

## EL SALVADOR, IRAQ, AND STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR COUNTERINSURGENCY

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**EL SALVADOR, IRAQ, AND STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR  
COUNTERINSURGENCY**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Considered by many a successful counterinsurgent effort, the El Salvador counterinsurgency experience has a number of lessons for both the policymaker and the military strategist. This experience in counterinsurgency and regime change in El Salvador during the 1980's is prescient, and this paper examines the strategic environment of El Salvador and U.S. interests in El Salvador during that tumultuous period. The seven dimensions of the 'Manwaring paradigm' are introduced and utilized as the backdrop for analysis of U.S. involvement in El Salvador from a strategic perspective. In the course of the analysis, legitimacy, unity of effort, and time are highlighted as the most poignant dimensions of the El Salvador counterinsurgency effort. They are also utilized to draw conclusions about the relevance of the El Salvador counterinsurgency to that of Iraq, specifically, and to counterinsurgency in general. This paper offers that these three dimensions—legitimacy, unity of effort, and time—should be codified as mandatory considerations for the policymaker and military strategist in the formulation of political and military objectives, particularly in those situations where insurgency is possible.



## EL SALVADOR, IRAQ, AND STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR COUNTERINSURGENCY

Insurgency: An organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through use of subversion and armed conflict.

—Joint Publication 1-02: Department of Defense  
Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, 2007

Insurgency is not new. Though it is known by a variety of definitions, colonial ‘freedom fighters’ in this country utilized it. Napoleon’s adversaries employed it. The Zionist movement used it. It was evident in Algeria in the 1950’s, Vietnam in the 1960’s, Afghanistan in the 1980’s, and countless other examples exist today, not the least of which is occurring in Iraq. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone, Vietnam was the forty-eighth ‘small war’ fought in the world, and since the end of the Cold War, insurgencies have proliferated.<sup>1</sup> Why has insurgency endured for centuries? What makes it so popular in this age? With so much experience to draw from, why does it remain difficult for governments to counter, or even prevent, an insurgency?

One possible explanation of the quandary of insurgency is its desire to undermine a standing government. For democratic forms of government, this is particularly challenging because the power of the government is derived from the very same population that an insurgent cause seeks to influence.

The United States (U.S.), particularly the U.S. military, faced its largest insurgent-oriented opponent in Vietnam, where over the course of a decade a number of lessons were presented at the strategic, operational, and tactical level. Arguably the most important lesson of the Vietnam War for the U.S. was ‘you can win the majority of the battles but still lose the war.’ In other words, and with due deference to the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, without an enduring, definitive link between the political



objectives and the military effort, victory is not certain.<sup>2</sup> That lesson seems destined to be learned once again in Iraq with the emergence of an insurgency following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion to dethrone Saddam Hussein.

The looming question remains the ability of democracies to defeat insurgency. Historically, there are examples of the defeat of insurgencies, such as the British in Malaya, and extensive research has been invested in examining the successful and disastrous, tactics, techniques, and procedures utilized in these examples. The adaptive nature of insurgency, however, has made it illusive and difficult to codify. This adaptability is perhaps the reason many democracies throughout history have not been prepared to fight insurgencies and why this method of warfare has grown in popularity.

No single example, however, can be utilized without first understanding its context. For example, Bernard Fall offered that using Malaya as an example for future counterinsurgent efforts was 'unworkable.' In his opinion, credit is infrequently given to the opposition for its mistakes, and when the communist insurgents in Malaya decided to confront the British in a straight forward military operation they, predictably, failed.<sup>3</sup>

In the spring of 2005, it was rumored that the U.S. administration was considering pursuing a strategy for Iraq called the "Salvadoran option," referring to U.S. involvement in Central America in the 1980's.<sup>4</sup> When then Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld was asked at a news conference about the utility of using El Salvador as a model for countering the insurgency in Iraq, he stopped short of categorically denying use of this option and declined any further comment.<sup>5</sup> El Salvador is arguably one of the least studied insurgencies; however, it offers a unique and valuable perspective for

countering insurgency. Understanding the context for El Salvador is of vital importance if it is to be applied in another counterinsurgent effort, particularly Iraq.

Considered a successful counterinsurgent effort by many, El Salvador has a number of features and lessons for the military strategist. This experience in counterinsurgency and regime change in El Salvador during the 1980's is prescient, and this paper examines the strategic environment of El Salvador and U.S. interests in El Salvador. The seven dimensions of the 'Manwaring paradigm,' or SWORD model, are introduced and used as the backdrop for analysis of U.S. involvement in El Salvador from a strategic perspective. In the course of doing so, legitimacy, unity of effort, and time are highlighted as the most poignant dimensions of the El Salvador experience. They are also utilized to draw conclusions about the relevance of the El Salvador counterinsurgency to that of Iraq, specifically, and to counterinsurgency in general.

### El Salvador Background

El Salvador declared its independence from Spain in 1821, as did most of Central America. Despite participation in a short-lived federation of Central American states, El Salvador endured a number of wars with its Central American neighbors and several revolutions of its own. For the first 70 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, military dictatorships governed El Salvador and a ruling oligarchy emerged. During the 1970's, however, international trade and the creation of a regional market spurred significant economic growth for El Salvador. International demand for El Salvadoran goods, particularly coffee, ultimately led the oligarchy to pursue economic interests at the expense of the peasant farmers that dominated the countryside.<sup>6</sup> Discontent among the El Salvador population grew as societal inequality and economic disparity widened. For example,

landless peasants increased from 12% in 1960 to 40% in 1975.<sup>7</sup> The growing unrest put pressure on the traditional alliance between the oligarchy, military, and Church.

A civil war ensued between the government, run by the right-wing National Conciliation Party (PCN) for 28 years, and left-wing anti-government guerilla factions represented by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). Named after Farabundo Marti, a communist who had fought in Nicaragua in the 1920's and later executed following a failed communist revolt in El Salvador in 1932, the FMLN conducted attacks on bridges, electricity supplies, irrigation systems, and even temporarily occupied towns.<sup>8</sup> By the late 1970's, consistent political, economic, and social problems created enough unrest in El Salvador that a military coup ousted the country's ruler, General Carlos Humberto Romero, and the more moderate Jose Napoleon Duarte assumed the presidency in 1980. The decade following the coup was volatile as the El Salvadoran government and military, with economic and military assistance from the United States, countered a growing insurgency. The El Salvadoran government, the insurgents, and the U.S. were ill-prepared for the disarray that arose from 50 years of authoritarian rule.<sup>9</sup>

President Duarte was challenged with bringing to justice right-wing 'death squads' that were credited with the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero in March 1980 and three American nuns later that year.<sup>10</sup> Even with U.S. support of the El Salvadoran government, an estimated 30,000 people were killed by right-wing death squads backed by the military. President Duarte suffered the political fallout of not gaining control over the death-squads and was defeated in an election in March 1982. Two years later, in an election that turned out 80% of the El Salvadoran voting population, he was elected as

President and initiated negotiations with the FMLN that led to a peace agreement eight years later. By that time, however, an estimated 75,000 people had been killed in El Salvador as a result of violence between the government and insurgents.<sup>11</sup>

From 1980-1992, the U.S. government funded extensive political and social reforms in El Salvador to help undermine the revolutionary insurgency. The left-leaning orientation of the FMLN supported by Cuba, combined with tacit Soviet Union support of guerilla forces in neighboring Nicaragua, led the U.S. to also provide extensive military aid and training to counter communist influence in the conflict. These U.S. efforts had effects at many levels within El Salvador. Most importantly, at the strategic level they had a significantly positive effect on the ability of the El Salvadoran government to pursue long-term stability and security. Eventually El Salvador established an enduring democratic government and a growing economy, which has led some to conclude that the U.S. strategy to counter the insurgency in El Salvador should be a model for other efforts, in particular Iraq.

### U.S. Interests in El Salvador

President James Monroe's 1823 proclamation of disdain for European intervention and colonialism in the Western hemisphere, subsequently known as the Monroe Doctrine, was the long-standing basis for assessing U.S. national interests in Central America. The Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 had been categorized as a vital national interest, so with the 1979 coup in El Salvador and the Nicaraguan revolution ongoing, the notion of a 'communist incursion of the America's' garnered equal notoriety. The Cold War loomed in Central America in the minds of many within the administration of

President Jimmy Carter, and the outcome of the El Salvadoran coup was seen as an opportunity to support a “moderate, centrist government.”<sup>12</sup>

The inauguration of President Ronald Reagan in January of 1981 brought even greater emphasis on defeating the Soviet Union, and in particular the spread of communism around the world. In Central America, U.S. aid to El Salvador increased throughout President Reagan’s two terms in office. For example, monetary aid went from \$264.2 million in fiscal year 1982 to \$557.8 million in fiscal year 1987.<sup>13</sup> The U.S. also provided military support teams to assist in training and advising the El Salvadoran armed forces, but U.S. national security strategy at the time precluded the introduction of U.S. combat troops on any large scale.<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately a democratically governed El Salvador prevailed but at great human cost. United Nations involvement in negotiating an enduring agreement between the government and the FMLN played a significant role in helping end the armed struggle, but the dissolution of the Soviet Union played an even larger part in minimizing the international influence of communism.

### The SWORD Model

In 1984, then Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, General Maxwell Thurman, a veteran of the Vietnam War, recognized the challenge of ongoing U.S. involvement in the insurgency in El Salvador and sought to avoid repeating the quandary that Vietnam had presented the military.<sup>15</sup> General Thurman commissioned the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College to study the strategic and doctrinal issues associated with U.S. involvement in insurgencies, and Dr. Max G. Manwaring developed two studies that analyzed 69 small wars, virtually all that had occurred since World War II.<sup>16</sup> The

studies identified 72 variables that were ultimately whittled down to seven dimensions of insurgency. Dr. Manwaring moved to the Small Wars Operations Research Directorate (SWORD) of U.S. Southern Command, and the results of his studies were published as the SWORD model, or Manwaring paradigm, in 1992.<sup>17</sup>

The model identified legitimacy, unity of effort, information/intelligence, isolation, actions of intervening power, indigenous military capabilities, and external military support as the dimensions common to, and influential in, every insurgent conflict. These seven dimensions are strategic-level variables that predicted the outcome of insurgent conflict with a 90% accuracy rate.<sup>18</sup> This suggests that despite the unique aspects of every insurgent conflict or irregular war, specific consideration, evaluation, and management of these variables in the development and implementation of the ends-ways-means strategy formulation model are most likely to resolve conflict in a politically effective manner.

The U.S. Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency field manual, often referred to as FM 3-24, is an excellent operational and tactical level resource for the counterinsurgent professional. Published in 2007, it reinforces Dr. Manwaring's assessment of the myriad factors involved in insurgent warfare that make it complex to counter. The manual also defines the preeminence of legitimacy and unity of effort in countering insurgency by dedicating much of the first two chapters to discussing them.

Of equal importance in assessing insurgent conflict or the potential for such, is the element of time. FM 3-24 acknowledges the relative value of time in an operational context, and the grand strategist must be equally as cognizant. The advantage one side can generate against another in insurgency is often relative. In other words, it is a

matter of comparison at a moment in time. The moment of advantage may be short-lived, or it may persist. In either case, awareness of the temporal dimension of insurgency must be considered at every level of the conflict.

Dr. Manwaring's work concluded that every element of the SWORD model plays a part in the analysis of conflict.<sup>19</sup> For the policymaker and military strategist consideration of at least the two most prescient dimensions, legitimacy and unity of effort, over the course of time, the third element, is mandatory. A testament to their value, legitimacy, unity of effort, and time will be utilized as a lens to examine El Salvador's struggle to defeat insurgency in the 1980's and further applied to current counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq.

### The Model Applied

#### Legitimacy

In Peace Operations (PO), legitimacy is perceived by interested audiences as the legality, morality, or fairness of a set of actions. Such audiences may include the U.S. public, foreign nations, civil populations in the operational area, and the participating forces. If a PO is perceived as legitimate by both the citizens of the nations contributing the forces and the citizens of the country being entered, the PO will have a better chance of long-term success. The perception of legitimacy by the U.S. public is strengthened if there are obvious national or humanitarian interests at stake. Another aspect of this principle is the legitimacy bestowed upon a local government through the perception of the populace that it governs.<sup>20</sup>

The single most important dimension in the development of counterinsurgency strategy is legitimacy. In fact, U.S. joint military doctrine for military operations other than war, or MOOTW, published in 1995 declared, "legitimacy is frequently a decisive element."<sup>21</sup> Within the SWORD model, legitimacy is defined as the moral right to govern.<sup>22</sup> It is, in essence, an unwritten contract between the governing establishment

and those it governs based on confidence that the governing body will engage in activities that are in the best interests of the governed. At a minimum, there are security, economic, and social aspects of legitimacy. Ultimately those subject to the actions of a governing body must believe that governing actions are taken in their collective best interest in order for the government to maintain legitimacy. If the interests and needs of the governed are not met or there is a perception they can not be sustained, then legitimacy begins to erode and a political vulnerability is exposed.

Political power is the central issue in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies, as each side strives to get the people to accept its authority to govern as legitimate. Nation states whose governments have achieved legitimacy are relatively invulnerable to destabilizing actions, both internal and external.<sup>23</sup> For example, the constitutional monarchy of the United Kingdom has reigned for centuries and endured many challenges to its authority. Because of its legitimacy in the eyes of the governed, the times that have tested the monarchy the most have often been those that have unified it the most. Hence, quite often the strategic center of gravity in counterinsurgency is legitimacy, which is perception-based and typically expressed through public opinion. El Salvador is an example of the preeminence of legitimacy as a dimension of any war against subversion.

A 'slow start' on the part of the government and armed forces of El Salvador in implementing social and economic reforms following the 1979 coup created opportunities for opposition groups.<sup>24</sup> The FMLN, in concert with other left-wing elements, countered with popular promises to build the working-class and redistribute wealth.<sup>25</sup> El Salvador's President, Jose Napoleon Duarte, intuitively recognized the



political significance of the situation and implemented the changes necessary to exceed the promises of the FMLN and deliver results in a much timelier manner.<sup>26</sup>

The promulgation of relatively effective reforms such as elections, the development of a bureaucratic capability to promote economic growth, particularly in the agriculture industry, and the ability to widely distribute commercial and financial resources to the society went a long way toward reinforcing the legitimacy of the Duarte government. The reforms were not perfect or all-encompassing, but they were tangible and more effective than anything the opposition had produced, which resulted in a perception among the people the government was making concerted efforts to affect change for the collective good.

### Unity of Effort

Unity of effort emphasizes the need for ensuring that all means are directed to a common purpose. In Peace Operations (PO), achieving unity of effort is often complicated by a variety of international, foreign, and domestic military and nonmilitary participants, the lack of definitive command arrangements, and varying views of the objective.<sup>27</sup>

Unity of effort is touted throughout U.S. joint military doctrine and has made its way into the U.S. government's interagency discussions and publications. For example, the October 2007 U.S. Department of State's *Counterinsurgency for U.S. Government Policy Makers: A Work in Progress* emphasizes the "complementarity of purpose and unity of effort required for interagency and international counterinsurgency operations."<sup>28</sup> Its importance in counterinsurgency is monolithic because of the myriad of government and interest groups that vie for both influence and legitimacy. David J. Kilcullen coined the term 'conflict ecosystem' in reference to the many participants in an insurgency and the resultant counterinsurgency effort. As illustrated in figure 1, the

‘conflict ecosystem’ is a complex system of legitimate and recognized organizations, as well as a number of less obvious and often illegal, interest groups. This graphic depicts the complexity of gaining and maintaining unity of effort in this environment.

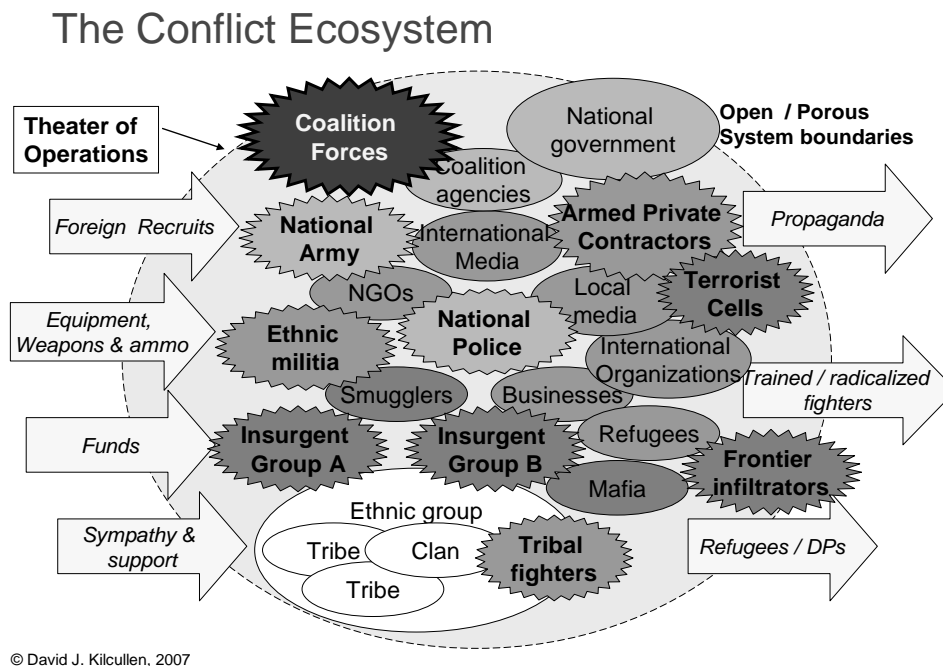


Figure 1. Kilcullen’s Conflict Ecosystem<sup>29</sup>

Within the SWORD model unity of effort is defined as the act of centering all efforts on the ultimate political objective, with particular emphasis on the *political* objective.<sup>30</sup> In order to achieve effectiveness against an enemy whose objective is to undermine the legitimacy and authority of the government, the efforts of all elements of power, at every level, must be unified. In other words, strategic clarity is mandatory for unity of effort.<sup>31</sup> In particular, links between political and diplomatic efforts, sociological and economic factors, and security and stability efforts must be formalized to the maximum extent possible and reinforced regularly. Historical examples are abound of the plight of nations unable to establish unity throughout their effort, from Hannibal’s

defeat of the Roman's in the Battle of Cannae in 216 B.C. to the British defeat in the American Revolutionary War. Unity of effort is simple in theory but difficult in practice.

Whatever relationship is established between the myriad elements involved in a counterinsurgent effort, all aspects of establishing unity must be managed both vertically and horizontally. Vertical unity of effort is established within the governments and insurgents of the conflict, while horizontal unity refers to that established between governments. The complexity of establishing and maintaining vertical and horizontal unity throughout such a web of cooperative efforts is daunting when the many additional non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations that participate, or have an interest, are considered. Once again, El Salvador provides an example of the absolute necessity and inherent complexity of unity of effort.

Building unity of effort in El Salvador was a continuous work in progress, and even when the United Nations brokered a peace agreement, unity of effort was a relative term. The government of El Salvador had merely done a better job of achieving unity than had the FMLN. Both sides organized to the extent necessary for survival, and perhaps even moderate success, but not to the degree required to win.<sup>32</sup> Thomas Pickering, U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador from 1983 to 1985, said:

We had neither the doctrine nor the support, nor the coordination in the United States government that would really be required to deal effectively with that kind of operation. I don't think we ever developed it; we still are kind of ad hoc in our way of viewing the problems. That is really quite a critical comment.<sup>33</sup>

Several examples from El Salvador illustrate this point more clearly.

The El Salvadoran government, like the insurgents, was debilitated by discord amongst their subordinate political and military organizations. In the early 1980's, El Salvador's governmental unity was inhibited by strife between the extreme-right and

more centrist politicians.<sup>34</sup> The rift led to contradictory policies and was substantial enough it resulted in the murder of politicians on both sides.<sup>35</sup> This lack of unity, and its resultant violence, undermined governmental legitimacy benefiting the insurgent position. The insurgents, however, had misgivings within their own effort about their objective ends, let alone the best ways for achieving them. The former El Salvadoran insurgent Marco Antonio Grande explained, “The Salvadoran problem was seen by the left as a problem of class struggle and a seizure of power, not as a problem of how to democratize the system.”<sup>36</sup> As a result of such varying views on the ends for the insurgent effort, the FMLN was ultimately unable to consolidate the effort necessary to leverage the El Salvadoran government’s position and, as a result, slowly lost legitimacy.

A second example highlights the horizontal aspect of unity of effort. The U.S., through its military support teams, encouraged the Salvadoran armed forces to grow into an image of their U.S. makers.<sup>37</sup> The result was a formidable military force most comfortable in conventional, battalion-size operations ill-suited for sustained counterinsurgency operations. Such a stagnant approach to developing the Salvadoran armed forces inhibited their effectiveness and confidence. Not only did it demonstrate the absence of a clear understanding of the dynamics of the insurgency at the time, it was manifestation of lagging horizontal unity of effort between the U.S. and El Salvador at the operational level of military planning. As a result, the success of the El Salvadoran Army in countering the insurgency was largely an extension of President Duarte’s strategic initiative and assistance.<sup>38</sup>

## Time

Of all the many dimensions of strategy, time is the most intractable. Compensation for deficiencies elsewhere and correction of errors are usually possible. But time lost is irrecoverable. The Western theory of war pays too little attention to war's temporal dimension.<sup>39</sup>

The dimension of time is perhaps the least analyzed of the elements of strategy formulation, yet its impact is wide and profound. Mistakes are made and corrections are applied in any conflict, but the time expended in the course of so doing affords the opposition the opportunity to utilize time with greater effect. In the absence of more tangible assets at their disposal, time is a weapon that insurgencies covet and use calculatingly.

Mao Tse-Tung recognized time as a strategic consideration as exemplified in his advocacy for 'protracted struggle.' For example, he acknowledged the effect time had on the logistics and morale of the Japanese force that occupied China and mandated, "energies must be directed toward the goal of protracted war so that should the Japanese occupy much of our territory or even most of it, we shall still gain final victory."<sup>40</sup> History has demonstrated that an insurgent cause can prevail if it is able to outwait its opponent while making progress in the legitimacy dimension. The insurgencies in Algeria and Vietnam are two 20<sup>th</sup> century examples of the value of strategic patience. They also demonstrate the inherently slow pace of counterinsurgency operations, a fact that has bedeviled democratic governments and Western culture.

El Salvador's struggle against insurgency, like so many others, illustrates the strategic importance of time. Even in the most restrictive of timelines, the insurgent effort in El Salvador ran from 1980-1992, and it concluded only after years of the

government and the FMLN negotiating through a variety of intermediaries and venues. During those twelve years a strategic-level competition for domestic and international legitimacy continued. For example, in the U.S. the national interest, strategy, and success in El Salvador were the subject of considerable debate. Additionally, the demise of the communist government of the Soviet Union played a pivotal role in focusing Soviet national interests domestically, which terminated their continued support of the FMLN, both directly and through Cuba.<sup>41</sup>

Colin Gray observed that the mindset needed to combat an irregular enemy is not one that comes easily to Western militaries or strategic culture.<sup>42</sup> An examination of nearly every war since 1700 by the Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey offers an explanation. Blainey's book The Causes of War noted, "Nations confident of victory in a forthcoming war were equally as confident that war would conclude quickly."<sup>43</sup> Because of this optimism, patience is a virtue that many nations, particularly Western nations, do not possess. Furthermore, democracies depend on the leadership of elected representatives who serve a finite and relatively short period in office, a fact their adversaries have developed an appreciation for. Consequently, the insurgent approach has frequently utilized time to overcome some aspect of their material disadvantage.

### Correlations to Iraq

There is a desire to rely on historical scenarios to gain an understanding of the dynamics of a current crisis, but fundamental to such a comparison is understanding the context of the scenario within history. From the preceding analysis, there are aspects of El Salvadoran and U.S. strategy in El Salvador that are valuable to examining the

situation in Iraq today. Utilizing the analytical elements of legitimacy, unity of effort, and time a comparison of the two situations follows.

#### Legitimacy – Correlating El Salvador and Iraq

The conflict in El Salvador was viewed internationally, even in the 1980's, as a situation where insurgency fomented predominantly through the tacit support of 'outsiders'. As a result, it garnered an international label as another in a growing list of 'proxy wars' between the East and West. Internal to El Salvador, however, it was a protracted struggle for political power, and at the same time a matter of daily survival for the people of El Salvador. The core of the issue was establishing an enduring government that would run the country based on political, social, and economic values the people recognized as legitimate. Provided that could be accomplished by the government, to a level that exceeded the FMLN's, the government's battle for legitimacy would be won.

The U.S. contribution to El Salvador was viewed by most in El Salvador as legitimate. Certainly from the perspective of the El Salvadoran government, U.S. economic and military aid was the linchpin that facilitated the realization of many government reforms that had a positive impact on the population. Furthermore, U.S. military assistance, and U.S. insistence on improving the human rights record of the El Salvadoran armed forces, improved the military's capability and perception throughout the country.

Though assistance to El Salvador was largely viewed amongst U.S. elected representatives as a necessary investment in both the Cold War and Latin America, it also faced considerable opposition because of the El Salvadoran military's alleged

human rights abuses, a perceived lack of progress in El Salvador, the emergence of the Iran-Contra affair, and partisan U.S. domestic politics. But for President Reagan's commitment to defeating communism in Latin America and his election to a second term, waning American opinion concerning U.S. national interests in El Salvador may have prevailed before communist support to the opposition failed.

Dubbed a 'proxy war' internationally, there was no consensus of opposition to supporting the government of El Salvador. Though Mexico and France recognized the FMLN as a "representative political force" in 1981, they later influenced the insurgents to reassess their strategy in 1988 and pursue a negotiated settlement.<sup>44</sup> By 1992, the U.N. had officiated an extended process of negotiation that resulted in a peace agreement for El Salvador. The international legitimacy of the outcome in El Salvador was substantiated by the U.N.'s role as observer and verifier of the agreement and by donor countries in their capacity to fund reforms.<sup>45</sup>

In contrast, the legitimacy of the government of Iraq today is cause for considerable concern. In a March 2007 BBC/ABC poll, 53% of Iraqis polled expressed dissatisfaction with the way the Iraqi government was performing, compared with 33% in 2005.<sup>46</sup> That same poll showed that much of the pessimism stemmed from a perception that life had not noticeably improved. The current Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki was installed in 2006 and serves with a mandate until 2010. If this government is unable to secure the confidence of the people of Iraq, the government's legitimacy will continue to erode.

The U.S. National Strategy for Victory in Iraq, published in November 2005, clearly establishes the objective of "a new Iraq with a constitutional, representative government



that respects civil rights and has security forces sufficient to maintain domestic order and keep Iraq from becoming a safe haven for terrorists.”<sup>47</sup> If, however, that government is unable to gain and maintain the confidence of the people through measurable improvements in social and economic conditions, their ability to achieve political reconciliation within a very fractured country may well pass. That is not to say that the endstate is not achievable—certainly the first, nor the second, elected leader of El Salvador achieved the national objective of peace and unity—but more time will be necessary to attain it.

Iraqi perceptions of the legitimacy of U.S. actions in their country depend considerably on the audience solicited for an opinion. For much of the Sunni population who surrendered power and prestige with the demise of the Baath party, U.S. actions are an illegal occupation, while most of the Kurdish populace of Iraq views the same actions as liberating. The Shiite community was arguably of the “liberated” mindset early on, but some factions, such as Muqtada Al Sadr’s Mahdi Army and Sadr Bureau, have evolved toward an ‘end the occupation now’ position.

There is, however, an emerging convergence of Iraqi opinion about continued U.S. military presence in their country. In November 2007 focus groups conducted by the U.S. military, Iraqi’s of all sectarian and ethnic groups believed the U.S. military invasion was the root of the violent differences among them and viewed the departure of ‘occupying forces’ as the key to national reconciliation.<sup>48</sup> The absence of a perception by Iraqi’s of any denomination of continued U.S. presence in their country as legitimate undermines the effectiveness of U.S. efforts and has deleterious effects on an Iraqi national government already plagued with skepticism from those it is intended to serve.

Within the U.S. population, the ongoing efforts in Iraq have been a divisive political issue, much more so than El Salvador was in its time. Some of the divisive fervor is attributable to the continued deployment of American military forces to Iraq which was not the case in El Salvador. Strong signals of a mandate for change to the U.S. strategy in Iraq were sent by the American people in the 2006 mid-term elections, and the issue remains at the forefront of political debates leading up to the 2008 Presidential election.

The insurgency in El Salvador spanned three U.S. Presidential election cycles and was divisive in its time, but the pace and proliferation of media coverage has dramatically changed issues of legitimacy in the modern era. The fast-paced media cycle and the availability of information and opinions regarding issues such as Iraq places them on the table and leaves them there for close scrutiny of the national interest and progress toward achieving national objectives. While this is the purpose of a free and open media, in the current age it subjects such issues to nearly constant exposure to the Western, and particularly American, prism of impatience. In the minds of many Americans, if the U.S. has not achieved its objectives within five years of committing to involvement in an issue, then they are not going to be attained in a timely enough manner to make the continued expenditure of the national treasure, particularly the sons and daughters of America, worthwhile.<sup>49</sup>

The U.S.-led multinational military force operates in Iraq at the request of the Iraq government and with U.N. Security Council approval which theoretically provides it international legitimacy. In the dimension of legitimacy a concern is the lack of growth in the international political and military coalition that supports Iraq. A robust political, economic, or military commitment on the part of a regional ally such as Saudi Arabia or

Jordan, or even an European ally such as Germany or France, would bolster the international commitment to the continued development of Iraq. Absent such a commitment, the true international perception of legitimacy must be reevaluated to determine whether concern about the Iraqi government, unwillingness to become involved so long as there is a robust American presence in Iraq, or a combination of such factors is what prevents such international resolve. There is considerable opportunity for improvement in this area of international legitimacy as many nations, and the United Nations, recognize Iraq as a sovereign state and become involved in the long-term stability and growth of the country.

#### Unity of Effort – Correlating El Salvador and Iraq

It was previously pointed out that unity of effort as it pertained to the protagonists in El Salvador was evaluated on a relative scale. None of the elected governments during the period of 1980-1992 was particularly unified in their action by Western standards, but compared to the FMLN they were able to maintain unity at a higher level for a longer period of time. El Salvador's government consistently pursued improvement of political, economic, and social conditions, as well as military reforms, and the effort produced tangible results the FMLN was unable to match. Furthermore, despite debate among U.S. lawmakers, economic and military aid to El Salvador remained reliable.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, support to the FMLN, whether it came directly from the Soviet Union or through Cuba or Nicaragua, withered as the Communist empire collapsed and forced the insurgents to reevaluate the ways to achieve their ends as their means withered.

Today unity of effort within the current Iraq government is a pivotal issue in determining the future of the nation. The ability of the elected Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish

representatives to establish a system that facilitates consistent unity, compromise, and resolution of issues is tied directly to the cornerstone of legitimacy of the government and is the foundation of defeating the insurgency Iraq faces. A December 2007 Pentagon report identified that despite a reduction in violence in Iraq in the three months leading up to the report, the Iraqi government had made little progress in improving the delivery of electricity, health care, and other essential services.<sup>51</sup> The report also noted, “The government of Iraq’s improvements in budget execution have translated into minimal advances in the delivery of essential services to the people of Iraq, mainly due to the sectarian bias in targeting and execution of remedial programs.”<sup>52</sup> A closer look at such a claim reveals that the Iraqi infrastructure upon which essential services rely was in poor condition prior to the demise of the Saddam Hussein regime, but more important with regard to unity of effort in this instance is the people of Iraq perceive that their government has not been able to improve their condition. History has shown that people will not idly endure this indefinitely.

Conversely, neither Al Qaeda in Iraq nor any other insurgent subsidiary has delivered tangible improvements of any scale in these areas either, so a window of opportunity still exists if the El Salvadoran example of “unity of effort is relative” holds true. How long that temporal window remains open is perhaps the ultimate question.

#### Time – Correlating El Salvador and Iraq

Twelve years of protracted political conflict in El Salvador occurred before political reconciliation arrived in 1992. Over that time military forces and advisers ebbed and flowed as did momentum for the government and the insurgents. The demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 contributed significantly to the willingness of the FMLN to

compromise, but the ability of the government to utilize time as a dimension to focus its domestic legitimacy and unity of effort placed it in a stronger position to negotiate a compromise with the FMLN that resulted in peace.

Iraq has had nearly five years of a growing insurgency vying for legitimacy. The insurgency's failure to maintain unity and provide a near and mid-term vision of the future has allowed the Iraqi government the privilege of additional time that history shows is rarely afforded. It takes time to sever the unity of the insurgent's position and have them labeled as illegitimate, yet it is precisely what is occurring in parts of Iraq like the Al Anbar province.<sup>53</sup> This time and momentum must, however, correlate with positive improvements in the legitimacy and unity of the Iraqi national government in order for mid-term stability to become reality. The government needs to be viewed as acceptable, fair, and legitimate by the majority of the people of Iraq regardless of their sectarian or ethnic affiliation. Furthermore, the government must provide sufficient internal security to allow economic and social evolution to occur for the people of Iraq to realize tangible improvements, embrace progress, and build a new national identity. History has shown that failure to do so will provoke some governing alternative to emerge and present its bid for legitimacy. In El Salvador it took several national governments to achieve results appreciated by the people, so it is reasonable to expect that it could take more than one government in Iraq as well.

## Conclusion

The strategic template of history rarely directly applies from one situation to the next. The myriad elements and influences that combine at one point in time to produce a condition, in this instance an insurgency, are not the same despite the many

similarities they might share at another point in time. El Salvador in the 1980's and Iraq circa 2008 do have many things in common, such as the involvement of interest groups external to the country, the absence of national unity and identity, and a significant investment on the part of the U.S. to grow a central government and military forces that could maintain security and foster stability within the nation. As a result of these similarities, it has been suggested that the success of the U.S. model for involvement in El Salvador should be used to formulate a strategy for Iraq today. While there is value to such an endeavor, engaging in the process must be tempered with the many dissimilar items of the two nations and the two periods in time. For example, there was not a belief that the U.S. created the strife that initiated the insurgency that plagued El Salvador for over a decade, yet in Iraq many perceive the U.S. did foment the conditions that led to the insurgent uprising that continues to this day.

In 1992 Dr. Max G. Manwaring codified seven dimensions relevant to analyzing and predicting the outcome of counterinsurgent efforts. It was 15 years before his significant conclusions took hold in U.S. military joint doctrine. Examination of the success of the El Salvadoran government in overcoming its insurgent challenge highlights several dimensions of Dr. Manwaring's model that must be codified at the highest levels of national security policy decision making and strategy formulation. First, the public-at-large must be continuously convinced of the legitimacy of the cause. The people of a nation combating insurgency must view their government as legitimate. Equally as important in an insurgency involving the military element of U.S. national power is convincing the American public that intervention is a truly legitimate interest of the U.S. It has been clearly demonstrated that convincing the American public and

maintaining their conviction are two different, yet equally important, aspects of legitimacy for this nation. In the spectrum of conflict where insurgency falls, American public support is very often the strategic center of gravity and must be assessed and addressed as such.

Unity of effort is the second principle for the national security apparatus to utilize in assessing insurgency and apply in the process of counterinsurgency strategy formulation. Unity of effort is a common theme within counterinsurgency doctrine, yet creating it tends to be elusive. It must be appreciated that, at its essence, insurgency is diametrically opposed to government, thus it seeks to sever the influence and damage the perception of the government within the population at every opportunity.<sup>54</sup>

Clausewitz proposed that “war is continuation of politics by other means,” a concept that Vladimir Lenin and Mao Tse-Tung embraced in proposing the early theory of insurgency.<sup>55</sup> Mao codified the notion that physical confrontation is but one of several necessary ways to achieving the political objectives.<sup>56</sup> Conversely, the national security professional must appreciate that no enemy today would logically seek to engage in a solely military confrontation with the U.S. As such, the U.S. and her allies must anticipate insurgency and build unity of effort through coherent marriage of national interests with political objectives in the counterinsurgent effort. This enables international and domestic resolve to be established on a foundation most likely to endure the many assaults it will face in countering an insurgency.

The final element for consideration in every endeavor against insurgency is time. It has been proven through events like the French and U.S. in Indo-China that time has strategic significance to all parties in conflict. For the insurgent, time is largely irrelevant

so long as the political objectives are eventually attained. For the government, legitimacy and unity of effort possess a temporal element. For example, leaders in democratic governments must consider the impact of time on policy decisions that span subsequent election cycles. Both legitimacy and unity of effort tend to become increasingly difficult to maintain and resource over time, which works to the advantage of the insurgent. This, again, is part of the design of insurgent theory and must be addressed in the formulation of national objectives such that the window of insurgent opportunity is minimized.

The political and security situation in Iraq in the fall of 2007 as described by General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker is evidence the U.S. did not apply these three principles well in the early and mid-stages of formulating objectives and strategy for Iraq. Improvements in the security situation in early 2008, however, suggest the U.S. is learning from this experience and applying lessons with positive effect today. It remains to be seen if time is available for the Iraqi national government to demonstrate its legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens and the international community. Provided it can do so relatively quickly, a more unified international effort to assist the people of Iraq and her government may prevail in the manner it did in El Salvador 26 years ago, and a “new Iraq with a constitutional, representative government that respects civil rights” may yet prevail.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Bernard B. Fall, “The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency,” *Naval War College Review* 51 (Winter 1998): 46.

<sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 605-610. Carl von Clausewitz in *On War* clearly defines war as “an extension of politics by other means.”



<sup>3</sup> Fall, 50.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan D. Tepperman, "Flash Back," *New Republic* (11 Apr 2005): 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Kinloch C. Walpole, Jr., *The Isolation of El Salvador in the International Arena*, Thesis (Gainesville, FL: The University of Florida, 1987), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ian F.W. Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies* (London: Routledge, 2001), 205.

<sup>9</sup> Max G. Manwaring and Court Prisk, *A Strategic View of Insurgencies: Insights from El Salvador* (Washington, DC: McNair Papers, No. 8), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Beckett, 205.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 164.

<sup>13</sup> Leslie Anne Warner, et al., "Money in the Bank: Lessons Learned from Past Counterinsurgency Operations," *Rand Counterinsurgency Study – Paper 4* (Arlington, VA: Rand Corporation, 2007), 45.

<sup>14</sup> The ceiling on the number of U.S. military trainers in El Salvador was fixed at 55 throughout the armed conflict according to Leslie Anne Warner, et al., "Money in the Bank: Lessons Learned from Past Counterinsurgency Operations," *Rand Counterinsurgency Study – Paper 4* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2007), 45.

<sup>15</sup> John T. Fishel, "War by Other Means? The Paradigm and its Application to Peace Operations," in *The Savage Wars of Peace: Toward a New Paradigm for Peace Operations* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Max G. Manwaring, interview by author, 28 November 2007, Carlisle, PA.

<sup>17</sup> For a complete explanation of the model and the techniques used to create and validate it, see Max G. Manwaring and John T. Fishel, "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: Toward a New Analytical Approach," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 3:3 (1992), 272-310.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 279-280.

<sup>19</sup> Max G. Manwaring, interview by author, 28 November 2007, Carlisle, PA.

<sup>20</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine for Peace Operations* (Joint Pub 3-07.3) (Washington, DC: Joint Warfighting Center, 2007), I-6.

<sup>21</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War* (Joint Pub 3-07) (Washington, DC: Joint Warfighting Center, 1995), I-1.

<sup>22</sup> Manwaring and John T. Fishel, 285.

<sup>23</sup> Max G. Manwaring and Kimbra L. Fishel, "Lessons That Should Have Been Learned: Toward a Theory of Engagement for 'The Savage Wars of Peace'," in *The Savage Wars of Peace: Toward a New Paradigm for Peace Operations* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 205.

<sup>24</sup> Manwaring and Prisk, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Yvon Grenier, *Emergence of Insurgency in El Salvador* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), 90.

<sup>26</sup> Max G. Manwaring, interview by author, 28 November 2007, Carlisle, PA.

<sup>27</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine for Peace Operations* (Joint Pub 3-07.3), I-6.

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Counterinsurgency for U.S. Government Policy Makers: A Work in Progress* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, October 2007), 13.

<sup>29</sup> David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency in Iraq: Theory and Practice, 2007*, United States Government Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative; available from [http://www.usgcoin.org/library/publications/CounterinsurgencyInIraq-ppp\\_files/frame.htm](http://www.usgcoin.org/library/publications/CounterinsurgencyInIraq-ppp_files/frame.htm); Internet; accessed 15 December 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Manwaring and John T. Fishel, 285.

<sup>31</sup> Max G. Manwaring, interview by author, 6 February 2008, Carlisle, PA.

<sup>32</sup> Manwaring and Prisk, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Manwaring and Prisk, 13. Cited from interviews by the authors with Ambassador Thomas Pickering, former U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, in Tel Aviv, Israel, August 1987.

<sup>34</sup> Bard O'Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005), 181.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Grenier, 85.

<sup>37</sup> Manwaring and Prisk, 16.

<sup>38</sup> Max G. Manwaring, interview by author, 10 December 2007, Carlisle, PA.

<sup>39</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy: Can the American Way of War Adapt?* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, March 2006), 26.

<sup>40</sup> Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith II, 2d ed. (Baltimore, MD: Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1992), 93.

<sup>41</sup> Max G. Manwaring, interview by author, 6 February 2008, Carlisle, PA.

<sup>42</sup> Gray, 27.

<sup>43</sup> Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3rd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 41.

<sup>44</sup> Joseph S. Tulchin and Gary Bland, eds., *Is There a Transition to Democracy in El Salvador?* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), 188.

<sup>45</sup> Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 257.

<sup>46</sup> "Iraq Poll March 2007: In Graphics," *BBC News*, 19 March 2007; available from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/6451841.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6451841.stm); Internet; accessed 7 December 2007.

<sup>47</sup> National Security Council, *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: National Security Council, November 2005), 1.

<sup>48</sup> Karen DeYoung, "All Iraqi Groups Blame U.S. Invasion for Discord, Study Shows," *Washington Post* (19 December 2007), 14.

<sup>49</sup> Len Hawley and Dennis Skocz, "Advance Political-Military Planning: Laying the Foundation for Achieving Viable Peace," in *The Quest for Viable Peace* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2005), 37.

<sup>50</sup> For a perspective on the debate concerning U.S. military and economic aid to El Salvador see the fact sheet for the Honorable Senator Edward Kennedy under: U.S. General Accounting Office, *El Salvador: Pipeline of U.S. Military and Economic Aid* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. General Accounting Office, February 1990).

<sup>51</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq: December 2007 Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, December 2007), 11.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> The author served in the Al Anbar Province of Iraq in 2004 with the Multi-National Force-West G-3, and again in 2007 as the Commanding Officer of Battalion Landing Team 2d Battalion, 4th Marines.

<sup>54</sup> It could be further argued that insurgency has evolved to the point it is diametrically opposed to democracy, thereby making it much more challenging to counter.

<sup>55</sup> Clausewitz, 605-610.

<sup>56</sup> Mao Tse-Tung, 109.