Air Education and Training Command

Develop America's Airmen Today ... for Tomorrow

Beating Goliath: Why Insurgents Win (and Lose)

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What do we mean by “strong”? 

The side with *preponderant material resources*—i.e., quantitative superiority in population, territory, industrial production, financial resources, & in conventional military power, especially firepower.

In short, the **BIGGER** side. The **heavyweight**.
What do we mean by “lose”?

Failure to achieve a war’s *political* objective(s)—which may not mean military defeat.

The United States was never *militarily* defeated in Vietnam, but nonetheless lost the war because it failed to achieve its declared *political objective*: the preservation of an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam.

In the Algerian War (1954-1962), the French *won* militarily but *lost* politically.
What do we mean by “insurgency”?

A rebellion against an indigenous government or a foreign occupier.
The stronger side usually wins

Clausewitz: “The best strategy is to be strong.”

Examples of stronger side victories:

American Civil War (1861-1865)
Spanish-American War (1898-1899)
World War I (1914-1918)
World War II (1939-1945)
Cold War (1947-1991)
Gulf War (1991)
But sometimes the weaker side wins

Examples of weaker side wins—all involving defeat of great powers:

- American War of Independence (1775-1783)
- The Peninsular War (1808-1814)
- French-Indochinese War (1946-1954)
- Vietnam War (1965-1975)
- Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989)
Why do Davids (insurgencies) beat Goliaths (great powers)?

Four explanations:


# 1. Stronger political will

- Greater stake in the fight leads to:
- Greater willingness to sacrifice, which in turn leads to:
  - Waging a **total** war against a foe for whom the war is **limited**.
  - (Insurgents also live in the theater of military operations, whereas their great power enemy often must project power into it.)
Asymmetry of Stakes: American War of Independence

- A total war for the American rebels, who staked their “lives, fortunes & sacred honor” on victory.
- A limited, distant, colonial war for the British, who could afford—and did—afford the loss of America.
- Effect of French intervention: transformation of a colonial rebellion into a world war & relegation the North American theater of operations to 3rd rank (behind Europe and the Caribbean).
Example: The Vietnam War
Military Dead / % of Total Population:

US: \[
\frac{58,000}{194,000,000} = 0.02\%
\]
VC: \[
\frac{1,100,000}{20,000,000} = 5.50\%
\]
(5.5\% of U.S. population today: \textbf{16,000,000+})

US Civil War: \[
\frac{600,000}{31,000,000} = 1.9\%
\]
French losses in World War I: \[
\frac{1,400,000}{42,000,000} = 3.4\%
\]
# 2. Better Strategy: Regular (Conventional) Warfare

- Direct approach.
- Firepower/technology reliant.
- Search for quick victory.
- Insensitive to war’s underlying political struggle.
- Focus on destroying the enemy’s **military capacity**.
Better Strategy: Irregular Warfare

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• Indirect approach.
• Stealthy.
• Protracted/attritional.
• Patient.
• Casualty tolerant.
• Focus on exhausting the enemy’s political will.
# 3. Great power regime type: exploiting democracies’ weaknesses

Modern democracies have limited domestic political tolerance for protracted, indecisive wars—and our enemies know it.

U.S. has been defeated only in wars against irregular adversaries: Vietnam, Lebanon, Somalia. (Iraq?)

Suicide bombing has been directed almost exclusively against democracies or quasi-democracies.

Our enemies—Ho, Saddam, Osama--have assumed we have no stomach for casualties.
# 4. Access to foreign assistance

- External help to the weaker side can reduce, even eliminate, material disparity in the theater of military operations.
- There are no modern examples of successful major insurgent wars unassisted by foreign help.
- The American rebels and Vietnamese Communists won only with foreign intervention; in contrast, the Confederates lost because they failed to attract foreign assistance.
Americans sought French help from the outset.

French Alliance of 1778 dramatically altered the military balance in North America & propelled Britain into a world war in which America became a secondary theater of operations.

The British were arguably the weaker side in North America by 1781.
What did the French provide?

- Financial credits (U.S. bankrupt by 1780).
- Arms, equipment, uniforms.
- Gunpowder (90% of the total consumed by American forces).
- Volunteer commanders (Lafayette).
- An expeditionary army (Rochambeau).
- A naval fleet (De Grasse) that protected the flow of supplies & men from France—& that made Yorktown possible.
- Spanish & Dutch intervention against Britain.
- A direct threat to Britain itself.
Order of battle at Yorktown

• British: 8,500 men/0 warships
• Americans: 9,000 men/0 warships
• French: 22,800 men/38 warships
The Rebellion’s
Strategic Transformation

• French Intervention:
  • Set the stage for Spanish & Dutch declarations of war against Britain.
  • Transformed a colonial insurgency into a world war
  • Relegated North America to a tertiary theater of operations for the British (behind Europe & the Caribbean.
  • Reduced the British to the weaker side in North America.
Vietnam War

• North Vietnam manufactured no military goods (except helmets).
• China, Soviet Union, & other Communist Bloc states supplied all of North Vietnam’s military hardware.
• Chinese & Soviets constructed & operated North Vietnam’s integrated AD system.
• 170,000 Chinese logistics troops operated & maintained North Vietnam’s RR system.
• An unarmed North Vietnam could have defeated neither the United States nor South Vietnam.
The Confederacy: Weaker side loses without foreign intervention.

Union had:
- 8:1 advantage in draftable (i.e., white) manpower
- 6:1 advantage in financial resources
- 6:1 advantage in industrial production
- 4:1 advantage in railroad track mileage
- Overwhelming maritime superiority

Confederacy had only two possible roads to victory:
1. a **strategy of guerrilla warfare** (never seriously considered), or
2. **foreign intervention** (withheld because of Antietam and Emancipation Proclamation).
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Does the Iraqi insurgency have what it takes to win?

- **Political Will**: Insurgency is a fractious coalition (rejectionists, Saddamists, Zarqawi jihadis) with a highly restricted political/terroritorial base. *It has no national appeal.*
- **Strategy**: Guerrilla warfare to drive U.S. out? Terrorism to provoke civil war? Desired end-state?
- **Great Power Regime Type**: Only real hope of success (Lebanon scenario).
- **External Assistance**: Indigenous weapons & munitions are plentiful; foreign jihadis no more than 10% of total insurgents; Iran working to expand influence in southern Iraq.
The Real Threat: Insurgent Takeover or National Disintegration?

- Iraq: a Middle Eastern Yugoslavia?
- Similarities:
  - Relatively new & highly artificial states cobbled together from collapsed empires.
  - Deep ethnic/sectarian divisions impeding a unifying & sustainable nationalism.
  - Subject to disintegration absent central political dictatorship (Tito in Yugoslavia & Saddam in Iraq).
  - The Yugoslav state collapsed in the 1990s; the Iraqi state collapsed in 2003—in a “catastrophic success.”
The Iraq War: Challenges for the U.S. Government

• Fostering establishment of a legitimate Iraqi government—i.e., one commanding support among all three major sectarian communities.

• Creating professionally competent Iraqi military & police forces capable of assuming primary responsibility for the counterinsurgent war.

• Sustaining domestic political support for “staying the course” in Iraq.
1. The stronger side usually wins; the best strategy, therefore, is to be strong.

2. Weaker side (insurgent) victories are exceptional, & almost always rest on some combination of stronger political will, superior strategy, and foreign help.

3. External assistance is a common enabler of victorious insurgent wars, though certainly no guarantee of success.
4. Modern democracies have limited political tolerance for overseas protracted wars against irregular enemies.

5. For the United States, the impact of casualties on political will is a function primarily of military action’s perceived costs, benefits, and chances of success.

6. The United States has become a victim of its conventional military success.