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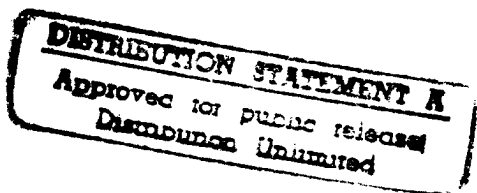
**Issues on the Center of Gravity in
Counterinsurgency Operations**

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Since World War II, military operations other than war (MOOTW) have been met by an evolution of force structure, technology, and doctrine in the United States. Foremost within our doctrine is the foundation of the Operational Art of Warfare with its concepts and tenets to link strategic objectives or aims with tactical actions. Among the most important of the Operational Art tenets is the concept of the Center of Gravity (COG), which is key within this tactical-strategic linkage to achieving a quick, decisive victory (QDV) by efficient use of forces against the strength of an adversary.

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This paper examines these questions, offers conclusions and then proposes some considerations for future force employment in the insurgency/counterinsurgency environment based upon the findings presented above.

Theoretical Framework

As a preface to discussing the issues surrounding the Center of Gravity in the insurgency/counterinsurgency environment, it is prudent to briefly establish the meanings of

both the Center of Gravity and MOOTW. These definitions are derived from the Joint Chiefs of Staff Publications (JCS Pubs) and curriculum readings offered at the Naval War College.

First, the JCS Pubs define Centers of Gravity as “those characteristics, capabilities, or localities from which a military force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight.”¹ Note the JCS definition speaks in the plural tone to allow these characteristics, capabilities, or localities to exist at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. Adding to this definition are the words of Carl Von Clausewitz, who advises that the COG is critical because “...one must keep the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind. Out of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed.”² Although this definition implies a more singular COG, the Operational Art of War adapts Clausewitz’ “hub of power” to the plural “hubs” existing at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of conflict.³ Secondly, centers of gravity have the direct relationship with the principle of the objective in that COGs are those optimum objectives which at the strategic and operational levels ensure victory. Lastly, it is occasionally argued that the concept of the center of gravity is only valid when considering conventional warfare. This narrow position is invalid. The search for COGs of adversaries is applicable whether

¹ JCS Pub 3-0, pg. GL-4.

² M. Howard and P. Paret (eds. and translators). Carl Von Clausewitz - On War. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1989, pp. 595-596.

³ Interview with Dr. Milan Vego, Department of Joint Military Operations, Naval War College, Newport, RI: 11 April 1997. In a second interview with Dr. Vego, on 15 May 1997, he revealed a strong dislike of the Howard and Paret translation of the original Clausewitzian term “schwerpunkt” to “center of gravity.” Dr. Vego’s contention is that the “schwerpunkt” can be either a weak or strong point and to translate it to “center of gravity” was incorrect. He states the “schwerpunkt” may or may not be the so-called hub of power we associate with the term “center of gravity.” For the purposes of this work, we will accept Howard and Paret’s translation as written.

our forces (including our political and economic forces) are employed conventionally or unconventionally, as in many MOOTW scenarios.⁴ This leads us to next define the terms insurgency and counterinsurgency.

Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) is generally understood as the broad range of "...military operations short of war."⁵ They include insurgency/counterinsurgency, peace-keeping, anti-terrorist and anti-drug missions. Certainly, any military employment "short of war" could be lumped under the MOOTW moniker and it has become common to associate contemporary military engagements as MOOTW missions. This paper, however, will be limited to only the insurgency/counterinsurgency aspects of the COG. The definition of an insurgency is "an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict."⁶ The definition of counterinsurgency is "those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency."⁷

Next, let's understand why the discussion of the COG is pertinent in the counterinsurgency employment of our military forces. There are two clear reasons. First, looking at the Army Posture Statement for FY97, we see that soldiers will be expected to "conduct diverse missions such as counterterrorism, punitive attacks, noncombatant evacuation, counterdrug operations, nation assistance, humanitarian and disaster relief."⁸ Combine this menu of MOOTW missions with a reduced defense budget and force structure,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ JCS Pub 3-0, pg. GL-3.

⁶ Ibid., GL-5.

⁷ JCS Pub, 3.07.1, pg. GL-4.

⁸ Togo D. West, Jr. and GEN Dennis J. Reimer. "Statement," U.S. Congress, A Statement on the Posture of the United States Army Fiscal Year 1997, Hearings (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1996), 6.

a decreased presence overseas, and a national will that desires quick, decisive results from our military. Altogether, we have an environment where we must clearly identify the COG of our adversary in order to keep it short, decisive, and, of course, successful. Second, the JCS Pubs highlight the value of examining the COG. It becomes an important analytical tool to the campaign planner.⁹

Finally, with the aid of some graphics, the interrelationship between tactical actions and strategic aims can be seen. The diagram below brings together these two levels and reveals the operational level linkage when dealing with conventional forces.

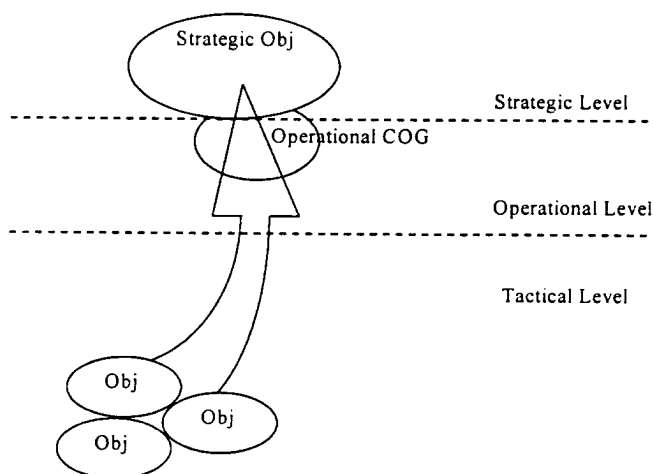


Fig. 1: Conventional War - Overwhelming Force - Direct Approach

The arrow can be regarded as the campaign which takes the tactical level objectives through the operational level to achieve the strategic objective. In the case of conventional war with overwhelming force, the campaign utilizes operational art to attack the operational COG enroute to the strategic objective. In other situations, where overwhelming force isn't assured, the indirect approach (avoiding the COG) is planned as in figure 2 below.

⁹ JCS Pub, 3-0, pg. III-20.

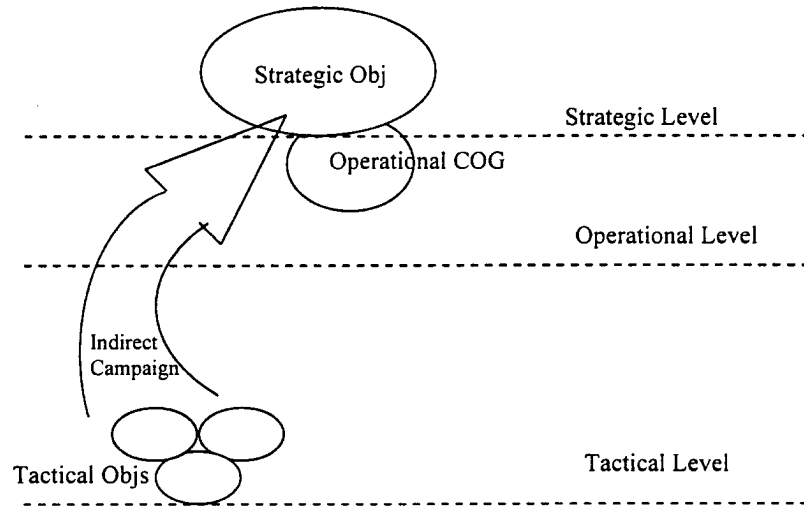


Fig. 2: Conventional War - Indirect Approach

It is this indirect approach which we will proceed to examine in the context of insurgent/counterinsurgent operations. As already mentioned, the lack of conventional, overwhelming forces places the insurgent into the indirect approach to achieve their strategic objective. The campaign of the insurgent includes tactical actions (e.g. seizing and controlling villages, destroying government facilities, blocking key roads and bridges, etc.) while focusing at the strategic level objective (which was defined earlier as the overthrow of the incumbent government). And in the figure above, the operational COG of the government would be the government's conventional military forces. Clearly the insurgent strategy would be to avoid these forces and the entire operational level itself in order to be successful at both the tactical and strategic levels.¹⁰

To graphically portray this strategy, figure 3 is next offered,

¹⁰ Interview with Dr. Milan Vego, Department of Joint Military Operations, Naval War College, Newport, RI: 15 May 1997. The insurgent's deliberate avoidance of the operational level was presented in the discussions at this interview.

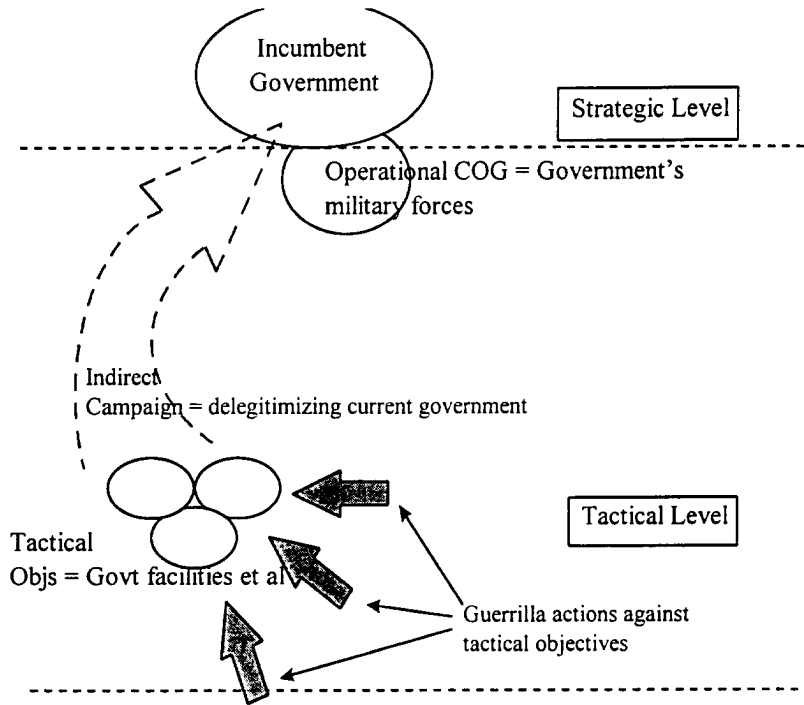


Fig. 3: Insurgency - Indirect Approach Avoiding the Operational Level

The campaign arrow is shown dotted because it is not a deliberate military campaign, but instead a social, economic, and informational campaign. These insurgent powers are used in the de-legitimizing of the constituted government. The application of military forces above the tactical level is avoided by the insurgent.

Tito and His Communist Insurgency Error

An example where a successful insurgency didn't heed this wisdom can be seen in the late 1942 decision by Tito to transform his insurgent, communists groups known as Partisans into "shock divisions." Tito informed the Communist leadership in Russia that "...we have formed eight divisions of three brigades each....The divisions are well armed inclusive of artillery. They are no longer called Partisan units but shock divisions of the National

Liberation Army of Yugoslavia.... We shall now set up something like a government.”¹¹ Unfortunately, moving from guerrilla insurgent groups to a more conventional military force carried the risk of allowing the Germans to target these forces as they combined and converged upon the Black Lake in 1943. Gathering together (instead of working in their usual separate guerrilla groups), the Germans entrapped the new divisions and decimated half. Barely able to escape through the mountainous terrain, Tito realized he had to bury his heavy weapons and leave behind his wounded. In the end, “those from Montenegro set out on the perilous task of infiltrating back through the enemy lines in order to begin rebuilding the shattered Party network.”¹² This example supports the strategy of the insurgent to avoid forming a COG at the operational level by not transforming into a more conventional force unfamiliar to such structure and operation.

Counterinsurgency Errors - Vietnam and the Operational/Strategic “Fog”

Moving to the other side of the insurgency/counterinsurgency conflict, it is seen that conventional forces are hampered by this lack of the operational level when fighting insurgents. In the counterinsurgency operations of Vietnam, retired Colonel Harry Summers, in his analysis of our strategy in Vietnam, focuses on the confusion we had with finding the operational level of conflict against the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Viet Cong. What occurred was the phenomena of creating surrogate COGs at the operational level.¹³ This is a result of trying to find the operational level (which doesn't exist) against an

¹¹ Tito quoted in Stephen Clissold, Djilas. The Progress of a Revolutionary (New York: Universe Books, 1983), 95-96.

¹² Stephen Clissold, Djilas. The Progress of a Revolutionary (New York: Universe Books, 1983), 114.

¹³ Ibid., 93.

effective insurgency. Recall our strategic hamlet program to win the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese rural populace away from Viet Cong control. It was a program intended to offer a secure area combined with land reform. This effort was directed toward the COG known as “popular support.” This, I argue, was actually a surrogate COG. It can be also described as a “let’s try something” decision at the operational level. It failed because the program really offered little in the way of security and the Viet Cong’s version of land reform was more attractive (if not more coercive in compliance). Having the program run by a Communist operative didn’t help matters either!¹⁴

If we couple the misunderstanding of insurgency strategy with a fear of “widening the conflict,” then we see the strategic level also becomes a failure. In Vietnam, we lacked a strategic objective because we were avoiding total victory in a war we wanted to keep very limited. That avoidance stemmed from our fear of widening the war with the Soviet Union and China. In fact, as Summers points out, our Army fighting doctrine at the time, embodied in the Field Service regulations, even avoids the importance of achieving victory.¹⁵ Any possibility of another World War was to be avoided. In the end, the consensus of many respected historians is that the strategic COG was the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) itself and the means which sustained it. But as Summers stated, we avoided that COG because it would widen the conflict. We even avoided bombing the on-going construction of surface-to-air (SAM) missile sites for fear that Soviet advisors were present. And we didn’t mine Haiphong harbor, which was providing tons of war materiel, until very late in the war.

¹⁴ Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 257.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Such “fog” often results in an infusion of massive materiel and men toward an “attritional solution.”¹⁶ Large conventional forces not directed against a conventional force leaves them to “wander” about at the operational level. Unfortunately, such a strategy is well received and used in the media by the insurgents because often it results in significant collateral damage and corruption in the ranks as money and materiel pour into the country. As a counter-argument to this we see in Malaya from 1948 to 1960, the British conducted a successful counterinsurgency campaign against the Chin Peng communists by bringing in a very large conventional force. The difference here was that the British focused on the Peng forces, infused strict discipline into limiting force use (i.e. strict rules of engagement), and they desired total victory without being hobbled by a fear of widening to a greater conflict.¹⁷

Admiral Sharp was CINCPAC during the early part of Vietnam. He gives a telling portrayal of the real effort by our military leadership to get back on track with strategic objectives. Strategic courses of action were developed and weighed by the military leadership. But in the end, these were ignored in favor of a return to the more vague and uncertain direction offered in McNamara’s Draft Presidential Memorandum (DPM) which gave the declaration that,

The time has come for us to eliminate the ambiguities from our minimum objectives--our commitments--in Vietnam. Specifically, two principles must be articulated and policies and actions brought into line with them. (1) Our commitment is only to see that the people of South Vietnam are permitted to determine their own future. (2) This commitment ceases if the country ceases to help itself.¹⁸

¹⁶ Gavin Bulloch, “Military Doctrine and Counterinsurgency: A British Perspective,” U.S. Army War College Parameters, Vol. XXVI, No. 2, Summer 1996, 5.

¹⁷ Bulloch, 5.

¹⁸ Robert S. McNamara, quoted in Admiral(Ret) Ulysses Sharp, Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect (London: Presidio Press, 1978), 171-172.

It is ironic that McNamara believed he was eliminating the ambiguities of the strategic COG by rejecting specific courses of action toward specific goals which achieved specific endstates. Instead, he saw the more general, loose framework of U.S. involvement as the more proper guidance of our efforts in Vietnam. How wrong he was. It is noteworthy to also reflect on McNamara's measures of effectiveness in the absence of clearly defined COGs. He developed a statistician's approach to measuring the success of our counterinsurgency effort. And this isn't surprising. Surrogate COGs will likely have surrogate measures of effectiveness. As Karnow tells us, "the statistics somehow failed to convey an accurate picture of the problem, much less offer solutions."¹⁹ With incredible, McNamara-like accuracy, the strategic hamlet program was deemed a success because in September 1962 we had placed 4,322,034 people under the caring security of Diem's countryside security. In fact, it was "statistical razzle-dazzle" which only served to support the surrogate COG and brother Nhu's belief he had genuinely countered the Vietcong influence.²⁰

As a result, the United States only had an effective tactical counterinsurgency operation in Vietnam. This conclusion, based upon the theoretical model and Summers' analysis, correlates well with a consensus among Vietnam veterans that tactically, we fought well and won. But operationally and strategically, we lost. As Kissinger warns us, "the guerrilla army wins as long as it can keep from losing; the conventional army is bound to lose unless it wins decisively."²¹

¹⁹ Karnow, 254.

²⁰ Karnow, 256.

²¹ Henry A. Kissinger, Diplomacy (New York: Touchstone 1994), 629.

Therefore, the first critical lesson here is that we must have a strategic understanding of the adversary's strategic hub of power and the understanding that no COG will present itself at the operational level. Without these concepts, surrogate COGs and false measures of effectiveness will likely fill that vacuum. Second, in some situations, counterinsurgency COGs should focus at the strategic level on any conventional forces which support the insurgents (e.g. the NVA). As fearful as we may be that such targeting could expand the counterinsurgency actions into true conventional war, these conventional enemy forces nonetheless represent the insurgent's strength and must be dealt with if we intend to win. Short of that, we will benefit the insurgent's psychological campaign from the collateral damage and likely corruption. Third, even in counter-insurgency operations, we must never forget that victory is our endstate.

Counterinsurgency Success - El Salvador

Next, a successful counterinsurgency is worth reviewing in the same light as Vietnam and the theoretical model. El Salvador's insurgency, described as a combined Cuban-Maoist insurgency²², did not succeed in destroying the legitimacy of the Salvadoran government and establishing its agenda as legitimate. Here, we see that the struggle for legitimacy can be won through a "less is better" involvement by the United States. Small contributions, in the form of Mobile Training Teams to shore up the Salvadoran Army, were effective in improving counter-guerrilla operations and consequently enhancing the legitimacy of the government. Such a strategy was successful because the strategic and tactical centers of gravity were effectively assessed and proper resources were placed against them. Right up

²² John D. Waghelstein, "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency," Lecture, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI: 6 May 1997.

front, it was acknowledged that “if we did not get the analysis right, the treatment would not be effective and we would fail.”²³ Other analysts would reassure us that we did learn from Vietnam by declaring in El Salvador,

“three strategic considerations must be kept in mind: The insurgent is dedicated to total victory and all his actions must be judged accordingly; the fundamental goal of the insurgent is not military, but political...and a special organization and tactics are necessary.”²⁴

We wanted to win, we better understood the political dimension, and we didn’t inundate the country with misguided conventional forces and unnecessary materiel.

Therefore, the insurgent’s center of gravity at the strategic level was their legitimacy. Manwaring and Prisk make this clear in their analysis of the FMLN objectives. Keeping in mind that an effective insurgency is political, not military, the FMLN had to destroy the legitimacy of the ruling government and supplant their organization and its agenda instead into the hearts and minds of the populace. Not surprisingly, the Salvadoran government’s strategic COG was the same; keeping and enhancing their citizens’ perception of legitimacy.²⁵

At the tactical level, the FMLN’s center of gravity was their assistance from the countryside and the populace. Separating that sustainment source from the insurgents took away their tactical agility. Such separation is achieved by great emphasis on proper treatment of the people by their own forces.

²³ John D. Waghelstein, “Ruminations of a Pachyderm or What I Learned in the Counter-Insurgency Business,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Winter 1994, 368.

²⁴ Max G. Manwaring and Court Prisk, “A Strategic View of Insurgencies: Insights from El Salvador,” *McNair Papers*, 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

Therefore, we can derive some lessons learned from El Salvador successful counterinsurgency. First, the intangible issue of legitimacy can actually become the strategic COG. Further, it can become a symmetrical COG; both sides can be fighting to gain and maintain the same COG (i.e. legitimacy). Second, gaining strategic legitimacy means gaining popular support at the tactical level to prevent sustainment of the insurgents. Conversely, a government without credible, genuine legitimacy will also lose at the tactical level, particularly if government forces become undisciplined, tortuous, or establish a pattern of indiscriminate village destruction. The converse example is probably best seen in the Vietnam case between the Diem regime and the South Vietnamese. The strategic hamlet program (remember we called it a “surrogate” COG above) was a failure because instead of Diem and his brother, Nhu, giving the people a sense that the government cared for their security it became “essentially a means to spread their influence rather than ...infuse peasants with the will to resist the Vietcong.”²⁶

The Future of Counterinsurgency

In only using these cases above it would be foolish to risk proposing a template for centers of gravity in counterinsurgencies, or MOOTW in general. Again and again, those with repeated first-hand experience in counterinsurgency operations and MOOTW remind us to not try to find a “cookie cutter” solution which can be applied generally to bring about a quick end. I cannot argue with that wisdom. However, I sense that there are some critical factors in counterinsurgency operations which will be important in the future. Referring back to figure 3, critical factors at the insurgent’s tactical and strategic levels may offer potential

²⁶ Karnow, 256.

COGs. Among these critical factors are two which will dominate future insurgency/counterinsurgency operations. A modern insurgency will have an effective propaganda campaign via the media and a strong economic base (which replaces the need for popular sustainment) financed by illegal drug activities.

The media today is omnipresent. Anyone assigned to the Pentagon, particularly on the Operations Staff, will soon realize that many televisions in that building are turned to CNN. With more conviction than humor, officers will often declare it to be a better intelligence system than those in the military. It is this power of information that makes it a contemporary, tactical COG. Why? For three main reasons; legitimacy and the restrictions on forces.

We have seen above how legitimacy is key to the political struggle of an insurgency, and literally the life (or death) of the ruling government. The media, and particularly TV, is incredibly influential to legitimacy because so much is derived from perception. How the government and insurgents are perceived in the media will steer the hearts and minds of the viewing or listening audience. Lessons learned from our efforts in Somalia underline this argument. When UNOSOM II was put in place, the U.S. forces had no public affairs capability to deal with the perceptions presented by the media. Consequently, the situation perceived by the military (which was positive and improving) wasn't matching the situation perceived by the press (which was negative and disintegrating).²⁷

The media also has an influence on our maneuver and use of forces in MOOTW at the tactical level. In writing about British counterinsurgency doctrinal changes, Gavin Bulloch

²⁷ Kenneth Allard, Somalia Operations: Lessons Learned (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1995), 86.

correctly recognizes that even the smallest unit within the friendly effort to combat an insurgency has lost its freedom of movement due to the constant scrutiny of the media.²⁸ Rules of engagement (ROE) become more critical than ever as each individual becomes a potential international incident from his or her actions. We must understand this disadvantage, form robust ROE that guides without too much constraint, and educate our soldiers on the consequences of their actions when the “spotlight” suddenly shines on them; even when they think they are out in the “boonies.” Pocket ROE cards, situation rehearsals, role playing, and ensuring soldiers understand “the big picture” will help avoid negative perceptions derived from their actions.

On the critical factor regarding tactical sustainment, we must recognize that the COG there is becoming less of a popular support issue, and more of an economic one. Food, shelter, and information can all be bought (as opposed to traditional coercion or political indoctrination of the people). “Outsourcing” these needs, instead of gaining them from the citizens themselves, is more reliable and less force intensive. The financing key to this new direction is drug oriented. In a quid pro quo relationship between insurgents and drug cartels, the insurgents can buy their needs while achieving the strategic goal of destroying the government. This agenda coincides with that of the drug businessmen who desire a weakened government and as many troops as possible tied-down in counterinsurgency operations (rather than counter-drug operations). My point is that the hearts and minds of the people are becoming less a COG to the insurgents. Economic centers of activity, including illegal ones, have replaced the traditional sustainment sources with hard cash.

²⁸ Bulloch, 7.

In closing, I have raised the important issues of centers of gravity in insurgency/counterinsurgency operations. Presented with a theoretical model, historical examples were used to show that the operational level of a successful insurgency is avoided, that a counterinsurgency failure is one which attempted to create operational COGs, and that a counterinsurgency success can occur with conventional forces. Lastly, I have addressed the future of counterinsurgency success with a discussion of the critical factors of the media and illegal financing at the tactical and strategic levels respectively.

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