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A Flame Kept Burning: Counterinsurgency Support After the Cold War

STEVEN METZ

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The insurgents of the world are sleeping. Outside the former Soviet Union, few new insurgencies have emerged since the end of the Cold War, and many old ones, from the Philippines to Peru, from Mozambique to El Salvador, from Northern Ireland to Israel, are lurching toward political settlement. But sleep is not death--it is a time for rejuvenation. Since the means and the motives for protracted political violence persist, it will prove as attractive to the discontented of the world in the post-Cold War global security environment as it did before. Eventually insurgency will awaken. When it does, the United States will be required to respond.

Since the late 1940s, the importance of counterinsurgency in American national security strategy has ebbed and flowed. Often it was not considered strategically significant and the defense community paid it little attention. When the President did decide that insurgency posed a threat, as during the Kennedy and first Reagan administrations, the military and the defense community had to craft or update an appropriate conceptual framework, organization, and doctrine. Like a phoenix, American counterinsurgency capability periodically died, only to be reborn from the ashes. One determinant of this process was how the period of remission was spent. When a cadre of counterinsurgency experts within the military and defense community used it to ponder past efforts and analyze the changing nature of insurgency, the reconstitution of understanding and capability was relatively easy.

Today, there is no pressing strategic rationale for US engagement in counterinsurgency, but history suggests that if the United States remains involved in the Third World, one may emerge. This is the time, then, for introspection, assessment, and reflection--for keeping the intellectual flame burning. Just as combat units train after an operation in order to prepare for future ones (while hoping they never occur), the US military and other elements of the defense community must train mentally for future counterinsurgency. To do this now will shorten the period of learning and adaptation should counterinsurgency support again become an important part of our national security strategy.

The Post-Cold War Security Environment

The evolution of US counterinsurgency strategy and doctrine has been shaped by Vietnam and El Salvador. After Vietnam, specialists considered the essence of US counterinsurgency strategy and doctrine sound, but concluded that it had not been applied properly in Southeast Asia. US counterinsurgency support in El Salvador thus did not require a radical revision of either strategy or doctrine, but simply better application.[1] This was correct. Despite some stark differences, Vietnam and El Salvador both occurred within the same strategic environment. In terms of the broad nature of the threat and the wider geostrategic concerns that shaped American decisionmaking, Vietnam and El Salvador shared more features than not.

Today, US counterinsurgency strategy continues to assume that the wisdom gained in Southeast Asia and Central America holds. El Salvador is thought to have proven the correctness of our strategy and doctrine. "The El Salvador experience," Victor Rosello writes, "generally validated the US Army's Foreign Internal Defense doctrine in countering insurgency." [2] But future counterinsurgency may not emulate the past; the similarities between Vietnam and El Salvador may be much greater than those between El Salvador and what comes after it. Since the strategic environment determines the form and salience of insurgency, the United States now needs to revise its counterinsurgency strategy and doctrine. Some trends in the post-Cold War strategic environment may inhibit insurgency; others will simply force it to mutate. Many of them, though, will alter the strategic calculus for the United States, leading policymakers to reconsider where, when, why, and how they engage in counterinsurgency support.

In his seminal book *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Samuel Huntington argued that political development

entails the creation and maintenance of institutions capable of dealing with demands on the state.[3] The contemporary Third World is undergoing mitosis, splitting into those able to craft adaptive and viable institutions and those unable to do so. Success at institution-building is manifested in the global trend toward democracy.[4] Since functioning democracies are less susceptible to insurgency, even if not altogether exempt, this is good news. Failed institution-building results, at best, in the division of states into sub-national units with security the purview of warlords and militias. At worst, the outcome is anarchy and a Hobbesian war of all against all.

Robert Kaplan, among others, contends that the trend toward anarchy will eventually win out and much of the Third World will see "the withering away of central governments, the rise of tribal and regional domains, the unchecked spread of disease, and the growing pervasiveness of war." [5] Afghanistan, where "there is no civil law, no government, no economy--only guns and drugs and anger," may portend the Third World's future.[6]

While political results are mixed, macroeconomic trends favor fragmentation over sustainable democracy. Despite the economic take-off of a few states, most of the Third World seems unable to sustain a level of economic growth able to keep pace with population. The transformation to democracy can take place in a stagnant economy, but it cannot be sustained.

A second related trend is the routinization of violence. Crime becomes omnipresent. While crime is growing in nearly all countries, this trend is most threatening in developing countries where un- and underemployment are epidemic and police forces are overwhelmed, ineffective, or corrupt. In much of the Third World, walls topped by concertina wire and backed by elaborate alarm systems are standard on even middle-class homes. In poorer neighborhoods, dirt-floored, single-room houses have thick bars on the windows. More and more businesses have their own heavily armed guards. In Panama, for instance, one sees frozen yogurt shops protected by men with M-16s.

Worse yet, the global routinization of violence has spawned entire generations for whom protracted conflict is normal. Whether in Lebanon, Gaza, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Colombia, or Liberia, youth see violence not as an aberration, but as an intrinsic part of life. It takes little to spark insurgency in such a context.

On the positive side, the end of the Cold War delegitimized the sponsorship of insurgency as an element of a state's national security policy. Only pariah states like Iran dabble in exporting insurgency and terrorism. The end of the Cold War also allowed a surge in the ability of the United Nations to cobble together coalitions for peacekeeping and to broker negotiated solutions to conflict.

The end of the Cold War did not end the US commitment to global engagement, but it has led us to redefine national interests. American leaders have long had little tolerance for military casualties in areas without clear national interests--witness Reagan's withdrawal from Beirut. With the demise of the superpower competition, the areas and issues worth spilling blood for have shrunk.

The Changing Nature of Insurgency

As the strategic environment changes, insurgency itself is mutating. Maoist "people's war," after all, was a reflection of the Cold War security environment. Now new forms of insurgency appear to be emerging. Distilled to its essence, a revolutionary strategy includes goals and methods. The goals of Maoist "people's war" were the seizure of political power and the revolutionary transformation of the political and economic systems. Its methods were political and guerrilla warfare, followed if necessary by conventional military action. Post-Cold War insurgents may seek political, social, and economic transformation that is revolutionary in its extent, but not necessarily revolutionary in the Marxist sense of building a new system. For instance, reactionary insurgency, in which a religious-based group attempts to seize power from a secular, modernizing government--as the Iranians did in 1979--may be common. In some ways this will also emulate Cold War revolutionary insurgency in that legitimacy will be the focus, control of the state the goal, and external support important. Tactically, however, future reactionary insurgents will largely be urban with an emphasis on terrorism rather than on rural guerrilla war. This type of insurgency will be most dangerous if it again becomes a technique of interstate conflict, with external sponsors using insurgency to weaken an opponent.

Other post-Cold War insurgent movements will not seek to seize the state in order to change the political, social, and economic system. Many regions of the Global South will suffer from what Larry Cable calls "defensive" insurgency,

where some subgroup within a state, whether ethnic, tribal, racial, or religious, seeks autonomy or outright independence.[7] Given the extent of primal conflict in the post-Cold War world, such secessionist- separatist insurgencies may be the dominant form during the next decade. This form is also the closest to traditional "people's war," since the insurgents will place great stock in the creation of "liberated zones." But where Maoists based mobilization and support on political ideology, secessionist insurgents will use primal ties. This will alter the essence of counterinsurgency. When the opponent was Maoist, the government could build legitimacy by offering the people a better deal than the insurgents. When the roots of the conflict are primal, with the government controlled by a different group than the insurgents, legitimacy will be extraordinarily difficult, perhaps impossible, for the regime to win. As bitter struggles in Peru and Guatemala have shown, the tendency will be for the government to consider all members of the group supporting the insurgency as enemies. And from a regional perspective, secessionist- separatist insurgencies will be particularly dangerous since they can easily spill over state borders.

What can be called commercial insurgency also will pose security threats without seeking the outright seizure of state power.[8] Commercial insurgency will be a form of what is becoming known as "gray area phenomena"--powerful criminal organizations with a political veneer and the ability to threaten national security rather than just law and order.[9] In fact, many commercial insurgencies may see an alliance of those for whom political objectives are preeminent and the criminal dimension simply a necessary evil, and those for whom the accumulation of wealth through crime is the primary objective and politics simply a rhetorical veneer to garner some support that they might not otherwise gain. It is this political component that distinguishes commercial insurgents from traditional organized crime. Most often, though, commercial insurgencies probably will not attempt to rule the state but will seek instead a compliant regime that allows them to pursue criminal activity unimpeded. If that is impossible, they will use persistent violence to weaken and distract the state. In many ways, commercial insurgency has the longest historic lineage-- quasi-political bandits and pirates, from Robin Hood to Carlos Lehder, have posed pervasive security threats throughout history. Better-organized commercial insurgents will rely on such activities as the production and shipment of drugs. Anarchic commercial insurgents such as the current rebel movements in Sierra Leone and Liberia will simply loot.[10]

Another emerging form of insurgency will be aimed at multinational political organizations and military forces attempting to stabilize failed states. These will emulate anticolonial conflicts in Algeria, Angola, and the first phase of Vietnam as the insurgents play on nationalism and, to an extent, racial divisions. Since public support in the nations providing the multinational force will often be precarious or weak, the insurgents will need only to create instability and cause casualties among the multinational force. Somalia is a prototype for this new type of insurgency.

Within this array of goals, the methods used by insurgents will vary according to the nature of the regime they oppose and the extent of their support network. If the legitimacy of the regime is weak, insurgents may follow something like Maoist techniques. If the regime is a democracy with at least moderately strong legitimacy, insurgents may pursue what US Army doctrine calls "subversive insurgency." This will combine a legitimate, above-ground element participating in the political process and an underground using political or criminal violence to weaken or delegitimize the government. It thus can also be called camouflaged insurgency. The insurgents will camouflage the connection between the above-ground and underground elements for two reasons. They will try to avoid alienating potential allies opposed to the regime but not in favor of violence, and they will seek to complicate attempts by the government to obtain outside assistance. It is much easier for a regime to acquire international support to fight an avowed revolutionary insurgency than to oppose a camouflaged insurgency that gives all the appearance of general disorder or widespread crime. When the underground element does destabilize the state and the above-ground element seizes power, the immediate problem for the new government will be reining in its violent wing. It will first attempt cooptation. Failing that, the government will have all of the intelligence needed to violently crush the underground, thus cementing its legitimacy by bringing order and stability.

For the United States, subversive insurgencies may pose intractable strategic problems because they will strike at fragile democracies, and because their covert nature will make early intervention difficult. Like many forms of insurgency, camouflaged insurgency will be difficult to recognize until it is so far developed that cures are painful.

The Changing Strategic Calculus

In combination, changes in the strategic environment and mutations in insurgency undercut the basic assumptions of US counterinsurgency strategy and doctrine. For example, during the Cold War, American policymakers often assumed that the costs of not acting when a friendly government faced a Marxist insurgency outweighed the potential risks and costs of engagement. In the post-Cold War strategic environment, this may hold only when insurgents intend to destabilize their neighbors. Marxism was a proselytizing ideology. From Leon Trotsky to Daniel Ortega, its adherents linked their own political survival to spreading the revolution. Future insurgents may not automatically come to the same conclusion, particularly if they see that destabilizing neighbors and spreading the insurgency is likely to provoke serious international involvement, making them less, rather than more, secure.

This prospect carries important implications for the United States. Victory by non-proselytizing insurgents, even those ideologically hostile to the United States, is unlikely to threaten our interests. Existing policy and strategy suggest two reasons for US concern for insurgency. One is an updated "domino theory." If most post-Cold War insurgents do not seek to spread violence, however, this argument weakens. It is also true that it is easier to contain a radical state run by former insurgents than to prevent insurgent victory. The other reason for American concern is access to raw materials and markets. But, as Benjamin S. Schwarz writes, "America's essential interests very rarely depend upon which group controls resources or power within underdeveloped countries. . . . [B]asic American economic interests seem relatively secure whatever happens politically in the Third World." [11] This does not mean that the United States has no economic interests in the Third World, but simply that who holds power there will have only a marginal effect on those interests. Since victorious insurgents must undertake post-conflict national reconstruction, they are unlikely to stop exporting raw materials. They may be more likely to close their markets, but these are often insignificant anyway. And, even if victorious insurgents did deny the United States access to a resource or market, the costs to the United States would ultimately be less than the burden of protracted counterinsurgency support to regain access.

In the post-Cold War security environment, the costs and risks of counterinsurgency are increasingly altering the basic strategic calculus. Counterinsurgency always risks damaging the United States' credibility, either by association with a repressive or corrupt regime, or by staking our prestige on the outcome of a conflict and forcing us to choose between the economic costs of engagement or the political costs of disengagement. Put simply, a government in serious danger of defeat by an insurgency is often a bad ally. Hypothetically, we could engage in counterinsurgencies only where the beleaguered government is not so bad. But this is extraordinarily difficult, mostly because of the way the United States usually becomes involved in counterinsurgency. Rather than making a rational cost-benefit assessment and then committing assistance until the end of the conflict, we stumble in and persist as the political costs of disengagement mount. During the Cold War, we often rushed in to bail out governments facing imminent defeat and then found that rather than a summer romance, we had entered a marriage. In the post-Cold War period, our involvement in counterinsurgency may grow out of peace operations, but it will still be inadvertent more often than not. The Clinton Administration's national security strategy does not specifically mention counterinsurgency other than "nation assistance" in Latin America, but its emphasis on global engagement, expanding democracy, and supporting peace operations opens the way for inadvertent involvement. [12]

American engagement in counterinsurgency also risks damaging the social, political, and economic system of the friendly state. For South Vietnam, our cure may not have been worse than the disease, but it was close. In El Salvador we were able to avoid damaging the state and society to the extent that we did in Vietnam, but a regime may eschew badly needed reform and negotiation with insurgents if it thinks American assistance will allow outright victory. It is possible that the Salvadoran military recognized that the collapse of the Soviet Union spelled the end of massive US support, and thus finally allowed a negotiated settlement that could have been reached several years earlier. American involvement in counterinsurgency, then, is often like lending money to a chronic gambler--it postpones real resolution of the problem rather than solving it.

Counterinsurgency can also damage our own institutions and morale. The erosion of national purpose and respect for authority engendered by Vietnam has taken years to ameliorate and may never be fully cured. Future American engagement in counterinsurgency might also provoke domestic terrorism. With easy global transportation, the existence of a variety of emigre communities in the United States, and a perception of the American public's unwillingness to accept casualties from peripheral conflicts, insurgents could open an "American front" and target public health, financial networks, communications systems, and the ecology.

During the Cold War, the United States assumed that only we were willing and able to provide effective counterinsurgency support. This was always questionable. Often the British and French better understood revolutionary insurgency than we did. And other states proved to be effective suppliers of counterinsurgency support, such as the Israelis and Taiwanese in Guatemala. In the post-Cold War security environment, the most effective counterinsurgency support may come from military institutions with extensive experience either as counterinsurgents--the South Africans, Israelis, Peruvians, Filipinos, Colombians, and Salvadorans, for instance--or those such as the Zimbabweans which were once insurgents themselves. Thus there may be others both willing and able to provide counterinsurgency support in the post-Cold War security environment. US effort might be better spent augmenting the planning, intelligence, sustainment, and mobility capabilities of such regional counterinsurgents than directly aiding a threatened regime.

Finally, our Cold War-era counterinsurgency strategy and doctrine assumed we understood insurgency better than the threatened regime. Whether this was true or not, there is little evidence that we fully grasp the motives, fears, and hopes driving emerging forms of insurgency. We are particularly likely to fail against insurgents driven by intangible motives like justice, dignity, and the attainment of personal meaning and identity. If, in Martin van Creveld's words, "future war will be waged for the souls of men," the United States will face overwhelming difficulties in counterinsurgency.[13] As our limited experience with "holy terrorists" in the Middle East shows, we are ill-equipped to deal with the root causes of religion-driven violence.[14]

In the post-Cold War strategic environment, then, counterinsurgency is increasingly becoming a high risk/low benefit activity. The US military and defense community must make policymakers aware of this while simultaneously watching for changes in the strategic calculus.

Conclusions

American counterinsurgency strategy and doctrine must be revised to reflect the post-Cold War strategic environment. Because counterinsurgency is not a central element of our current national security strategy, such revision must deal with broad concepts rather than specifics, thus paving the way for a reconstitution of capability should the strategic calculus change and a new rationale for counterinsurgency emerge.

The first step should be conceptual expansion. Our notion of insurgency itself must be expanded to reflect the complexity of the new security environment. The first post-Cold War revision of FM 100-20--now called *Operations Other Than War*--recognizes the variegation of insurgency that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. While continuing to emphasize Maoist "people's war," the manual pays greater attention to urban and subversive insurgency than its predecessors. It also stresses that US neutrality in insurgencies "will be the norm." The new doctrine, though, still argues that "success in counterinsurgency goes to the party that achieves the greater popular support," thus continuing to view Third World conflict as a contest with Western notions of rationality.[15] It does not offer advice on how to deal with gray area phenomena, "irrational" enemies for whom violence is not a means to political ends, or what Ralph Peters calls "the new warrior class"--"erratic primitives of shifting allegiance, habituated to violence, with no stake in civil order." [16]

John Keegan points out that cultures like the United States with a Clausewitzian belief in the connection of war and politics often have difficulty comprehending, much less defeating, opponents with other motives.[17] It is the job of experts in the military and defense community to help overcome this tendency. Some movement in this direction has taken place. New joint doctrine, for instance, states that foreign internal defense "has traditionally been focused on defeating an organized movement attempting to overthrow the government," but in the future "may address other threats." Threats such as civil disorder, narcotrafficking, and terrorism "may, in fact, predominate in the future as traditional power centers shift, suppressed cultural and ethnic rivalries surface, and the economic incentives of illegal drug-trafficking continue." [18] To transcend the conceptual limits of the Cold War, insurgency should be considered as simply protracted, organized violence--whether revolutionary or nonrevolutionary, political or nonpolitical, and open or clandestine--which threatens security and requires a government response.

The second step should be the building of consensus on basic principles. Given the post-Cold War security environment, four principles seem appropriate. One is rigid selectivity. The key factor when the United States considers engaging in counterinsurgency support is whether the threatened state and regime warrants the effort. During

the Cold War, the simple fact that a noncommunist regime faced a communist challenge led us to engage in counterinsurgency support. In the post-Cold War world, we can and must be much more discerning. The international system is not domestic society where every citizen, no matter how reprehensible, deserves assistance. We should, in other words, consider providing counterinsurgency support only when the threatened state is an existing democracy rather than a potential one. Of course our standards for defining democracy must be somewhat flexible, but not to the point of emptiness.

The second principle of our post-Cold War counterinsurgency strategy should be multilateralism. When engaging in counterinsurgency, we should engineer an international support coalition both to enlarge the assistance available to the threatened state and to avoid staking US credibility on the outcome of the conflict. Even though American counterinsurgency strategy has long called for multinational efforts, we seldom attempted to be "one among equals" but instead formed hierarchical coalitions where we clearly bore the brunt of the effort.[19] Horizontal coalitions should be the way of the future. We might lead such coalitions in the Western Hemisphere, but rely on others elsewhere.

The third principle should be concentration on secondary support. We could lead the way in deterring, isolating, and punishing external sponsors of insurgency. Within a multinational counterinsurgency support coalition, we should focus on our special skills and provide intelligence, mobility, planning support, and psychological operations training rather than massive financial assistance or tactical training and advice. In general we should be a second-tier supporter providing assistance to regional states with greater experience in counterinsurgency and a more direct stake in a conflict (thus making them more likely to persist in a protracted struggle). After all, one of the things that made the Soviet Union effective in sponsoring insurgency was reliance on surrogates like Cuba and North Vietnam. The United States should heed this example.

The fourth principle of our post-Cold War counterinsurgency strategy should be organizational coherence. The United States may need a new organization to confront new forms of insurgency. With the exception of secessionist-separatist insurgency, all post-Cold War forms will be far removed from the Army's traditional areas of expertise and will be more police functions than military ones. The Army should thus encourage the formation of a permanent civil-military cadre of experts with a strong emphasis on law enforcement and intelligence collection and analysis. Rod Paschall's argument that Western military forces are not proficient at counterinsurgency and should be replaced by "an international corporation composed of former Western officers and soldiers skilled in acceptable counterinsurgency techniques" rings even truer today than when written in 1990.[20]

What can the Army do to speed reconstitution should policymakers again deem counterinsurgency strategically significant? Working closely with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, the Army should use its intellectual resources to "keep the flame burning," at least at a low level. Sponsored research, symposia, workshops, conferences, discussion papers, working groups, publications, and debate in the Army educational system can contribute to this. The wargames, planning exercises, and case studies used in the Army's professional educational system should consider commercial, subversive, and spiritual insurgency as well as Maoist "people's war." The Army also should make sure it retains a cadre of counterinsurgency experts within its ranks during downsizing. If we are lucky, no strategic rationale for extensive US involvement in counterinsurgency will emerge and this cadre will never be activated. But it is the fate of the military to hope for the best and prepare for the worst. With clear thinking now, the Army can be ready to offer effective advice should the strategic environment change and the United States once again see a rationale for major involvement in counterinsurgency support.

NOTES

1. For detailed (but critical) assessments of US counterinsurgency support in El Salvador, see A. J. Bacevich, James D. Hallums, Richard H. White, and Thomas F. Young, *American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1988); and Benjamin C. Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustration of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1991).

2. Victor M. Rosello, "Lessons From El Salvador," *Parameters*, 23 (Winter 1993-94), 102.

3. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1968).
4. See Larry Diamond, ed., *The Democratic Revolution: Struggles for Freedom and Pluralism in the Developing World* (New York: Freedom House, 1991); and Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993).
5. Robert D. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1994, p. 48.
6. Tim Weiner, "Blowback from the Afghan Battlefield," *The New York Times Magazine*, 13 March 1994, p. 53.
7. Larry Cable, "Reinventing the Round Wheel: Insurgency, Counter-Insurgency, and Peacekeeping Post Cold War," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 4 (Autumn 1993), 229.
8. This is explored in Steven Metz, *The Future of Insurgency* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 1993), pp. 13-15.
9. See Max G. Manwaring, ed., *Gray Area Phenomena: Confronting the New World Disorder* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993). The phrase first appeared in Peter Lupsha, "Gray Area Phenomenon: New Threats and Policy Dilemmas," a paper presented at the High Intensity Crime/Low Intensity Conflict Conference, Chicago, September 1992.
10. Howard W. French, "Bandit Rebels Ravage Sierra Leone," *The New York Times*, 17 February 1995, p. A10.
11. Benjamin C. Schwarz, "A Dubious Strategy in Pursuit of a Dubious Enemy: A Critique of U.S. Post-Cold War Security Policy in the Third World," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 16 (No. 1, 1993), 269-70.
12. William J. Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (Washington: The White House, July 1994).
13. Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991), p. 215.
14. See Bruce Hoffman, *"Holy Terror:" The Implications of Terrorism Motivated by a Religious Imperative* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1993).
15. FM 100-20, *Operations Other Than War*, Initial Draft (Washington: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 30 September 1994), p. 4-20. This draft is for review purposes and does not represent approved Department of the Army doctrine.
16. Ralph Peters, "The New Warrior Class," *Parameters*, 24 (Summer 1994), 16.
17. John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).
18. Joint Pub 3-07, *Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War* (Washington: The Joint Staff, 1994), p. III-6.
19. John M. Collins, *America's Small Wars: Lessons for the Future* (Washington: Brassey's, 1991), p. 79.
20. Rod Paschall, *LIC 2010: Special Operations and Unconventional Warfare in the Next Century* (Washington: Brassey's, 1990), p. 125.

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