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# The Hobbesian Notion of Self-Preservation Concerning Human Behavior during an Insurgency

RAYMOND MILLEN

Scholars generally reference Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* for theories in international politics. Specifically, scholars subscribe to the concept of international anarchy and the pursuit of survival to explain state behavior. Since Hobbes lived through the English Civil War (1642-1651), his observations arguably could be a reflection of insurgency warfare rather than interstate conflict.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the relevant passages in *Leviathan* to which this article refers connote a concern with domestic conflict vice external threats. With this frame of reference, this article will focus on the effect of insurgency on human behavior.

According to Hobbes, "fear of violent death and desirous peace" are the compelling reasons man forms a society.<sup>2</sup> In making this *a priori* argument, Hobbes advances the idea that individual self-preservation is the primary motivating factor behind the formation of society and not, as Aristotle contends, because man by nature is a social animal. This motivational factor also has tremendous implications for individuals suffering through an insurgency. If the population is the centerpiece of any insurgency and counterinsurgency struggle, as prominent scholars on insurgency contend, then Hobbes's insights are crucial to understanding how individuals caught up in an insurgency behave. This article will address the following questions:

- Why do subsequent generations accept the covenant rather than returning to the state of nature?

- Why do some individuals reject the covenant?
- How do insurgencies take root?
- What are the cascading effects when the covenant is broken?
- Why do citizens fail to assist the government upon liberation from the insurgents?

The answers to these questions will help explain why Hobbes's notion of self-preservation compels the general population to remain noncommittal to either side during an insurgency. Naturally, human behavior is not the only variable in an insurgency, but it is an important variable; and it is one often underappreciated by governments conducting a counterinsurgency.

### ***The General Acceptance of the Covenant by Subsequent Generations***

Hobbes argues that the social contract promises to protect the individual from the threat of oppression, death, and injury prevalent in the state of nature. Released from the need for constant vigilance against threats, the individual can pursue private interests and happiness that benefit him and society.<sup>3</sup> Hobbes's analytical framework for the formation of society is logical, but it does not address why subsequent generations accept the covenant. Born into an established society, the individual makes no conscious decision to renew the social contract. Never having experienced political anarchy, he might even take security for granted. As the individual matures to adulthood, one could say his behavior is derived more from social norms than a conscious rational choice. Because security under a common power is nonexclusive, everyone enjoys the collective good automatically whether cognizant of its benefits or not. It could be argued that the individual becomes so accustomed to the order brought by the common power that he does nothing when rebel activity begins, expecting the government will resolve the matter.

When Hobbes speaks of acceptance, he is alluding to the majority of the population. The essential tendency of the citizenry is to accept some re-

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strictions on liberty in exchange for the benefits. Nonetheless, Hobbes makes the case for a common power precisely because not all citizens will accept the covenant, and these individuals represent the greatest danger to society.

***The Rejection of the Covenant by the Few***

Hobbes recognizes that a small sector of society will never be satisfied under a sovereignty in which they are not in charge. Hobbes contends that the pursuit of power is part of human nature, a second aspect of self-interest: “I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death.”<sup>4</sup> The pursuit of power would seem incompatible with his central premise of self-preservation since it often entails great risks and peril for the instigator.

Hobbes qualifies his statement, however, by explaining that only a distinctive group of individuals embarks on gaining power through sedition: “Needy men, and hardy, not contented with their present condition, as also all men that are ambitious of military command, are inclined to continue the causes of war, and to stir up trouble and sedition; for there is no honour military but by war, nor any such hope to mend an ill game as by causing a new shuffle.”<sup>5</sup> These conspirators are more inclined to gaining power and influence through armed conflict rather than working through the political process. “And in sedition,” Hobbes stresses, “men being always in the precincts of battle, to hold together and use all advantages of force is a better stratagem than any that can proceed from subtlety and wit.”<sup>6</sup> Although Hobbes does not state it, one can assume these rebels possess the organizational skills and experience to conduct a protracted insurgency.

***How Insurgencies Take Root***

If seditious conspirators are always waiting in the wings, does citizen discontent with the government present them with an opportunity to start an insurgency? Contrary to Hobbes’s contention that citizens should remain satisfied with the benefits of established peace under a common power, the historical record of insurrections and uprisings prior to Hobbes’s time suggests

a different conclusion.<sup>7</sup> Even in Hobbes's civilized England, government corruption, inequitable socioeconomic and political programs, as well as perceived injustices were likely to lead to grievances, which conspirators could exploit. Hobbes's *Leviathan* actually neutralizes this threat by placing a higher premium on order rather than on perceived injustices. Uprisings may erupt, but society would expect the government to respond with exigent force to establish order once again. Hobbes submits that the common power possesses the requisite force to keep *all* men in "awe," and that this power is justified: "Covenants without the sword are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all."<sup>8</sup> Having made a covenant with the government, the individual expects the government to respond to lawlessness quickly and effectively.

For an insurgency to take root, extraordinary circumstances must exist for the government to lose its authority over some or all of its sovereign territory. Either the state is collapsing or has already collapsed. Collapse could result from a defeat in a war, especially if the loss leads to the fall of the government. In this case, the government is in such disarray that it lacks the capability to respond to challenges to its authority. The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime is not the only illustration of an insurgency erupting as a result of a war and regime change. Weimar Germany and post-Tsarist Russia were beset by revolutions and civil wars following World War I. The American War Between the States (1861-1865) escalated rapidly into a full-fledged civil war because the federal government lacked sufficient forces to quell the rebellion. Equally unhelpful was the fact that many professional officers betrayed the Union by joining the Confederacy.<sup>9</sup> The anti-colonial insurgencies in the Cold War era are less an illustration of grievances against imperialism, albeit that was certainly a motivation; rather, they erupted because the colonial powers were weakened by World War II and the insurgents saw an opportunity to seize power. Lastly, Afghanistan suffered from two decades of various insurgencies following the Soviet invasion in December 1979. Naturally, there are cases in which the government totally alienates its base, such as occurred under Somoza in Nicaragua and Batista in Cuba, but even here, the implosion of the government represented a loss of authority. Hence, the cabal of conspirators cannot hope to initiate an insurgency until the authority of the government has diminished over a portion of territory.

One wonders how a small group of rebels can hope to turn the insurgency into a popular uprising. As Hobbes points out, it cannot, but it can give the illusion of one, and this illusion has a profound influence on the individual's perception of government impotence. From the beginning, the cabal attempts to portray the insurgency as a mass movement by committing as many attacks as possible. "Men cannot distinguish, without study and great understanding, between the action of many men and many actions of one multi-

tude,” says Hobbes; “and therefore [they] are disposed to take for the action of the people that which is a multitude of actions done by a multitude of men, led perhaps by the persuasion of one.”<sup>10</sup> This observation contains two implications once insurgents have seized control of an area: first, the majority of the citizenry will remain as spectators, trying to ascertain who is winning the conflict; second, and conversely, the insurgents will use force against a portion of the population as a means to control the whole. Under these circumstances, the insurgents initially appear omnipresent and omnipotent, while the government seems to have disappeared.<sup>11</sup>

### ***The Effect the Breach of the Covenant has on Citizen Behavior***

The government’s loss of authority, even if temporary, has profound effects on the citizens’ psyche. Whether the citizen recognizes it or not, the loss of authority represents a breach of the covenant. In making his argument for the establishment of the *Leviathan*, Hobbes provides insights on human behavior in the state of nature. Logically, this behavior would emerge again in the absence of the covenant. Paradoxically, this breach of the covenant may become the insurgent’s most powerful weapon during the course of the conflict, as this article will explore more fully.

It would appear by their actions that insurgents have an intuitive understanding of human behavior in peril. Thrusting the local population into the state of nature is effectively achieved by eliminating the vestiges of government authority. As insurgents are not initially powerful enough to seize power outright, they often resort to terrorist acts to eliminate local authorities (political figures, policemen, teachers, and key bureaucrats). Terrorism effectively intimidates the vast majority into passivity. Some extraordinary citizens will emerge to resist the insurgents, but the insurgents, better organized and postured to react, will neutralize them. It is important to note that terrorist acts, such as assassination, murder, intimidation, and kidnappings, have the correlative effect of controlling the local inhabitants. Within a short time, the individual discovers his life and property are no longer safeguarded. He is placed in the state of nature, which, according to Hobbes, is a state of war.<sup>12</sup> But what is this state of nature, exactly?

According to Hobbes, in nature all men are equal. Any physical advantages possessed can be offset by intrigues or alliances with others. Intellectual advantages are actually vain illusions. Experience becomes the essential element, which all men acquire over time. Hobbes asserts that conflict arises whenever men desire the same object (e.g., property) and cannot share it. They become enemies, and in the pursuit of this objective they will endeavor to subdue or kill the other. The matter is never settled, because other

challengers will continually vie for the object as well. Under these conditions, man's position is never secure. He must continually remain vigilant to threats from every quarter.<sup>13</sup>

Hobbes believes that the state of nature is a state of war because no common power exists to keep man's tendency for conflict in check. Hobbes makes the point that battles and actual fighting do not define war; rather, it is the environment of insecurity in which "every man is enemy to every man." Under these conditions, all normal activities of commerce, social and cultural progress, and the pursuits of the arts and sciences cease. Stability is replaced by "continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."<sup>14</sup> The system of law and order no longer has any meaning. "Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice. Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues. Justice and injustice are none of the faculties neither of the body, nor mind."<sup>15</sup> In short, traditional norms and institutions no longer have their predictive influence on citizen behavior.

In accordance with Hobbes's state of nature, a remarkable dynamic takes place in insurgent-controlled areas. The former citizen is isolated physically and psychologically with no hope of finding succor from the central government; observing the fate of earlier government loyalists and believing the insurgency to be so pervasive, he trusts no one, especially in terms of organizing resistance. He may view the insurgents with hostility, but as long as they control the area, he must comply. The individual and his family must also live. They require sustenance and a livelihood. This overarching need makes him susceptible to anyone who will ameliorate his predicament. Once all government bonds are broken, the insurgents fill the vacuum quickly to administer the local population. That the insurgents forcibly establish a covenant with the population becomes irrelevant. It is important to note that once the insurgents have gained control of the population, the continued use of terrorism ceases, because it might drive the population into desperate resistance rather than resigned compliance.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Government Misperceptions of Citizen Loyalty***

Governments experiencing an insurgency often erroneously conclude that the citizens will resist the insurgents because the latter are evil. Without taking the individual's drive for self-preservation into consideration, the government also assumes its citizens have choices regarding their loyalty. Whether the individual considers the insurgency evil or not is immaterial, because he is not in a position to refuse the new common power. Hobbes reasons that the individual is caught in a war in which "nothing can be unjust. The no-

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tions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place.”<sup>17</sup> For Hobbes’s citizen, a common power, even if harsh, is better than the state of nature. The primary goal of self preservation compels individuals to accept the new conditions.

The real tragedy for the individual is that the ensuing power struggle between insurgents and counterinsurgents will involve him intimately. The counterinsurgency begins once the established government takes countermeasures, usually and predominantly through military force. The individual is once again caught in the middle, thrust into the state of war, and embroiled in the worst of all situations.

After experiencing generations of citizen allegiance to its rule, the government might make the mistake of assuming loyal citizens will resist the insurgents or at least assist the counterinsurgency. However, the citizen’s options are limited. As previously mentioned, the citizen could assist the local government in combating the insurgents once the threat is recognized. This action is not very effective against insurgents that have formed an extensive political network over many months or even years. The historical experience suggests that insurgents will have an ensconced network of cells throughout the area before initiating hostilities. Since many of the insurgents are native to the area, the insurgents enjoy immediate and accurate intelligence. In turn, insurgents will likely learn of the citizen’s assistance to the government and target him or his family quickly. One can assume that the insurgents will announce their acts of retribution to serve as a warning for the rest. Obviously, fear is not the only incentive for cooperation. Ideological indoctrination will create a loyal base of adherents, as Mao patiently instructed, but for the rest, intimidation is critical.<sup>18</sup>

The citizen also can flee his home and become a refugee. This seems an illogical option for anyone not directly targeted or expelled by the insurgents, because the citizen thus thrusts himself into the state of nature. As a refugee, the citizen becomes a direct burden to the state, which must provide emergency necessities. Overburdened by the need to fight a counterinsurgency and care for refugees, the state must establish temporary refugee camps administered with insufficient resources. Unless the camp is very well administered, life there can resemble the state of nature. Additionally, families



are wont to abandon their homes to looters and vandals. Hence, most are likely to remain in their familiar, established community.

The citizen also can join the government counterinsurgency forces in the hope of liberating his community eventually. Only a minority can choose this option, however, in view of the age and physical fitness requirements. The prospective citizen-soldier would naturally worry about the fate of his family as well. The probability that the insurgents would punish the family members of soldiers would likely prove a powerful disincentive against joining the government military forces. The young males will thus either go into hiding, try to keep a low profile, or become impressed into service with the insurgents. As a result, the community will comprise women, children, and old men.

Another option is that the citizen can join the insurgency. A few volunteers are likely to exercise this option out of a sense of adventure, ideology, or grievances against the government. This is a dangerous option, because the citizen has committed himself to the insurgency. If the insurgency fails, his life may be forfeited. Even if the government offers amnesty, the stigma of treachery would likely remain on him and his family. But given the individual's overriding goal of self-preservation, he may provide some assistance to the insurgents in the hope of placating them. He can expect no quarter from the insurgents for aiding the government, but he can at least hope for leniency from the government should it succeed. If impressed into service by the insurgents, he can at least use that as an excuse if captured. Under these difficult conditions, the option of limited assistance to the insurgency provides his best chance of survival.

The most likely option for the majority is to remain neutral and wait to see which side wins the struggle. Neither the insurgents nor the government authorities will be satisfied with this stance and will attempt to draw the citizen to their side. Insurgency recruitment patterns suggest a process of drawing the citizen into the conspiracy by requesting assistance (e.g., providing aid to a wounded insurgent), demanding menial tasks (hiding munitions, delivering explosives, or providing intelligence), and using force or threats to gain the active support of the citizen. By drawing him into the conspiracy, the insurgents turn the citizen into an outlaw, subject to punishment by the government. Counterinsurgency forces sweeping through the area are likely to view all local citizens with suspicion, especially if they are of fighting age. The counterinsurgency forces will expect citizen loyalty and demand intelligence related to insurgent forces. Unless the counterinsurgency forces establish a strong, permanent presence in the area (unlikely in view of limited military resources), the citizens are likely to offer minimal assistance, knowing the insurgents will return once the counterinsurgency forces move on. It does not take too many cases of insurgent retribution against "traitors" to instill in the population the belief that impartiality is the safest course for self-preservation.

The counterinsurgency government will likely experience extreme difficulties regaining the allegiance of the individual once he has come under the power of the insurgency. The government likely takes it for granted that the affected population will willingly proclaim its loyalty and assist the government in destroying the insurgents. Generally, this does not happen, and the breach of Hobbes's covenant may provide a powerful explanation for this passivity. If the government's primary responsibility of security is so easily forfeited to a group of insurgents, why should it expect loyalty from its citizens? The government has betrayed its citizens by failing to fulfill its obligations under the covenant. It should be no surprise that once government forces reestablish control of a former insurgent enclave, the individual might not display any gratitude.

Another facet of the interaction between the individual and the government concerns the use of force. The government has the power to regulate the amount of force to retake an insurgent-controlled area. When it uses force indiscriminately, resulting in high civilian casualties and property damage, it represents a double betrayal. The first betrayal is not providing adequate force to stop the insurgents from taking control. The second betrayal is not valuing the life and property of the individual sufficiently to use minimum force when retaking an insurgent enclave. The individual can reason that insurgents resort to terrorist acts because they lack the means to fight the government forces conventionally. When the government displays seemingly wanton disregard for the individual's safety, what good is the covenant? It is no small wonder that insurgent recruitment increases in the aftermath of major counterinsurgency operations that result in significant noncombatant casualties and damage. It is only logical that some individuals will join the insurgent cause because of this betrayal in the belief that the insurgents will create a better society. Thus, rather than being greeted with cheers and gratitude, the government forces may often experience sullen stares and even hostility among the liberated population.

Often the government compounds its earlier errors by not fully appreciating the role self-preservation plays among the citizenry. If the provision of security is the central tenant of the covenant, then anything short of that is a waste of government energy and resources. The concept of winning hearts and minds without first providing security thus rings hollow. If the struggle was simply over gaining the affections of the populace by providing reconstruction projects, health services, humanitarian relief, and so forth, insurgencies would quickly collapse. The citizens may appreciate the influx of aid, but it does not solve their plight. Hobbes clearly states that the individual initially seeks membership in the society for security. Once that need is met, then he is able to pursue other interests and pleasures for a more complete and happier life. Hence,

winning hearts and minds begins with providing security, and once that need is met unequivocally, then the other initiatives can begin.

In conclusion, gaining control over the population is the centerpiece of both the insurgency and the counterinsurgency. Hobbes suggests that the primary bond which holds society together is the promise of security. Once this is broken, the individual is thrust into a state of nature, which is mitigated only by the establishment of a common power. The struggle between the insurgency and counterinsurgency thus revolves around which side can provide uncontested security. A discussion on counterinsurgency strategy and tactics in attainment of that end is beyond the scope of this article. However, by focusing on individual's plight and motivation for self preservation, the government can produce a framework strategy. It is remarkable that Hobbes's behavioral variable has such profound implications for an insurgency, and yet is so often ignored by governments when conducting a counterinsurgency. In this sense, Hobbes remains relevant to the study and resolution of modern insurgencies and not just as realist theory.

#### NOTES

1. A civil war is the last stage of an insurgency, in which the insurgents are strong enough to challenge government forces in conventional combat. In the initial stages of an insurgency, the rebels will conduct guerrilla warfare because they are too weak for a direct confrontation. For an insurgency to be characterized as a civil war, the rebels require secured territory and a trained fighting force.

2. John H. Hallowell and Jene M. Porter, *Political Philosophy: The Search for Humanity and Order* (Ontario: Prentice Hall Canada, 1997), p. 312; "The passions that incline men to peace are fear of death, desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living, and a hope by their industry to obtain them." Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), p. 78.

3. Hobbes, pp. 58-59.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 109-13.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 76, 106.

9. Two hundred ninety-six graduates of the US Military Academy joined the Confederate forces; 800 remained loyal to the Union. *Bugle Notes* (West Point, N.Y.: US Military Academy, 1978), p. 260.

10. Hobbes, p. 61.

11. Roger Trinquier embraced Hobbes's insight regarding the control of the population: "The *sine qua non* of victory in *modern warfare* is the unconditional support of a population. . . . If it [popular support] does not exist, it must be secured by every possible means, the most effective of which is *terrorism*." Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare*, trans. by Daniel Lee (New York: Praeger, 1964), p. 8.

12. Hallowell and Porter, p. 311.

13. Hobbes seems to make an overstatement regarding experience, since not all gain from experience equally. Hobbes, pp. 74-75.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

16. David Galula is one of the few modern writers on insurgency who recognizes the motivation of self-preservation among the population in counterinsurgency. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964), p. 60.

17. Hobbes, p. 78.

18. Mao Tse-tung, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, chapters 4, 9, 11, 12, 13, 29, and 30. Accessible on-line at <http://art-bin.com/art/omaotoc.html>.