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WHY THE TEACHERS?

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Students of counterinsurgency warfare long have realized that its very nature leads the forces of order into some unusual places and subjects. In the declassified documents from the Vietnam era in the Kennedy Administration, there is a hilarious—because it was deadly serious—conversation between the President and his aides on whether to maintain a condensed milk program in South Vietnam or to cut it off to put pressure on the Vietnamese government for military and political reform. The leader of the Free World discussing condensed milk with top advisers! This incident demonstrates the interrelated nature of counterinsurgency programs: social, economic, political, and military factors very often are programmatically inseparable. This may drive many a professional soldier and diplomat to distraction (it did in Vietnam), but it is a type of challenge that is still with us.

In addition to these material factors, the current Global War on Terror (GWOT) includes ideational factors that will be crucial to victory over the Islamists, that is, politicized, violent Muslim terrorists. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Marine General Peter Pace put it in October 2005, in this war “ideas are as important as bullets.” The major goal of the Islamist strategy is to alter the social identities of the Muslim world to the point that their first loyalty will not be communal (family, tribe, clan, sect, region) nor national, but Islamist, transnational, and civilizational. Thus unified, the Muslim world will be ready to confront other civilizations, especially the West.

Because secular schools are major transmitters of nonreligious, nationalist social identity, they are often the targets of the Islamists. This can be seen in Thailand, which has one of the most violent insurgencies in Southeast Asia. The provinces in southern Thailand that are in revolt are primarily Muslim and ethnically Malay, and have a long tradition of localism. The public school system is secular and national, and becoming more so, with much of the culture and history taught consisting of the culture and history of Buddhist Thailand, and in the Thai language. The Muslim reaction over time has been to create their own religious schools, called *pondoks*, to maintain their Muslim and Malay identity. When violence broke out in January 2004, the Thaksin government’s response was to begin closing down some *pondoks* and arresting some of the Muslim teachers, based on the belief that they were hotbeds of Islamist radicalism. In retaliation, the insurgents began attacking public schools. One study found that, as of mid-2005, 27 percent of insurgent attacks have been against public schools and teachers, while only 19 percent were aimed at military or police targets. Buddhist teachers are quitting in droves, and those remaining now are allowed to carry weapons to class. With neither side seemingly in a mood for compromise, it is likely the violence will continue. The insurgent attacks increasingly are centering on Buddhist Temples and

monks. The role of religious schools at times has been an important issue among separatist groups in Burma, Indonesia, and the Philippines, also.

This development should not be too surprising. Social psychologists tell us that an identifiable majority group typically presses for assimilation, and minorities typically press for some form of separate cultural identity. It is interesting to note that both the governments of Indonesia and the Philippines have adopted a “dual identity” political strategy, attempting to create relationships with separatist groups by allowing a fair amount of cultural autonomy, but under a nationalist rubric. It is too soon to say if this will work, but the violence in Aceh, Indonesia, has virtually ended (the widespread destruction of the 2004 tsunami and the international response also had a salutary effect), and the Philippines government says it is close to a deal with its primary Muslim separatist group, brokered by Malaysia.

If Thailand cannot find a way to satisfy the desire for a place at the cultural table for its Muslim population (about 4 percent of the total), they very well might be lost to an Islamist civilizational identity. This could destabilize a valuable American ally and trading partner, and siphon scarce resources away from more worthy projects. The Indonesian and Filipino “dual identity” strategy is a risky one; cultural autonomy could lead to more, not less, separatist sentiment. But it is one that Thailand should consider seriously. A robust nationalism is the best way to counter the Islamist civilizational appeal. It could turn out that teachers will become prime actors in the GWOT. Not exactly condensed milk, but an unconventional challenge in the GWOT nonetheless.