

Counter Insurgency – A Messy Business

by Maxim Worcester

In a letter to the London Times a British officer who had served in Iraq wrote the following:

“The people of England have been led into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with dignity and honour. They have been tricked into it by a steady withholding of information. Things have been far worse than we have been told, our administration more bloody and inefficient than our public knows. We are today not far from disaster.”

The correspondent was Lawrence of Arabia, writing about the British occupation of Iraq in 1920. Today, Lawrence is credited with the idea that in Counter Insurgency there is no purely military solution; that soldiers should get out of their bases; that the key was to protect the population; that they should immerse themselves in local history, languages and politics and that they should live with their foreign colleagues. Or, as more recently stated by an American officer, “better the locals do it tolerably than you do it perfectly”.

Since 1945 there have been a large number of Counter Insurgency operations. What they all have in common is that they always ended in negotiations and were always bloody. Two in particular offer lessons on what not to do and how it can be done – Algeria and Malaya.

The “victor of Algiers”, General Bigeard, who died on 17th June 2010, was France’s most decorated and popular soldier. It is rumoured that General David Petraeus keeps a signed photograph of Bigeard on his desk. He was a hero of Dien Bien Phu and the battle of Algiers; but his reputation and that of the French army was tarnished by allegations that he had taken part in torture of captured guerrillas and suspects.

During the Algiers war, Bigeard commanded the 3e RPC (Colonial Parachute Regiment) which was entrusted in 1957 with the dirty job of destroying the FLN (Algerian National Liberation Front) in the central Casbah of Algiers. His forces succeeded in neutralising the FNL through intelligence garnered by imposing a system of sector-based surveillance and through the more dubious methods of direct interrogation. Bigeard refers to this method as “muscular interrogation”.

The battle for Algiers was won by the French forces by abandoning any pretence of legal norms in dealing with the FLN. Torture was widespread, systematic and largely approved by the French government. It was seen as a necessary evil to counter the FLN.

France won the battle for Algiers – it lost Algeria and thus the war.

The Malaya Emergency, which began shortly after the defeat of the Japanese in 1946 and continued until 1960, offers a number of lessons of how to conduct a successful Counter Insurgency operation. The victor of this operation was General Gerald Templer who is credited with defeating the communist rebels. His tactics are still considered to be a model for effective Counter Insurgency today. His tactics were based upon reward and security for those who were opposed to the communist rebels and strict curfews and tight control of food supplies to force compliance from rebellious areas. Food grown by insurgents was destroyed with herbicides. Templer made extensive use of PsycOps through dropping of leaflets, aerial loudspeaker announcements and radio broadcasts. He used paid informers to gather intelligence and also to spread propaganda.

There are, however, allegations of torture and executions carried out by British troops and Malay police during the Emergency. The most serious allegation is the Batang Kali massacre in 1948 where 24 villagers were shot by British troops.

One of the many initiatives of Templer was the establishment of the following five principles which were at the centre of his campaign against the communist insurgents. They make interesting reading in the light of the current operations in Afghanistan:

1. The government must have a clear aim.
2. The government must function in accordance with the law.
3. The government must have an overall Counter Insurgency plan that encompasses security measures, military operations, political objectives, social and economic measures and administrative policy.
4. The Government must give first priority to identifying and defeating the political subversives, not the guerrillas.
5. When the insurgency has reached the stage of substantial military operations, the government must secure its base area first, even if this measure means relinquishing some remote areas for a time to the insurgents.

Templer was no push-over and acted with a very firm hand. He went to great lengths to make the point that he expected his orders to be followed, by the police, the army and the population. His strategy was not “Counter Insurgency Light”, it was robust and effective.

Both sides knew the rules and he stuck to his rules, even if this did mean short term setbacks. His influence and that of his staff cannot be overestimated. He coined (and lived) the phrase “winning the hearts and minds”. He helped the Malaysian authorities to organise themselves and convinced the politicians to integrate the population by granting citizenship to over one million Chinese in Malaysia. The guerrillas made the mistake of alienating the population by brutal and wanton killing of villagers, torturing of suspects and by thinking that an insurgency can be won by military and repressive means alone.

Today the US and her NATO allies are embroiled in a hugely controversial Counter Insurgency operation in Afghanistan. Some, but not all the lessons learned from similar insurgencies in Algeria and Malaysia have been acted upon. Some of the useful lessons, however, cannot be implemented for mainly political reasons.

The government of Afghanistan has no clear aim and does not function in accordance with the law. The allies fighting the insurgents have no overall Counter Insurgency plan as their rules

of engagement differ widely. Furthermore, some of the measures implemented by Templer would create an outcry in certain countries: There would be little support for a programme which denied Taliban-occupied villages' food or water supplies, a strategy which proved to be most effective during the Malaysian Emergency. The eradication of the poppy fields, the source of wealth for corrupt government officials and the insurgents, is equally a non starter.

The sad truth of the Counter Insurgency strategy in Afghanistan is that it is widely ineffective for reasons of political constraint and correctness. All parties involved would like the strategy to work but are unwilling to accept that Counter Insurgency is messy and involves taking unpleasant decisions. Governments need to accept that harsh measures must be taken in order to succeed, they are however unwilling to do so as the electorate, upon which they are dependant, will not accept such measures. What is essentially preventing the US and her allies from winning in Afghanistan is the disagreement between the state and its citizens over expedient and moral issues concerning human life and dignity. As a result, democracies, by their very nature, fail to adopt effective Counter Insurgency measures in asymmetric war situations.

The conclusion seems clear. Unless a more robust and effective Counter Insurgency strategy is put in place and acted upon we cannot expect to leave Afghanistan with dignity and honour.

Remarks:

Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



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