

THE HARD CHOICE:

DECISIVE POINTS IN COUNTERINSURGENCY

CAPTAIN BRANDON ANDERSON

Editor's Note: *The author has supported this article with extensive source documentation which has not been included in the text, due to space considerations. All footnotes and other documentation will, however, be provided by Infantry on request.*

"This is another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin—war by guerillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of by combat, by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him... When there is a visible enemy to fight in open combat, the answer is not so difficult. Many serve, all applaud, and the tide of patriotism runs high. But when there is a long, slow struggle, with no immediately visible foe, your choice will seem hard indeed."

— **President John F. Kennedy**
Remarks to the graduating class of the
U.S. Military Academy, West Point, June 6, 1962

"If the only tool that you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail."

— **Abraham Maslow**

A decisive point is the tipping point in a military operation when one side begins to win. It lends focus and clarity to an operation. Commanders focus their efforts on achieving the decisive point and continue through to the desired endstate. In a boxing match, a decisive point could be when one fighter lands a devastating blow, allowing him to follow up and knock his opponent out. In a football game, it could be when a team recovers a fumble and runs it back for a touchdown. Decisive points are measures of effectiveness and initiative.

FM 3-0, *Operations*, defines a decisive point as "a geographic place, specific key event, or enabling system that allows commanders to gain marked advantage over an enemy and greatly influence the outcome of an attack."

Current doctrine for company level leaders and below focuses decisive points on either controlling terrain or destroying the enemy. According to Sir Robert Thompson, the architect for British counterinsurgency success in the Malayan Emergency, neither tactic alone is sufficient. In his book *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, Thompson said, "The government must give priority to defeating the political subversion, not the guerillas." Thompson focused his efforts foremost on attacking the cause of the insurgency, not just its symptoms. Unfortunately, focusing solely or primarily on killing the enemy or controlling terrain often creates a search and destroy mentality which addresses the symptoms and not the cause. According to Thompson, "most

search-and-clear operations, by creating more communists than they kill, become in effect communist (or now insurgent) recruiting drives." A search and destroy focus reduces an Army to cutting grass without pulling out the roots. In Iraq and Afghanistan, successful leaders across the Army are focusing their Soldiers on defeating the cause of an insurgency instead of just killing or capturing the insurgents.

Because winning looks different in defeating an insurgency, the model for decisive points should be changed. Commanders know they have more in their toolbox than "kill or capture," and that success cannot be measured solely in body counts or hilltops. Decisive points can and should reflect that. Decisive points in counterinsurgency at the company level should include quantifiable measures of influence and success in building the government's legitimacy with its people and successfully transitioning authority to its own security forces, as well as traditional measures of success.

Conventional War

Conventional doctrine for high intensity conflict was created and refined through Western warfare. By the 18th century, Western and Central European countries accepted unwritten rules of war in order to keep it from being more terrible and maintain some level of social order. The disagreements of nations were ultimately decided by massing military forces against their counterparts and fighting pitched battles to gain a decisive victory, according to *Warfare in the Western World: Military Operations from 1600 to 1871* by Robert A. Doughty and Ira D. Gruber. Underlying these ideas are the assumptions that the enemy army would agree to pitched battles and that these engagements would be decisive; meaning that the people would accept defeat and its implications to their way of life. A major difference between conventional conflict and insurgency lies with this crucial aspect, the people and their consent.

The underlying principles in American doctrine, tactics, and strategy are found in the writings of Carl von Clausewitz and Antoine-Henri Jomini as they were interpreted through the 19th and 20th centuries, according to the book *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife* by Lieutenant Colonel John A. Nagl. The book also discusses how both authors were writing in response to the unprecedented success of Napoleon fighting conventionally against conventional forces in Europe. According to Nagl, Clausewitz defined war as a function of the people, the government and the army, while Jomini focused his writings on the army, specifically on massing friendly strengths against enemy weaknesses at a decisive point in order to destroy the enemy's army, and with it his ability to "properly" resist. Because of the culture and assumptions of Europe, Clausewitz's broad interpretation of conflict was focused narrowly into the most dynamic and decisive factor in Western



Tech Sergeant Molly Dzitko, USAF

An interpreter and a Soldier from the 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, talk with a motorist while on patrol near Samarra, Iraq.

and Central Europe — the army. Through the Prussian and later German interpretations of Clausewitz’s and Jomini’s ideas, the modern focus of “find, fix, and finish” was born.

The context that caused the decisive factor of war to be the army must be considered to fully appreciate what other dynamics exist. Within similar societies of continental Europe, the assumptions of purely military wars were relatively safe. Therefore, Napoleon was able to take Austria and Prussia after defeating their armies in pitched, decisive battles with minimal resistance, according to Doughty and Gruber. However, where there was a fundamental cultural or religious disagreement with Napoleon and what his rule represented, as with Spain or Russia, something different happened. The war of “the fist and the axe” was born.

Insurgency

In *On Guerilla Warfare*, Mao Tse-Tung uses the example of Napoleon in Russia in 1812 to show the contrast between conventional and unconventional warfare. Mao read Clausewitz and Western military history, and this greatly influenced his thinking. From Napoleon’s 1812 example, Mao learned how a great army can win battles but lose the war. Napoleon invaded Russia, seized Moscow, and waited for the surrender of the Czar. He had seized decisive terrain and any army that would

dare to meet him would be defeated; by conventional standards he had won. However, something different was at work. As Napoleon waited in Russia, the winter rolled in. His supplies ran short. The Cossack cavalry conducted limited attacks against his logistics and army. Napoleon could not sustain his soldiers nor impose his will on the people of Russia. The result was that Napoleon, who had left France with 600,000 soldiers, returned to France with only 100,000, although he never lost a battle. The Russians’ victory was won through exhaustion, not decisive combat.

Mao saw this kind of conflict as the Achilles’ heel to the powerful conventional force he faced in China in 1930s. He considered the three variables of war from Clausewitz for his situation: the people, the government, and the army. He knew he could not field a superior army to the Japanese. However, he found that by exploiting the crucial variable of the people he could change the conditions on which war was fought. He could shape the battlefield to the point that he gained the initiative. The focus and importance of winning the support of the people in guerilla warfare cannot be overstated because this is where the initiative is won or lost. It can clearly be seen in Mao’s “Three Rules and the Eight Remarks,” all of which focus on influencing the population:

Rules:

1. All actions are subject to command.

2. Do not steal from the people.
3. Be neither selfish, nor unjust.

Remarks:

1. Replace the door when you leave the house. (In summer, doors were frequently lifted off and used as beds.)
2. Roll up the bedding on which you have slept.
3. Be courteous.
4. Be honest in your transactions.
5. Return what you borrow.
6. Replace what you break.
7. Do not bathe in the presence of women.
8. Do not without authority search the pocketbooks of those you arrest.

“Because he is a foreigner and a barbarian, guerillas can gain the confidence of millions of their countrymen.”

**— Mao Tse-Tung
On Guerilla Warfare**

Mao Tse-Tung also said that the nature of the guerilla is to conduct limited attacks at a time and place of his choosing and escape to a safe area or anonymity amongst the people. Guerillas know where the forces they attack are, but the same is not true of their opponents. Guerillas need intelligence superiority for this and it gives them the initiative. A guerilla’s intelligence superiority comes from the active or passive support of the people. Therefore, with the support or submission of the people, a guerilla force can continue to attack if and when it chooses. With the support of the people, the guerilla force is unable to be found, much less fixed or finished, unless it wants to be.

FM 3-0 says that a decisive point, “allows commanders to gain marked advantage over an enemy and greatly influence the outcome of an attack.” Few things are more powerful and decisive in an insurgency than the intelligence superiority that a successful guerilla force enjoys. In the words of Sir Robert Thompson, “The population is not only providing the guerilla with his food and intelligence, but providing him perfect cover and concealment.”

Decisive Points in Defeating Insurgency — When Do I Start to Win?

“The key strategic thrust is to provide meaningful security for the Vietnamese people in expanding areas of increasingly

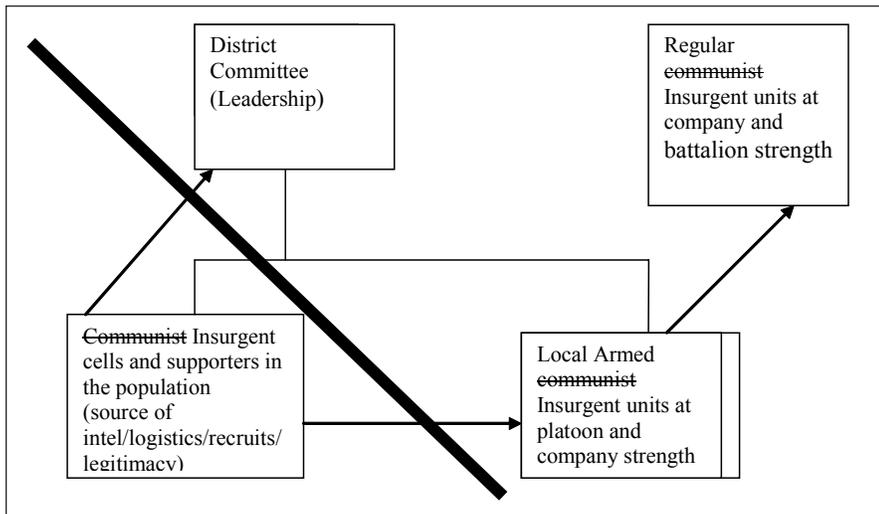


Figure 1 — This diagram, which was adapted from Sir Robert Thompson's *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, shows the importance of isolating insurgents from the people. Note that the word "communist" has been replaced by "insurgent."

effective civil authority ... In order to provide security for the population our operations must succeed in neutralizing the VCI and separating the enemy from the population. The enemy Main Forces and NVA are blind without the VCI. They cannot obtain intelligence, cannot obtain food, cannot prepare the battlefield, and cannot move "unseen."

— **General Creighton Abrams**

As quoted in *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife* by Lieutenant Colonel John A. Nagl

In conventional conflict the outcome is decided purely by military action, and decisive points are limited to the destruction of enemy forces or the control of terrain. However, counterinsurgency has the aspect of simultaneous military and political action with the focus on the support of the people in order to isolate the guerilla. Because of this feature, decisive points within the population become crucial. The population provides intelligence, logistics, recruits, and legitimacy to either the guerillas or the government. Therefore, the battle is won or lost at the popular level.

"Necessary measures were taken to achieve their three objects: of protection, of uniting and involving the people, and of development, with the ultimate aim of isolating the guerilla units from the population."

— **Sir Robert Thompson**
Defeating Communist Insurgency

The focus here is on protecting and influencing community leaders, building indigenous military or police forces through joint actions, and transitioning to host nation control in order to establish the government and the rule of law. Success and the tipping point in this kind of conflict is not measured in body counts or control of a hill, but in the level of support from the people. Local people provide intelligence, logistical support, recruits, and

legitimacy to one side or the other. For intelligence, support can be quantified by the amount and quality of intelligence on guerilla activities that coalition forces receive. Logistical support can be measured by the number of workers willing to work with and for the government and amount of food or material sold to coalition forces. Success in recruiting can be measured in the number and quality of local people willing to serve in indigenous security forces. Legitimacy can be measured by overall support of the government and its programs.

Conclusion

The influence and support of the people is crucial to success in counterinsurgency. What this means for tactical leaders at the company level and below is that decisive points are not only based on the terrain or enemy, but may also be based on the people and local forces. With the active or passive support of the people, the guerilla can fight

at a time and place of his choosing. However, with the support of the people coalition forces can isolate the guerilla from his intelligence and logistical support and reduce him to criminal status. Decisive points in counterinsurgency at the company level should include quantifiable measures of influence and success in building the government's legitimacy with its people and successfully transitioning authority to its own security forces.

Captain Brandon Anderson graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 2003. He is currently serving on a military transition team in Afghanistan. His previous assignments include serving as weapons platoon leader for D Company, 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry, 2nd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, and as a rifle platoon leader with the 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division.

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Tech Sergeant Molly Dzitko, USAF

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