
U.S. Responses to Egalitarian and Traditionalist Insurgencies

By Major Dexter Davis

Following World War II, countries that were not directly allied with the United States or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics began to experience internal friction resulting from a lack of resources, religious differences, and political freedoms that gained alliances with the United States or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Insurgencies—or “struggle[s] between a nonruling group and the ruling authorities in which the nonruling group consciously uses political resources and violence to destroy, reformulate, or sustain the basis of legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics”¹—have since ensued. The desired outcome of these insurgencies is the political dominance of the nonruling group over the ruling group. According to Bard O’Neill, there are nine different types of insurgencies.² Of these, egalitarian and traditionalist have been the most prominent during the post-World War II era. This article describes these two types of insurgencies and discusses U.S. responses.

For many years, analysts for nation-states often misread the types of insurgencies and desired outcomes. Egalitarian insurgencies seek to impose a new system of equal distribution and central control of the populace. The anti-Communism “Red Scare” that followed World War II was related to this type of insurgency. Traditionalist insurgencies articulate primordial and sacred values rooted in ancestral ties and religion. Traditionalists seek to establish political structures that are characterized by limited participation, with political power in the hands of the economic, military, or clerical elite. The Taliban, al-Qaida, and Islamic revolutions are examples of this type of insurgency.³


In the 1950s, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and China began to export egalitarian insurgencies into Eastern Europe and Asia. The United States attempted to defeat the insurgency in Indochina (which later became known as Vietnam). Ho Chi Minh and his North Vietnamese army defeated the French and South Vietnamese armies, which were supported by the Western-colonizing countries of the United States, Britain, and France. The U.S. government began to fear the continuing spread of egalitarian insurgencies and, with the intent to defeat the spread of Communism, eventually went to war against the insurgent forces. The United States fought a counterinsurgency war, which involved creating a democratic government and establishing nine- to twelve-man military advisor teams with each South Vietnamese Army unit and provincial Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support agency.⁴ The goals were to turn military operations over to the South Vietnamese as soon as possible and to use provincial teams to establish local governance and essential services. But the United States faced a huge problem in that Ho Chi Minh had a large,

active support base that wanted to rid Vietnam of foreign influence and reestablish a “normal” life. This eagerness to return to normalcy, coupled with a favored nationalistic approach and external support from neighboring countries (who provided faculty training and a safe haven for the North Vietnamese army), prompted the people of Vietnam to accept the egalitarian ideas over the U.S. strategy. Aware of this, the North Vietnamese army appealed to the basic land and service needs of the people. Adjustments to the U.S. strategy had little impact because of the inability of the United States to influence the Vietnamese people.

After the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, there was an increase in traditionalist insurgencies. Religious fundamentalists expanded their control throughout the Muslim world. This culminated in a horrific 11 September 2001 clash with the United States, when several Afghanistan-based al-Qaida terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. In response, the United States waged a war against Islamic terrorism in Afghanistan. It took four months for coalition forces to defeat the Taliban (who were harboring the al-Qaida) and free the Afghan people from tyranny. For the past seven years, the United States has left the sustainment of these successes to smaller military forces, while waging yet another war to defeat the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. Due to a shift in tactics from conventional to guerrilla warfare, the cost of these conflicts has been high for American military and civilian personnel. The U.S. government has been fighting these counterinsurgency battles based on a 1965–1973 advisory strategy. Because of the strong central and provincial government systems in Iraq and because most Iraqi citizens have formal educations and

live in well-populated, urban areas, this strategy has been somewhat successful in Iraq. In contrast, the Afghans are generally poorly educated and dwell in rural areas. They are unaware of what a government should provide, and they do not understand democratic societies. At the same time, the Taliban is seeking to reestablish the way of life that existed in the region for hundreds of years. It would take decades to shift the Afghan mind-set, and the Taliban understand that the United States does not have the time or resources necessary to maintain an extended counterinsurgency.

The fundamental problem with using traditional counterinsurgency strategies in Afghanistan is the same as that encountered in Vietnam—the nationalistic and religious beliefs of the people are very different from those of the United States, which makes it easier for insurgents to mold, shape, and align the thoughts of the natives against the Western world. In both cases, insurgency forces were present for years and the citizens believed that the established governments were corrupt and did nothing to improve the lives of their citizens. Therefore, the people did not accept the national or provincial governments. This lack of trust allowed the North Vietnamese and the Taliban/al-Qaida to move in and around villages and form shadow governments. And the coalition military did not have the forces required to

extend security to the multitude of villages in these countries. This enabled the Communist and Taliban/al-Qaida elements to continue recruiting members for their causes. 

Endnotes:

¹Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare*, Brassey's, Inc., 1990.

²Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse*, Potomac Books, Inc., 2005.

³O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare*, 1990.

⁴The Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support agency was a civilian organization that was aligned with military headquarters that established provincial civilian reconstruction teams to assist American units with reconstruction following the defeat of North Vietnamese forces.

Major Davis is the chief of the Sense Team, Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction Branch, Requirements Determination Division, Capabilities Development Integration Directorate, Maneuver Support Center of Excellence, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. He holds a bachelor's degree in biology from the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff and master's degrees in environmental management from Webster University and public policy management from Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.