

Running head: ALGERIA AND VIETNAM: A STUDY OF COUNTERINSURGENCIES

Algeria and Vietnam: a study of counterinsurgencies

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Abstract

The United States could have shortened the war or changed the outcome by adopting Trinquier's principles in Vietnam. The French reacted rapidly and separated the guerrilla from the population. The United States moved the population to strategic hamlets, alienating the population against the government. The French held the terrain, but to the United States occupying and controlling key terrain wasn't a priority unless there was enemy contact. The French secured the borders and kept pressure across the country. In Vietnam, politics, international boundaries, and terrain made constant pressure impossible. Both counterinsurgencies have similarities with the current Global War on Terror. Adopting his principles now for our fight in Iraq and Afghanistan could shift the counter-insurgency battle dramatically in our favor.

Algeria and Vietnam: a study of counterinsurgencies

The counterinsurgencies in Algeria and Vietnam were fought with different tactics and achieved different outcomes. Valuable lessons can be learned in the comparison and contrast of the counterinsurgency operations in Algeria and Vietnam. Roger Trinquier, a French counter-insurgency expert and veteran of the counterinsurgency in Algeria wrote a book in 1961 outlining the French strategy used successfully in Algeria. Trinquier had three simple principles for success in counter insurgencies. We as a nation should have adopted his principles for our fight in Vietnam. If we had followed Trinquier's principles in Vietnam, it is not likely that the war would not have lasted as long nor had the same outcome. The three critical factors that led to success or failure of counter-insurgency are: (a) separate the guerrilla from the population that supports him; (b) occupy the zones that the guerrillas previously operated from; and; (c) coordinate actions over a wide area and for a long enough time that the guerrilla is denied access to the population centers (Trinquier, 1964). To examine these three principles this paper will use the examples of the French in Algeria and the United States in Vietnam.

This examination will begin by looking at how critical Trinquier's first principle of separating the guerrilla from the population that supports him was in each of these counter-insurgencies. In Algeria, the French adopted Trinquier's principles to fight their growing counter-insurgency. The French locked down the population centers to stop any movement of the guerrillas as a first step. The vast majority of the Algerian population lived in the cities. According to Trinquier, the most vulnerable part of the enemy organization is in the towns (Trinquier, 1964, p. 71). This surprised the insurgents who were not prepared or organized to have their freedom of mobility stopped. In previous years, prior to the arrival of the French Paratroops, the police had taken a law enforcement approach to stopping the insurgents. The group's ability to travel among the

population had never been affected before. French military intelligence, using the local police files, developed a target list of all known or likely supporters of the insurgency. No longer restrained by the law enforcement approach, they swiftly moved to separate the guerrilla from the population. Within 48 hours, all of these suspects were arrested, and anyone associated with the insurgency was detained. This rapid action removed the guerrillas from the population centers and cut off any access to a sympathetic population. The United States had a different approach. Unable to duplicate the level of intelligence gathered by the French, they could never isolate the guerrilla in the population centers. Their idea was to relocate the population away from the guerrilla into an area that was more controllable and defensible. They developed the strategic hamlet approach to separate the guerrilla from the population that supports them. They transferred the population from thousands of small villages into central locations that could be defended by the population or the Army. This plan also forced the transferred population to take an active role in the war. With the large amounts of barbed wire and defensive positions, these strategic hamlets often resembled prison camps. The strategic hamlet plan failed miserably. The plan moved tremendous amounts of the population into areas that they could not properly defend or could not sustain the population of the hamlet economically (Bergerud, 1991,p. 37). The failure of the government to provide for their basic social needs after relocation caused tremendous opposition by the population. The affected population was greatly upset with the government for moving them from their ancestral areas into hamlets, while giving the contested area to the guerrillas. The enemy easily overran these hamlets and gained access to the population. It was estimated that only twenty percent of the strategic hamlets were truly controlled by the government by the third year of the program. Any civilian population that remained in the rural areas was sympathetic to the guerrillas. This allowed the guerrillas

freedom to move men and supplies into these contested areas from North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

Trinquier's second principle is occupy the zones that the guerrillas previously operated from, making them dangerous for him and turning the people against the guerrilla movement. In Algeria, the French divided the terrain and established a presence in all areas. In the population centers, they established a "block warden" approach (Horne, 2006, 198). The Germans against the French in World War II first used this approach. The block warden method appoints one local person responsible for each city block. This person is responsible for spying on each resident and reporting any anti-government activities. The block warden kept a file on each household, and was responsible for planning and spreading propaganda and developing acceptance to the policies of the government in their area. This gave the French tremendous intelligence gathering capabilities to target the guerrilla and their support network. This technique also made it dangerous for the population to support the guerrilla. The United States had a very different approach in Vietnam. The United States did not occupy the zones previously occupied by the guerrilla. They developed large firebases and traveled to these formerly occupied zones to engage the enemy. Unlike the French who to some degree occupied all contested areas, the United States was focused on battling the enemy wherever they were located. Occupying and controlling key terrain was not a priority unless there was current enemy contact (Time magazine, 1969). Once the battle was over, the United States would abandon the contested terrain. An example of this was the battle of Hamburger Hill. The United States fought the North Vietnamese to gain a hilltop for ten days. After taking the hilltop at a cost of seventy killed and three hundred and seventy two wounded, the United States abandoned the terrain sixteen days later (1969). Due to this policy, large sections of Vietnam were not under

government control. The population in these areas generally supported the guerrilla since there were no government forces in the area.

Trinquier's third principle is coordinate actions over a wide area and for a long enough time that the guerrilla is denied access to the population centers that could support him. The French in Algeria pacified the population centers first and then moved to the rural areas of Algeria. Over a period of time, there was little insurgent activity in the cities, so the French maintained a presence but moved forces to keep the pressure on the insurgents. After the insurgents had sustained several defeats in the Atlas Mountain range, and unable to return to the population centers, the few remaining insurgents left Algeria. The French then moved to secure the borders while maintaining constant pressure across the entire country. In Vietnam, the United States found that politics, international boundaries, and terrain made the goal of the third principle impossible for the United States. By the time the United States was heavily involved in Vietnam, political considerations were preventing the military from acting with a free hand. Casualties and the American population's anti-war feelings were affecting the higher level leadership. These political considerations were having an impact on decisions being made on how to prosecute the war. President Johnson personally selected bombing targets, and several areas were off limits due to political considerations. Many times the population centers that could support the guerrilla were across international boundaries. Guerrillas entered Vietnam across the North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia borders. When the guerrilla was being chased by the U.S. Army, or needed to rest and refit, they simply moved across the border where the U.S. Army would not follow. Finally, the harsh jungle terrain made coordinating actions over a wide area difficult. Large guerrilla forces could move through the jungle undetected. Communication, unless you were near a major population center, was short range at best.

Conclusion

As we examine Trinquier's counter-insurgency principles with the backdrop of counter-insurgency operations in Algeria and Vietnam, we see parallels to what is currently happening in Iraq and Afghanistan. If we had followed Trinquier's principles in Vietnam, it is not likely that the war would not have lasted as long nor had the same outcome. Rapid early action by our forces to target and separate the insurgent from the supporting population would have been a tremendous blow to the enemy. Our forces commuted by helicopter from large bases to battle the enemy. Once the enemy left, so did our forces. Occupying the areas that the guerrilla operated in would have severely limited their freedom of movement. Coordinating the actions of our forces in denying the enemy access to the population centers on either side of the border would have taken away the sanctuary provided by political considerations. Both counterinsurgencies have strong similarities with the current Global War on Terror. Adopting his principles now for our fight in Iraq and Afghanistan could shift the counter-insurgency battle dramatically in our favor.

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