support of Overseas Contingency Operations. Therefore, reflecting on the three critical factors that were used in the American Civil War and U.S. Indian Wars of the West; counterguerilla measures, experimentation with new techniques, and pacification measures, the U.S. Army has and will continue to build upon and apply those basic principles in the numerous operations it conducts in today's operational environment.

Today's U.S. Army leaders and soldiers may accomplish and apply these lessons in support of Overseas Contingency Operations by: learning to understand the cultures, religions, traditions, and customs of the population they will be associating with; learning about the geographical area in which they will be operating in order to understand the terrain, weather, and environment and how they will affect their units capabilities and limitations; learning and applying current doctrine; and also having the experience and opportunity to develop new tactics, techniques and procedures that can be properly employed in which their lessons learned are recorded for future leaders to use and build upon.

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