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Winning Hearts and Minds: The Key to Defeating an Insurgency

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Abstract

As America leads the fight against world terrorism our success on the nontraditional battle field rests with the Soldier with boots on the ground. Leaders at all levels, from the policy makers in Washington down to the squad leader, must have an understanding of the history and culture of the enemy and the local population. Without an understanding of history and culture winning the hearts and minds of the locals will lead to conflict and loss of support and eventual defeat by the insurgents. The Philippine War and Vietnam conflict provide excellent examples of what happens when leaders fail to take into consideration the culture and history of the enemy and local population.

Winning Hearts and Minds: The Key to Defeating an Insurgency

As the U.S. Army prosecutes the war on terrorism and continues to fight on foreign soil the need for understanding the culture of the enemy and local population of the contemporary operating environment is paramount to the success of current and future operations.

Time and time again the United States Army entered an area of operation with the goals of defeating the enemy and liberating the local population from oppressive leadership or an ideology contrary to that of our own. In many cases we failed in both cases. Two such examples are the Philippine War (1899 – 1902) and the Vietnam conflict (1959 – 1975). Our failure to understand the local population and their culture resulted in needless loss of tens of thousands of our own troops, hundreds of thousands of enemy combatants and millions of innocent civilians. Our military in both cases was charged with protecting our way of life and planting the seeds of democracy abroad.

The Philippine War

As a result of loss of the Spanish American war Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States. During this war the United States supported the Philippine uprising against Spain by backing Filipino Emilio Aguinaldo. Aguinaldo would eventually refuse to acknowledge American authority over the Philippines. Aguinaldo and his army surrounded the capital of Manila and fighting erupted in February 1899. Aguinaldo's initially fought a conventional war but his army was quickly defeated and turned to guerilla tactics.

The American government and local military commanders thought the Filipino resistance forces would surrender their arms after the Spanish departed. However many of those in the resistance felt they had the right to govern themselves. The insurgents were lead by many of the

wealthy middle and upper class land owners that held power over the local population during the Spanish occupation. U.S. Army commanders thought they could crush the insurrection if they could cut off the rebel's ability to resupply and recruit. However the lack of understanding the language, culture and history of the Philippines proved a major obstacle in defeating the insurgents.

The Philippine nation is composed of over 7000 islands and hundreds of indigenous tribes, languages and religions. The vast majority of the population were peasants making their living in small farming communities or working on the plantations of wealthy landowners. A quote by BG Franklin Bell sums up what we thought we knew about the local civilians:

The common hombre is dominated body and soul by his master, the principal. He is simply a blind tool, a poor down-trodden ignoramus, who does not know what is good for him and cannot believe an American. We cannot appeal to him direct. It is impossible. You can no more influence him by benevolent persuasion than you can a fly. He is going to do what ever he is told to do by his master or his leaders, because he is incapable of doing anything else. (Birtle 2003)

Failing to understand what the local population suffered through and not committing the necessary time and/or resources to the pacification process caused a further rift between the local population and U.S. forces.

The Filipino insurgent leaders after the initial failure at armed conflict did not feel they could win the war. The aim instead was to undermine the United States' will to continue the war through harassing U.S. Army forces. The enemy was well aware of the political picture of the time in the U.S. and the perception of Americans opposition to the government's imperialistic goals.

U.S. commanders in the Philippines faced a determined enemy and a local population that was torn between supporting the rebels or if they refused faced torture or death. In order to crush the insurrection the U.S. adopted tactics similar to the rebels. If the local population could not be converted to good citizens through pacification then they would be forced. Many villages were burned and countless civilians tortured and killed by the U.S. Army in an attempt to deny the insurgents supplies and shelter.

The Vietnam Conflict

Regardless of the reasons for U.S. involvement in Vietnam's internal affairs one fact remains; the United States did not know the history or the cultures of the people of the geographical region known as Indochina. In the 1950s one of the main goals of the U.S. government was to stop the spread of communism. In Vietnam, that meant supporting the French and eventually the South Vietnamese government. Where the French failed, the U.S. would later follow suit, winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people.

The communists of North Vietnam and their support in the south the Viet Cong, like the Filipino rebels elected to engage the forces of South Vietnam and the U.S. in an insurgent war. Once again senior military commanders thought if they could deny the enemy the ability to recruit and resupply the insurgency would collapse. The assumption was that through superior fire power and technology the enemy's will to fight would be crushed. What the U.S. failed to realize was that the enemy was determined, motivated and adaptive. The Viet Cong were revolutionaries attempting to win the hearts and minds of the local population.

What we thought we knew about the local civilian population was that by fighting on the side of the South Vietnamese government their quality of life would improve, they would be free from oppression and they could have a democratic government that would insure their personal

freedoms. What we did know was that the various ethnic groups of the high lands and ethnic Vietnamese of the low lands did not regularly interact with each other and that each had throughout their history been an oppressed people, tired of war. All they really wanted was to be left alone to raise their family on land that had been in their family for generations.

Failing to understand the nature of the civil war taking part in South Vietnam, understanding the nature of the Vietnamese revolution and the culture of the people doomed the U.S. to the same fate as the French during their Indochina war. The U.S. had many successes during the Vietnam conflict; however unlike the Filipino insurgents the Viet Cong with the backing of the North Vietnamese destroyed the will of the American public and government to continue war.

Lessons Learned

From the Philippine and Vietnamese insurrections the U.S. should have learned that in order to overcome an insurgency, manpower and technology alone will not be enough. An understanding of the history of the region and the culture of its people is just as important as the number of troops we send into the region. Technology and money will only go so far. Who ever wins the hearts and minds of the people will be the victors in most insurgency campaign. Failing to understand the people and attempting to pacify the local population through a show of force and intimidation, only results in the average local citizen feeling one task master replaced another.

Conclusion

As the U.S. Army prosecutes the war on terrorism and continues to fight on foreign soil the need for understanding the culture of the enemy and local population of the contemporary operating environment is paramount to the success of current and future operations. The U.S.

Army has a rich history of lessons learned in dealing with insurgents. The current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are classic examples of insurgencies the Army has faced in the past. The only difference is the technology and the geographical location. With the change in geography comes a change in history and culture. The United States and its coalition partners cannot have any hope of long term success in the Middle East without having an understanding of the history of Iraq and Afghanistan and the culture of the various ethnic and religious groups of the region.

The United States government and the senior Army leadership must take into consideration the history and culture of the local people when formulating contingency plans for future operations. Be assured we will be drawn into other conflicts around the world, whether it is in Africa, South America or again in Asia, our success will be closely tied to our understanding of the contemporary operating environment.

References

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