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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background

Insurgency is not a new form of warfare, dating back to at least 165 BCE when insurgent Jews under Judas Maccabeus defeated Greek occupiers and liberated Jerusalem.[1]

Neither is insurgency new to the United States. The U.S. military has either fought insurgents or supported friendly governments in many counterinsurgency operations since the early 20th century. The Philippines, Haiti, Nicaragua, Greece, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Bolivia, El Salvador, Colombia, Afghanistan, and Iraq are only the most prominent examples.[2] During the 40 years of the Cold War, the United States actively sought—through economic aid, security assistance, and combat operations—to counter communist insurgen-

[1] The Central Intelligence Agency defines *insurgency* as

> protracted political-military activity directed toward completely or partially controlling the resources of a country through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations . . . The common denominator of most insurgent groups is their desire to control a particular area. This objective differentiates insurgent groups from purely terrorist organizations, whose objectives do not include the creation of an alternative government capable of controlling a given area or country.

See Central Intelligence Agency, *Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, no date.

[2] See Anthony James Joes, *America and Guerrilla Warfare*, Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2000.

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cies around the world.[3] These insurgencies were seen as part of a global communist strategy to spread instability, install Marxist governments, undermine democracy, and isolate the United States and other Western powers. U.S. government attention to counterinsurgency peaked during the Vietnam War. When that ended, the defense community rapidly shifted its attention back to the twin threats posed by Soviet nuclear and conventional forces. Although the Reagan administration committed significant resources to opposing insurgencies (as well as supporting several) during the 1980s, the military services remained largely indifferent toward the problem. Writing in 1988, Dennis Drew observed that

> the American military has all but turned its back on the study and preparation for low-intensity conflicts and has concentrated its efforts on worst case scenarios involving nuclear deterrence and a major war against the Warsaw Pact in Europe or Southwest Asia.[4]

The end of the Cold War only exacerbated this trend, largely ending official Washington interest in the civil war in El Salvador, for example. To the extent that insurgency mattered to U.S. security policy, it was limited to those in a few key countries, such as Colombia and the Philippines. A small cadre of insurgency specialists survived in the special operations and intelligence worlds, academia, and think tanks, but the broader defense community quickly lost sight of counterinsurgency as a military challenge.

Since September 11, 2001, however, the problem of insurgency has once again become a priority for the U.S. government, largely

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[3] The 1960s marked the height of U.S. interest in counterinsurgency. Although the bulk of U.S. efforts were consumed by the conflict in Southeast Asia, there was considerable activity elsewhere. For example, between 1962 and 1968, the 8th U.S. Army Special Forces Group, based in Panama, conducted over 400 internal security–related missions in Latin America alone. See Ian F. W. Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies: Guerrillas and Their Opponents Since 1750*, London, UK: Routledge, 2001, p. 173.

[4] Dennis Drew, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: American Military Dilemmas and Doctrinal Proposals*, Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, March 1988, p. 1. See also Andrew J. Bacevich et al., *American Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador*, Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1988, especially pp. 14–15.

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because of the connection between Islamic insurgents and global jihadist groups, such as al Qaeda. With ties among insurgent and terrorist groups expanding, the line between global counterterrorist actions and counterinsurgency is becoming blurred. The United States is currently conducting counterinsurgency operations or providing support to governments facing insurgencies in Afghanistan, the Philippines, Colombia, Georgia, Iraq, and elsewhere. Among the instances of major U.S. involvement, there are significant ties between local insurgents and global jihadists in all but Colombia.

In Iraq, the United States is learning once again that counterinsurgency operations are complex, dangerous, difficult, and time consuming. Although the Iraq experience is unique in some respects, it is a powerful reminder of some common elements all insurgencies share. In particular, successful counterinsurgency requires tight integration of political, military, intelligence, police, and economic activities and organizations—a feat that is inherently difficult. It also requires that their actions be well integrated with those of the local government and of any other states, alliances, or other multinational organizations participating in the intervention.[5] Although the U.S. military can achieve rapid and operationally decisive outcomes in conventional conflict, it has been less successful against insurgents, and, in any event, the military instrument can play only a comparatively small, if nevertheless essential, role in defeating an insurgency. That said, there may be situations in which U.S. military forces do need to intervene to help stabilize a situation so that the local government can address the roots of the insurgency and build up its own security capabilities.

Whether the United States achieves its goals in Iraq or not, the experience there should not mask a fundamental truth: The nexus between local insurgencies and terrorist groups with global ambitions means that the United States can ignore insurgencies only at its own peril. Insurgent groups that control territory, are involved in smuggling, or possess military or other skills can provide significant support to global terrorists. The existence of Islamic insurgencies is also

[5] Counterinsurgency is likely to also require the United States to work effectively with the United Nations, other international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations.

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enormously helpful, if not essential, for global jihadism because they motivate and inspire a global audience, help recruiting and fund raising, and can provide a crucible for testing and training new recruits. At the same time, connections to terrorist groups tend to increase both the level of hostility toward the United States and the capabilities of local insurgent groups to challenge state authority and attack U.S. interests. Although not every insurgency will be a potential threat to U.S. interests, many will require carefully calibrated U.S. action. In other cases, successfully assisting other states in their counterinsurgency operations may help avert the emergence of threats to U.S. national security over the longer term.

The Dilemma of Intervention

Because the United States is an outside power intervening in what locals may view as an internal matter, any U.S. involvement always carries the seeds of its own defeat. The very presence of U.S. forces, particularly those involved in combat operations, may stir opposition, be perceived as part of a broader design to support U.S. hegemony, or be viewed as supporting an illegitimate local government. This is especially so in regions where the United States (because of its policies, past actions, or culture) is viewed with suspicion or hostility. Even tactical victories may be operational defeats when the deaths of insurgents and, especially, noncombatants in combat operations motivate others to join the struggle. To the extent that the local populace identifies with a larger movement (e.g., global jihadism), U.S. policies elsewhere may undermine local support for a friendly government. In short, external involvement in insurgencies is fraught with complex and paradoxical dynamics. If the United States is going to be successful in defeating threatening insurgencies, it will need to develop a broad strategy that is sensitive to these risks and mixes military, law enforcement, intelligence, and other instruments of power to undermine and ultimately end support for the insurgents.

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The fundamental goal in any counterinsurgency operation must be to gain the allegiance of the population to the government.[6] Everything that the local government, the United States, and other participants do must be assessed in light of the contribution to this goal. In general, outsiders contribute to this fundamental goal only indirectly. Police, military, intelligence, economic, and other assistance may be essential to strengthen a government fighting insurgents, but, by themselves, they do not directly contribute to this goal. For example, U.S. civic-action programs (e.g., digging wells, building schools) are often greatly appreciated by the local populace and may enhance U.S. standing but are not likely to enhance allegiance to the central government. Indeed the U.S. power, enthusiasm, and competence displayed in such activities is often in such stark contrast to the performance of their own government that it may further undermine allegiance. At best, the United States may be able to use civic action to build friendships and gain allies who will work with the United States to fight the insurgents, but that is a temporary measure at best. Ideally, the focus of all U.S. activities would be to give the partner government the resources and training so that it could take the political, military, economic, and other initiatives that would convince the people that the government is worthy of their allegiance.

Given these constraints on outside intervention, this monograph emphasizes the role of the U.S. military, and USAF in particular, in training, advising, and equipping partner nations so that they can successfully deal with insurgencies.[7] The precautionary strategy we discuss here is consistent with recent DoD moves to take an indirect approach to battling insurgents and terrorists, emphasizing building partner capabilities rather than direct combat operations by U.S. forces.[8]

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[6] Thanks to RAND colleague Bruce Pirnie for sharing his insights on how U.S. activities in Afghanistan and Iraq might be conducted to better support this objective.

[7] Although the emphasis here is on military assistance, we recognize that support to the host nation's police, security, and intelligence organizations is especially critical and should precede or occur in parallel with military assistance.

[8] See U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, Washington, D.C., February 6, 2006, especially pp. 2 and 87–91.

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Purpose and Organization of This Monograph

The objective is to help USAF explore its potential role in future counterinsurgency operations. In particular, we address four major policy questions: (1) What threat do modern insurgencies pose to U.S. interests? (2) What strategy should the United States pursue to counter insurgent threats? (3) What role does military power play in defeating insurgencies? (4) What steps should USAF take to most effectively contribute to counterinsurgency?

Chapter Two explores how the insurgency phenomenon has evolved and the nature of the current challenge to the United States. Chapter Three presents lessons learned from counterinsurgency over the last 60 years or so. Chapter Four approaches the problem from the level of grand strategy, assessing the types of military capabilities and strategies necessary to deal with the counterinsurgency challenge. Chapter Five discusses the advantages of a precautionary strategy that seeks to head off insurgencies while they are still quite young. Chapter Six assesses USAF's current contributions in counterinsurgency and explores options to enhance this role in the future. Chapter Seven presents our conclusions and recommendations for USAF. Appendix A contains additional information on current insurgencies. Appendix B explains the derivation of the manpower metric presented in Chapter Six.

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