COIN Doctrine Is Wrong

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ABSTRACT: Counterinsurgency does not increase the legitimacy of, or support for, central governments engaged in internal conflicts. Recent research shows quantifiable degrees of government legitimacy, national identity, and population security are necessary precursors and accurate predictors of a government's ability to outlast a civil uprising. Because the first two predictors—government legitimacy and national identity—can be measured and do not increase during a conflict, the probability of government failure in most cases can be accurately predicted when the conflict starts.

Although fighting against internal rebellions is as old as conflict itself, the term "counterinsurgency" (COIN) to describe such conflict originated only recently, first appearing in the English language in 1962. The Kennedy administration introduced the word as part of a new doctrine of limited war intended to contain communist expansion.[1] The basic premise of COIN holds that civil actions can be taken to increase support for a central government and thereby decrease support for an internal rebellion. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines counterinsurgency in straightforward terms: "military or *political* action taken against the activities of guerrillas or revolutionaries."[2] The US Department of State expands upon this, defining counterinsurgency as "comprehensive *civilian* and military efforts taken to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and *address its root causes*."[3] According to the *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide*, a counterinsurgency campaign should

> integrate and synchronize political, security, economic, and informational components that *reinforce governmental legitimacy and effectiveness* while reducing insurgent influence over the population. COIN strategies should be designed to simultaneously protect the population from insurgent violence; *strengthen the legitimacy and capacity of government institutions* to govern responsibly and marginalize insurgents politically, socially, and economically.[4]

As journalist and contemporary historian Fred Kaplan phrases it, "the premise of counterinsurgency is that insurgents arise out of socio-political conditions and, therefore, the point of a counterinsurgency campaign, or the goal of it, is not just to kill and capture insurgents, but to change the living conditions to help the government provide basic

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1. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "counterinsurgency (n.)," https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary /counterinsurgency.
2. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "counterinsurgency (n.)," https://www.oed.com/. Italics added.
3. US Department of State (DoS), Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PMA), *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (Washington, DC: PMA, 2009), 12, https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents /organization/119629.pdf. Italics added.
4. DoS, *Counterinsurgency Guide*, 12. Italics added.

services to the people, so that support for the insurgency dries up."[5] As recently as 2013, RAND Corporation published a study entitled *Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies* in which the authors purported to lay out the best practices to "help host-nation governments reform . . . and increase their legitimacy."[6] In short, the basic principle underlying counterinsurgency doctrine is that civil actions can be taken to increase support for an embattled government and increase its legitimacy.

This premise seems logical and obvious: If a government makes its people safer and improves their lives, their support for the government will increase. Although rational, this assumption is untested, and as Columbia University professor Rita McGrath notes, the danger in suppositions of this type is to "take the untested assumptions that underlie the . . . plan and treat them as facts."[7]

In this case, the untested assumption upon which COIN doctrine rests—that actions can be taken to increase support for a government during an internal conflict—is wrong. A study conducted at the US Army War College from 2015 to 2020 found no empirical evidence that counterinsurgency means and methods increased either popular support for a government or the public perception of its legitimacy in any internal conflict since the end of World War II. Governments have been successful in defeating rebellions, and governments that used many of the methods and actions prescribed by counterinsurgency doctrine have successfully suppressed internal conflicts. But these victories have led to the erroneous claim that success is a result of "doing counterinsurgency right."[8] This is a classic example of the logic fallacy known to the ancient Romans as *post hoc ergo propter hoc*: "after this, therefore because of this."[9] But sequence is not causation.

Quelling Internal Rebellions

In the vast academic literature of internal conflict, the recognition that counterinsurgency doctrine is wrong is not new. For example, Gian Gentile observed anecdotally that counterinsurgency did not work in Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan. Without fully recognizing the reasons *why* this was the case, he nonetheless argued vociferously against COIN doctrine.[10] The research study behind this article

5.   A. C. Valdez, "A Decade at War: Afghanistan, Iraq and Counterinsurgency," America Abroad Media, podcast, aired March and September 2013, https://www.americaabroadmedia.org/radio/decade-war-afghanistan-iraq-and-counterinsurgency.

6.   Christopher Paul et al., *Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), xxxv, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR291z1.html.

7.   Rita Gunther McGrath, "The Dangers of Untested Assumptions," MIT Sloan Management Review, October 26, 2009, https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-dangers-of-unchecked-assumptions/.

8.   For example, see Michael O'Hanlon, interview by Fareed Zakaria on Global Public Square, "What Will Obama's Afghanistan Policy Be?" transcript, January 25, 2009, http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0901/25/fzgps.01.html; and Michael Crowley, "Obama versus Osama," CBS News, December 8, 2008, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-versus-osama/.

9.   John Woods and Douglas Walton, "Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc," *Review of Metaphysics* 30, no. 4 (June 1977), https://www.jstor.org/stable/20126985.

10.   Colonel Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York: New Press, 2013).

identifies and enumerates the political science underlying the failure of counterinsurgency and, using quantifiable metrics, concludes precisely why governments succeed or fail against internal rebellions.

For the past five years, the Study of Internal Conflict at the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College has systematically researched and analyzed the 53 internal conflicts since 1945 in which an internal rebellion sought either control of the government or the creation of an independent breakaway country, and in which at least 1,000 persons died in a 12-month period. The study used the Oxford University Armed Conflict and Correlates of War Project databases to identify all relevant internal conflicts.[11] Because there are many kinds of civil conflict (for example, wars between ethnic groups in remote areas that are not fought for control of the government), internal conflicts in the Correlates of War database to which the government was not a party were excluded from the study.

The study sought to identify all political-military factors that correlate with government defeat in at least 90 percent of all cases. Some factors were interrelated, as will be seen, and were often nested together. As in calculating probable medical outcomes across multiple morbidity factors, the presence of multiple negative political-military factors in one conflict decreased the likelihood of government survival to close to nil.

The study results show conclusively that governments fail against internal rebellions for five fundamental structural reasons, and the outcomes of internal conflicts are heavily dependent on these five preexisting political-military conditions. Each of the five factors was found in government failure in at least 94 percent of all 53 conflicts, and only two of the five are susceptible to military action. Further, two of the five factors are simple binary variables, while the remaining three factors are mathematically quantifiable to a useful degree of accuracy, creating thresholds that correlate to government defeat with a remarkable degree of consistency and accuracy.

Furthermore, the empirical data prove only two of the five factors can be altered in any meaningful way after the onset of hostilities. In essence, whether a government may be successful in suppressing an internal rebellion depends predominantly on whether these five factors are present at the start of the conflict. Thus, collectively, they constitute a predictive model of probable outcomes with a reliability that startled researchers. Cases of successful counterinsurgency often cited by proponents of COIN doctrine were found to be simply cases where all five political-military factors were already in favor of the existing government at the outset of the conflict.

The research shows the basic assumption behind "clear, hold, and build" (in Afghanistan), "pacification" (in Vietnam), or "nation building" (in Iraq), indeed behind all counterinsurgency, is wrong. No

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11. The Correlates of War Project, data sets, https://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets; and Oxford University Armed Conflict Database, https://libguides.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/c .php?g=422808&p=2887072.

evidence supports the contention that these lines of effort increased government legitimacy—one of the five factors—and a number of studies found such efforts did not. For example, an independent before-and-after study conducted during the war in Afghanistan showed a mathematically 0 percent increase in either support for the local government or the government in Kabul after the completion of hundreds of civil affairs projects.[12] A similar study produced the same results during the Iraq War.[13] In his study of the massive US Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) effort in Vietnam, British historian Andrew Gawthorpe also concluded the effort to increase support for and the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese government did not work.

> Nation building had failed. . . . CORDS failed despite its attempt in the latter years of the war to emulate the successes of the Vietnamese Communist movement through the village system. Through the village system . . . . CORDS had abandoned the attempt to build rural support on the basis of an imagined community of the South Vietnamese nation, and instead had shifted to the idea of communalism which the communists had used so successfully. . . . But it was precisely the political contents of CORD's programs, and its attempts to forge a network of pro-GVN village communities that failed. The GVN never managed to become . . . legitimate enough to demand the sacrifices needed to win the struggle against the Communist movement. As outsiders both in understanding and in influence, American nation builders could hardly do so either. . . . Nation building was an unavoidable condition of victory. . . . It was also almost certainly preordained to be impossible.[14]

In many cases, as a result of poorly understood local village economies, aid projects were found to have increased local conflict.[15] A study focused on the Kapit-Bisig Laban sa Kahirapan-Comprehensive and Integrated Delivery of Social Services program in the Philippines, for example, found the "program exacerbated violent conflict in eligible municipalities."[16]

Civil War or Insurgency?

Before proceeding further, a note on etymology is needed to explain why the study used the terminology "internal conflict," or "internal rebellion," instead of insurgency or civil war. Conflict naming conventions are fraught with political considerations and are often driven

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12.   Jennifer Brick, *The Political Economy of Customary Village Organizations in Rural Afghanistan* (report prepared for the annual meeting of the Central Eurasian Studies Society, Washington, DC, September 2008), https://www.bu.edu/aias/brick.pdf.

13.   Barnett Koven, "Development Assistance and the Diffusion of Insurgent Violence" (PhD diss., George Washington University, May 21, 2017).

14.   Andrew J. Gawthorpe, *To Build as Well as Destroy: American Nation Building in South Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 185–90.

15.   Nathan Nunn and Nancy Qian, "US Food Aid and Civil Conflict," *American Economic Review* 104, no. 6 (June 2014): 1630–66, https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.104.6.1630.

16.   Benjamin Crost, Joseph Felter, and Patrick Johnston, "Aid under Fire: Development Projects and Civil Conflict," *American Economic Review* 104, no. 6 (June 2014): 1833–56, https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.104.6.1833.

by participant perspectives and politics.[17] The dictionary definitions of civil war and insurgency are basically the same: two groups of citizens of the same country fighting each other for political power.[18] There is nothing in the dictionary definition of either term regarding the size of the conflict, its duration, or other characteristics. The difference in the applications of these terms is thus primarily political.

Governments fighting against internal rebellions generally avoid using the term "civil war" since it reflects badly on the government and possibly legitimizes the opposition. Instead, these governments prefer terms like "rebellion" and "insurgency," and they may even use words intended to delegitimize the rebelling group as a whole, such as "bandits" and "malcontents."[19] Following this pattern, when foreign powers intervene in internal conflicts on the side of governments, they too, usually use the term "insurgency" to refer to the fighting. Thus, when the United States intervened in Vietnam and Afghanistan in support of those governments, the conflicts were consistently referred to as insurgencies and rarely, if ever, as civil wars.

In contrast, in cases where the United States opposes the government in power, such as the ongoing conflict in Syria, the fighting is typically referred to in official statements and policy documents as a civil war. Conversely Russia, which has intervened heavily on behalf of the al-Assad government of Syria, refers to the conflict there as an insurgency and never uses the term civil war.[20]

A hermeneutical reading of US government-produced documents that define insurgency, such as Joint Publication 3-24, *Counterinsurgency Operations*, the aforementioned *US Government Counterinsurgency Guide,* and the CIA's *Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency*, shows the definitions inherently privilege the existing governments with terms like "constituted government" and "established government" and identify rebel political activities as "illegal," so the use of the term "insurgency" effectively means the speaker has taken the side of the government.[21] Of note, the United Nations tellingly avoids both terms, preferring neutral language such as conflict and violence. The characterization of an internal conflict as an insurgency or a civil war is usually driven by which side of the conflict the speaker is on; hence the term is best avoided.[22]

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17. Edward Wong, "A Matter of Definition: What Makes a Civil War, and Who Declares It So?" *New York Times*, November 26, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/26/world/middleeast/26war.html.

18. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "civil war (n.)," https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/civil%20war; and *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. "insurgency (n.)," https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/insurgency.

19. Michael V. Bhatia, "Fighting Words: Naming Terrorists, Bandits, Rebels and Other Violent Actors," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005): 5–22, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3993760?refreqid=excelsior%3A259cbe2857da1aae6100f9a2d5d06073&seq=1.

20. Madeline Conway, "Timeline: U.S. Approach to the Syrian Civil War," *Politico*, April 7, 2017, https://www.politico.com/story/2017/04/timeline-united-states-response-syria-civil-war-237011; and Wong, "A Matter of Definition."

21. US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: CIA, 2012), 28–29.

22. Wong, "A Matter of Definition."

Five Determinant Factors of Internal Conflict

In addition to the criteria of legitimacy of governance identified above, the other determinant factors identified or confirmed by the study as corresponding to government defeat in at least 94 percent of all 53 conflicts are: national identity (the percentage of the population that locates its personal identity at the level of the nation), the percentage of the population adequately safeguarded by internal security services, and two binary variables already broadly known in the literature of internal conflict—external sanctuary for rebels and the preexistence of sustainable security forces. The latter two criteria require little additional amplification except to note the study research bears out these two recognized factors without exceptions.

The study was able to quantify the levels of national identity and population control necessary for a government to prevail as 85 percent—the same as for government legitimacy. The parameter of national identity, in the accepted political science sense, was defined as at least 85 percent of the population locating their personal identities at the level of the nation.[23] In cases where less than 85 percent of the population claimed a unified national identity, 96 percent of governments facing internal rebellion as defined above suffered defeat. The national identity factor usually coincided or nested with that of legitimacy of governance, especially in cases where the majority ethnic, linguistic, or religious national group comprised more than 85 percent of the population and also predominated in the country's government.

The factor of population security was defined as the government securing and isolating at least 85 percent of the people from meaningful contact with or violence from guerilla elements. It is usually impossible to prevent a single guerilla or a small group of guerillas, either openly or in disguise, from infiltrating a populated area and from avoiding detection by security forces for a brief period—for example, to prevent every suicide bomber from getting through security measures. Security is rarely airtight, but successful governments create firewalls between at least 85 percent of the civilian population and guerillas; such barriers prevent meaningful political contact, such as proselytizing, leafleting, and public addresses, as well as virtually all targeted violence against government leaders and supporters.

Governments that failed to secure 85 percent of their populations lost in 94 percent of the 53 case studies. The 85 percent threshold recurred throughout the research and was almost a magic number in government survival. The criticality of population security to defeating internal rebellions is well established. Mao Zedong, for example, recognized the threshold in 1937 in his treatise, *On Guerrilla Warfare*: "Historical experience suggests that there is very little hope of destroying a revolutionary guerrilla movement after it has survived the first phase and has acquired the sympathetic support of a significant segment of

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23.   Omar Dahbour, "National Identity: An Argument for the Strict Definition," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (January 2002): 17–37, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40441311?seq=1.

the population. The size of this 'significant segment' will vary; a decisive *figure might range from 15 to 25 per cent*."[24] The data derived from the Study of Internal Conflict more precisely pinpoint this number at a minimum of 15 percent.

The first of the two binary variables, the existence of militarily significant external sanctuary available to rebel forces, was defined for the study as the persistent ability of insurgents to cross a neighboring border in numbers that would impact the outcome of a conflict and to obtain sanctuary there from government forces. Defining militarily significant numbers seemed at first to be problematic for the study designers. In actuality, however, the existence or lack of external sanctuary was clear-cut in virtually all of the 53 conflicts—there were few marginal calls to be made in assessing whether rebels had cross-border sanctuary. Rebel movements on islands, for example, could not have external sanctuary in any significant numbers. Conversely, most international borders are very difficult to secure completely, even for developed countries with almost unlimited resources (for example, the US borders with Canada and Mexico).

In all 53 conflicts, governments were unable to defeat rebel movements that maintained external sanctuaries. The sole ambiguous case in this regard was the second stage of the Greek Civil War from 1946 to 1949, in which the leftist National Popular Liberation Army, or *Ethnikós Laikós Apeleftherotikós Strátos* (ELAS), initially had sanctuary and external support from bordering Albania and Yugoslavia, and to a lesser extent, from Bulgaria. But the UN General Assembly began to criticize severely the three communist countries for their role in the war, and in 1949 Yugoslavia broke with Russia and closed its frontier with Greece. The loss of sanctuary in Yugoslavia was a severe blow to ELAS as was greatly diminished help from and refuge in Bulgaria and Albania—Stalin backpedaled from his proxy support through Bulgaria while the United States surged aid to the Greek government. While ELAS made many tactical blunders, this early case study in the postwar record remains an asterisk in the factor of external sanctuaries.[25]

The second binary variable factor was defined for the study as the preexistence of sustainable, reasonably competent government security forces at the onset of internal violence. The study found no government since 1945 facing an armed rebel movement that did not have existing security forces survived the conflict. In other words, the lack of an established army at the beginning of an internal conflict was fatal for the government in every case. But because virtually all countries

24.   US Marine Corps (USMC), *Mao Tse-tung on Guerrilla Warfare*, Fleet Marine Force Reference Publication 12-18, transl. Samuel B. Griffith (Washington, DC: Headquarters, USMC, April 5, 1989), 27, https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/FMFRP%2012-18%20%20Mao%20 Tse-tung%20on%20Guerrilla%20Warfare.pdf. Italics added.

25.   See "Greek Civil War," HistoryNet, website, https://www.historynet.com/greek-civil-war .htm; Amikam Nachmani, *International Intervention in the Greek Civil War: The United Nations Special Committee on the Balkans, 1947–1952* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1990); and Andre Gerolymatos, *Red Acropolis, Black Terror: The Greek Civil War and the Origins of the Soviet-American Rivalry, 1943–1949* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

since 1945 have had standing armies under the control of their central governments, this factor did not often come into play and therefore had a relatively minor impact on the research findings. Nonetheless, there are significant exceptions, including the US phase of the Afghan conflict from 2001–21 and the anti-government rebellion in Iraq after 2003.

Table 1. Conflict parameters

Factor	Metric	Fail Rate
National Identity	<85%	96%
Government Legitimacy	<85%	94%
Population Security	<85%	94%
Existing Security Forces	No	100%
External Sanctuary	Yes	100%

South Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Colombia, and Malaya

Brief executive summaries of case studies where counterinsurgency doctrine was applied are useful for illustrating how these five basic parameters are situated within and applied to historical conflicts. The counterinsurgency efforts in Vietnam and Afghanistan stand out among America's wars for the tragedy and futility surrounding them. Considerable time has been spent identifying lessons learned from both wars, and these lessons learned were the genesis of the Study of Internal Conflict Research Program in 2015.

At a fundamental strategic level, the two conflicts are structurally similar. In both cases, the United States effectively created and supported a government in a country that was not a nation in the political science usage of the word. In both cases, the United States attempted to create a democracy as the basis for the government's legitimacy where no previous tradition of democracy existed.[26] In both wars, anti-government forces received existential support from a nuclear-armed neighbor and had cross-border external sanctuaries in two neighboring countries (Laos and Cambodia in the Vietnam War, Pakistan and Iran in the Afghanistan War), which the United States and the central governments of South Vietnam and Afghanistan respectively could do little to disrupt.

In both conflicts the central governments, which were largely created and supported by the United States (with some degree of additional international support), were not broadly seen as legitimate by a majority of the population (again in the political science usage of the term).[27] Moreover, opponents of the regimes in both cases were able to mobilize narratives that established a greater claim to legitimacy from other sources, in the Weberian sense.[28] In Vietnam and Afghanistan, the United States built a comprehensive,

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26.   Dahbour, "National Identity."

27.   See *Princeton Encyclopedia of Self-Determination*, s.v. "legitimacy," Princeton University, https://pesd.princeton.edu/node/516.

28.   Max Weber, "IV. Politics as a Vocation: '*Politik als Beruf*,' *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 77–128, http://www.columbia.edu/itc/journalism/stille/Politics%20Fall%202007/Readings%20--%20Weeks%201-5/Weber%20-%20Politics%20as%20a%20Vocation.htm.

top-down model of governance (central government to provincial government to district government), while the opponents of the regimes worked from the bottom up to control the village populations in the rural areas, where approximately 80 percent of the people of both countries lived.

In both Vietnam and Afghanistan, US war planners made a conscious choice to rely primarily on police or local paramilitary forces to protect villagers against guerilla infiltration and violence—forces that were demonstrably unequal to those tasks in both conflicts—while conventional military forces were used to conduct large "cordon and sweep operations" intended to drive guerilla forces from an area and confiscate or destroy weapons and materiel useful to the enemy.[29] Leaders of local governing bodies, established at the district levels in South Vietnam and Afghanistan, were often chosen by the central governments in Saigon and Kabul on the basis of graft pyramid schemes or palace politics and were frequently unacceptable to local populations as a result—a counterproductive effort that made the rebel's local political work easier.[30]

In both Vietnam and Afghanistan, there was a trifurcation of lines of effort. As the main conventional Army defaulted to conventional operations, the smaller civil affairs components conducted pacification and reconstruction programs, which were often at odds with frequently corrupt central government planning efforts. At the same time, special operators increasingly sought to eliminate high-value targets with CIA oversight through the Phoenix Program in Vietnam and similar high-value-target operations in Afghanistan. In both conflicts, these targeted kill-or-capture missions were not coordinated with the conventional forces and were often conducted on the basis of flawed intelligence, sometimes neutralizing the intended target, but often arriving too late or arresting or killing the wrong man. These operations upset villagers, upending the patient work of the civil affairs components, and played into enemy propaganda.

Tragically in both conflicts, the overuse and sometimes indiscriminate application of the US advantages in fire support resulted in extensive civilian casualties. An estimated 220,000 South Vietnamese civilians were killed by forces fighting for the South Vietnamese government from 1962 to 1975, and at least 135,000 civilians have been killed and wounded in Afghanistan since 2001, where claims about responsibility often conflict.[31] Such civilian casualties alienated the rural population not just from the United States but from the central government it was known to be supporting.

29.   See for example, David Pearson, "Low-Intensity Operations in Northern Ireland," in *Soldiers in Cities: Military Operations on Urban Terrain*, ed. Michael C. Desch (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), 106.

30.   Gawthorpe, "*To Build as Well as Destroy.*"

31.   Charles Hirschman, Samuel Preston, and Vu Manh Loi, "Vietnamese Casualties during the American War: A New Estimate," *Population and Development Review* 21, no. 4 (December 1995): 783–812, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2137774?seq=1; Neta C. Crawford, *Update on the Human Costs of War for Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001 to mid-2016* (Boston: Watson Institute, Brown University, August 2016); "Afghanistan: Civilian Casualties Exceed 10,000 for Sixth Straight Year," UN News, February 22, 2020, https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/02/1057921; and UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, Annual Report 2020* (Kabul, Afghanistan: UNAMA, February 2021), 11, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_protection_of_civilians_report_2020_revs3.pdf.

There are many other operational parallels between the wars, such as the marginalizing of the advisory mission until far too late in the conflicts, infantry tactics that instilled systemic overreliance on US-provided air support among the South Vietnamese and Afghan armies, and the inability to develop a functional language capability to obviate the persistent failure of communications via interpreters. In another parallel, the United States and the host governments, while attempting to build stable armies in Vietnam (the Army of the Republic of Vietnam) and Afghanistan (the Afghan National Army), were largely unable to overcome debilitating problems with desertions (attrition rates in Afghanistan never dropped below 30 percent per year), enemy infiltration of the ranks (resulting in widespread lack of information security), pervasive drug use, and getting recruits into the training pipeline.[32]

South Vietnam

While the basic building blocks of a separate South Vietnamese national identity—a common ethnicity, culture, and language shared by more than 85 percent of the population—arguably existed in the mid-1950s, the government of Ngo Dinh Diem squandered the social capital, which did exist for creating a South Vietnamese nation, by exacerbating the religious fault line between the Catholic minority government and the country's Buddhist majority, effectively creating a body of resistance to the government that remained a key factor in South Vietnamese politics throughout its brief existence.[33] Diem also alienated the nonethnic-Vietnamese peoples living in the south, such as the Nung, Hmong, Chan, and Hoa, further eroding his legitimacy. Rather than trying to build consensus and a broad nationalist movement, Diem chose to focus on repressing his political rivals in the south and waging war against competing anticommunist sects such as the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao at the expense of national cohesion.[34]

Thus, none of the governments of South Vietnam had 85 percent legitimacy, and South Vietnam could not be considered a nation (less than 85 percent of the population self-identified specifically as South Vietnamese as opposed to simply Vietnamese). While the communist movement in the South, which became known colloquially as the Viet Cong, was initially weak, by 1958 the South Vietnamese government could no longer claim full population security of and control over 85 percent of the population of the south.

Moreover, this figure continued to erode throughout the course of the conflict until by 1972, the Viet Cong controlled or influenced the majority of the rural population of the country south of the demilitarized

32.   M. Chris Mason, *The Strategic Lessons Unlearned from Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan: Why the Afghan National Security Forces Will Not Hold, and the Implications for the U.S. Army in Afghanistan* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2015), https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/2340.pdf.

33.   Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

34.   Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*.

zone. Enemy forces could and did make massive use of external sanctuaries and supply corridors in bordering Laos and Cambodia, which the United States and South Vietnam were not able to interdict effectively. Of the five factors defined by the study, only the preexistence of a sustainable and reasonably competent army applied. South Vietnam did possess the basic elements of a capable military force with some very good fighting elements, particularly its ranger and paratrooper battalions. But these capabilities were largely crippled by central government corruption and political appointments to military leadership positions that prioritized loyalty to Saigon over military competence.

Table 2. Conflict parameters: South Vietnam

Factor	Metric
National Identity	No
Government Legitimacy	No
Population Security	No
Existing Security Forces	Yes
External Sanctuary	Yes

Afghanistan

Not only is Afghanistan not a nation (less than 85 percent of the population places their personal identities at the level of an Afghan nation), it is one of the most segmented and fragmented countries on the earth.[35] For example, more than 40 first languages are spoken in Afghanistan, 17 in Nuristan Province alone—more languages than are spoken in all of Western Europe. These languages are largely determinant of identity, as civil conflict has raged in Afghanistan since the 1970s between the Pashto-speaking plurality of the population and shifting coalitions of the other ethnic and linguistic groups.[36] Adding to the fragmentation is the hostility between the Sunni Muslim majority and the Shia minority, which is predominantly but not exclusively of the Hazāra ethnic group.

The status of the two binary factors necessary for government success—the existence of a sustainable and reasonably competent army in 2002, when the Taliban were driven from power and began to build a rebel movement, and the existence of cross-border sanctuary to a militarily significant degree—is well known.

The mathematical odds against success were rendered insurmountable by the imposition of popular democracy—a form of government which had never been practiced in Afghanistan—that is not widely accepted as legitimate governance in the Weberian sense. Less than 30 percent of the voting-eligible Afghan population voted

35.   Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Metin Gurcan, *What Went Wrong in Afghanistan? Understanding Counter-Insurgency Efforts in Tribalized Rural and Muslim Environments* (Solihull, UK: Helion & Company, 2016).

36.   Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "No Sign until the Burst of Fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier," *International Security* 32, no. 4 (Spring 2008): 41–77; and Bernard Comrie, ed., *The Major Languages of Western Europe*, 1st ed. (Abingdon, NY: Routledge, 2015), v–vi.

for Hamid Karzai, and less than 5 percent voted for Ashraf Ghani in 2019. The return of the Afghan king Mohammed Zahir Shah from exile in 2001 as a ceremonial monarch and a figure of national unity, similar to the role played by the royal families in Great Britain and Japan, could have conferred popular legitimacy on a parliamentary government. The return of King Zahir Shah, however, was rejected by the George W. Bush administration, and the Afghan monarchy was eliminated against the wishes of three quarters of the official delegates to the Emergency Loya Jirga in what amounted to a CIA coup d'état.[37]

Traditional legitimacy in the form of a Pashtun king has always been the predominant source of legitimacy of governance in Afghanistan.[38] The absence of the legitimacy and stability provided by this monarchy in Afghan society created a vacuum, and the Pashtun Taliban movement essentially filled this legitimacy vacuum with a religious source of legitimacy understood by the population. Although the Taliban initially enjoyed little support among the Afghan people as a result of its failures in governance, draconian social policies from 1996 to 2001, and harsh Deobandi interpretations of Islamic law not native to Afghanistan, their support has increased. Today the Ghani government maintains full control of less than 54 percent of the Afghan population.[39]

Table 3. Conflict parameters: Afghanistan

Factor	Metric
National Identity	No
Government Legitimacy	No
Population Security	No
Existing Security Forces	No
External Sanctuary	Yes

Iraq

Many of the same problems were faced in the nation-building effort in Iraq after 2003. As defined by most political scientists, Iraq was—and is—not a nation.[40] Following World War I, in the wake of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the boundary lines drawn across the sand by Gertrude Bell

37.   Mason, *Strategic Lessons Unlearned*, 143; Pamela Hess "Afghan Council Postponed, King Steps Aside," United Press International, June 10, 2002, www.upi.com/Business_News/Security -Industry/2002/06/10/Afghan-council-postponed-king-steps-aside/UPI-62001023745673/; and Camelia Entekhabi-Fard, "Accusations of American Meddling Mar Afghan Council," Eurasianet, June 12, 2002, https://eurasianet.org/accusations-of-american-meddling-mar-afghan-council; and author interviews with two eyewitness participants.

38.   Roy, *Islam and Resistance*; and Carlo J. V. Caro, "Afghan Kings and the Failure of U.S. Military Intervention," RealClearDefense, February 12, 2020, https://www.realcleardefense.com /articles/2020/02/12/afghan_kings_and_the_failure_of_us_military_intervention_115034.html.

39.   Bill Roggio, "Analysis: US Military Downplays District Control as Taliban Gains Ground in Afghanistan," Long War Journal, January 31, 2019, https://www.longwarjournal.org /archives/2019/01/analysis-us-military-downplays-district-control-as-taliban-gains-ground-in -afghanistan.php.

40.   Dahbour, "National Identity."

in 1922 to create Iraq's current boundaries made no political sense.[41] By the beginning of the twenty-first century, only Saddam Hussein's brutal police state held the country together. Following the US invasion, the government installed by the United States was not seen as legitimate by 85 percent of the Iraqi population, and it was never able to provide full security to at least 85 percent of the total population. Thus, none of the three 85 percent parameters of government success against insurgency existed after 2003. Because the standing Iraqi army was disbanded before the start of the internal rebellion and some rebels were able to find sanctuary and support to some degree across international borders, none of the five political-military factors established by the research study as necessary for government success in quelling an internal rebellion existed in Iraq in 2003.

Table 4. Conflict parameters: Iraq

Factor	Metric
National Identity	No
Government Legitimacy	No
Population Security	No
Existing Security Forces	No
External Sanctuary	Yes

Colombia

The Marxist insurgency in Colombia, known at first as "*La Violencia*," began in the 1920s and was waged by a number of rebel groups, most notably since 1960 the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*). This internal conflict, suppressed in 2016, makes a fascinating case study within the context of the five parameters of the research project. Colombia can be defined as a nation, as at least 85 percent of the population self-identifies as Colombian. Colombia is multiethnic, but its people share a language, religion, and culture that are almost universal throughout the country.

Colombia's governments in the twentieth century were seldom broadly popular but were accepted as legitimate in the sense that the government's laws were recognized and its right to govern was accepted by at least 85 percent of the population.[42] Colombia's rebels could not gain cross-border sanctuary in militarily significant numbers; Colombia's border regions with Venezuela and Ecuador are remote and uninhabitable jungles, a deadly "green desert" in which daily survival

41.   James Buchan, "Miss Bell's Lines in the Sand," *Guardian*, March 11, 2003, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/mar/12/iraq.jamesbuchan; and Robin Wright, "How the Curse of Sykes-Picot Still Haunts the Middle East," *New Yorker*, April 30, 2016, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-the-curse-of-sykes-picot-still-haunts-the-middle-east.

42.   See for example *Marco Palacios, Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia 1875–2002* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Abbey Steele, *Democracy and Displacement in Colombia's Civil War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017); and Summer Newton, ed., *Assessing Revolutionary and Insurgent Strategies: Case Studies in Insurgency and Revolutionary Warfare—Colombia (1964–2009)* (Fort Bragg, NC: US Army Special Operations Command, undated), https://www.soc.mil/ARIS/books/pdf/ARIS_Colombia-BOOK.pdf.

even for experts is a struggle. At the outbreak of *La Violencia*, Colombia's standing army was sustained by the government, and the army was reasonably competent as defined by the study.

But one of the five factors—population security—was initially missing from the equation, allowing a succession of rebel movements to survive at a level that stressed Colombian society at times. Beginning in the 1920s, government forces could not isolate the guerillas from at least 85 percent of Colombia's population because at least 70 percent of the country's population at the onset of *La Violencia* was rural. During the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, Colombia underwent a dramatic demographic shift—by 2018, just under 80 percent of the population was urban. Because cities are much easier to secure, Colombian security forces were eventually able to reach the magic number of more than 85 percent population security and control.[43] The steady construction of all-season roads linking Colombia's rural regions to its cities also made the movement of security forces easier and faster, as did the advent of helicopters for military transport.

In short, all five political-military conditions existed by 2016 to starve the last of the guerilla forces, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* movement, of sufficient recruits and sources of popular support, and the survivors agreed to a cease-fire.

Table 5. Conflict parameters: Colombia

Factor	Metric
National Identity	Yes
Government Legitimacy	Yes
Population Security	No → Yes
Existing Security Forces	Yes
External Sanctuary	No

Malaya

The Malayan Emergency is another notable case study that confirms the parameters identified in the research project. This 1950s conflict, in what was then the British colony of Malaya, is often cited as proof that counterinsurgency works if "done right." In fact, it does not. In the context of the identified political-military parameters of government success, all five elements necessary to defeat an internal rebellion were in place at the start of the conflict.

First, Malaya was a nation as defined by political science: at least 85 percent of the population identified itself as Malay—of the Malay ethnic group—which comprised and still comprises approximately 90 percent of the country's population.[44] The Malay speak a common language understood throughout the country and share a common culture. Significantly, during the 1950s conflict and subsequent outbreaks

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43.   Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE), *Población ajustada por cobertura - Censo Nacional de Población y Vivienda 2018* (Bogotá, Colombia: DANE, 2018).

44.   Dahbour, "National Identity."

of violence in Malaya since then, virtually all the rebels were ethnic Chinese, who comprise just 10 percent of the country's population. Not all ethnically Chinese citizens were rebels, but essentially all rebels were ethnically Chinese.

Furthermore, the Chinese minority, who faced economic discrimination and a permanent underclass status within the country, lived in an apartheid society in which they were clustered almost entirely in segregated villages and towns and did not usually venture into Malay settlements. Because the physiognomy of the two ethnic groups is quite distinct, this separation was relatively easy to enforce. As a result, the government secured more than 85 percent of the population—the 90 percent of the population which was Malay—and excluded anyone who might have been a guerilla from Malay areas. The ethnic Chinese rebels were easily spotted and detained in most of the country, and they could find little or no support or sympathy among the majority Malay population.

The British faced no problems with a host-country government, unlike the United States in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. For example, they could make any rules or laws they pleased, and they did not have to beg an intransigent president to make needed reforms. In addition, the British publicized they would return the country to the ethnic Malay majority as soon as the rebellion was quelled. This move incentivized the Malay people to work even harder to suppress a minority group they already disliked intensely and enabled the government to claim sufficient legitimacy to conduct the counter-rebellion with the support of at least 85 percent of the people.

The ethnic Chinese rebels were unable to gain meaningful external support or cross-border sanctuary, and British Malaya had well-disciplined and competent military and police forces sustained by the British government in London. Thus all five essential political-military factors permitting government success were in place at the start of the conflict and remained there until the conflict ended, which took many years to accomplish, even with every advantage favoring the British.

Table 6: Conflict parameters: Malaya

Factor	Metric
National Identity	Yes
Government Legitimacy	Yes
Population Security	Yes
Existing Security Forces	Yes
External Sanctuary	No

The eventual victory in Malaya had nothing to do with military skills or tactics peculiar to counterinsurgency or with specialized cultural knowledge the British possessed beyond the ability to discern the difference between the Malay and Chinese citizens of the colony. Instead, this victory had everything to do with national identity, population protection, legitimacy of governance, and the lack of

cross-border sanctuary for rebel soldiers in any significant numbers, all of which existed before the conflict started.

Conclusion

The most critical lessons drawn from Vietnam, Afghanistan, and other internal conflicts are: 1) in no case since 1945 has either a sense of national identity or the legitimacy of the central government increased during the conflict period, and 2) the levels of national identity, legitimacy of governance, and population security necessary to suppress an internal rebellion are all 85 percent or more. In the 53 conflicts meeting the study criteria for intensity and rebel goals and in which any of these parameters were not met, government mortality was close to 100 percent. Moreover, no instances were found in the 53 conflicts where counterinsurgency efforts to increase the legitimacy of or support for an existing government had such an effect. Because no increase in national identity or legitimacy of governance was found during the course of the conflict in any of the 53 case studies, their levels *at the onset of conflict* are determinant of outcomes. In other words, these factors predict the probability of government failure with a remarkable degree of accuracy.

In October 2001, when asked by a reporter if the United States could avoid Afghanistan becoming another quagmire like Vietnam, then President George W. Bush replied, "We learned some very important lessons in Vietnam."[45] Over the intervening 20 years, the political goals of the campaign, the military conduct of the conflict, and the implementation of the nation-building efforts of the war in Afghanistan have shown the United States did not learn the most important lessons. With the US Army now pivoting again from small wars to planning for near-peer conflict as it did after Vietnam, the true lessons of the wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan, and about counterinsurgency in general, are in danger of being lost once more.[46]

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45.   Nayanima Basu, "When Bush, Top US Officials Compared Afghan War to Vietnam War—a War America Lost," Print, December 11, 2019, https://theprint.in/world/when-bush -top-us-officials-compared-afghan-war-to-vietnam-war-a-war-america-lost/333657/.

46.   Michael T. Klare, "The US Military Is Preparing for a New War: After Years of a Fruitless War on Terror, the Pentagon Is Turning Its Focus to China and Russia," *Nation*, June 5, 2019, https://www .thenation.com/article/us-military-is-preparing-for-new-wars-china-russia/.