

Chapter Title: Considering the "Right" Cases: Identifying Relevant Subsamples

Book Title: Paths to Victory

Book Subtitle: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies

Book Author(s): Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill and Molly Dunigan

Published by: RAND Corporation. (2013)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt5hhtb4.11>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a RAND Corporation License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://www.rand.org/pubs/permissions.html>.



RAND Corporation is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Paths to Victory*

Considering the “Right” Cases: Identifying Relevant Subsamples

The goal of this research was to answer a range of questions about or related to the historical effectiveness of a variety of COIN concepts and associated practices. These are fundamentally *comparative* questions and are based on the assumption that the historical cases in which these different practices have been observed are comparable. Moreover, to make the results of such analyses of more than just historical interest, the historical cases must be comparable to likely future cases as well. This chapter argues that some of the 71 cases discussed in Chapter Two, while individually interesting, are *not* good comparisons with other historical cases and with likely future cases and thus should be excluded from comparative analysis. After identifying these suboptimal cases for comparative analysis and indicating which cases constitute the 59 core cases used for our core analysis, the chapter then turns to the identification of several subsets within the data—cases that are members of smaller populations of cases with shared features. These are the cases that followed each of the two main COIN paths (the cases involving “iron fist” COIN approaches and those pursuing motive-focused approaches) and cases involving an external actor committing forces on the COIN side. Those cases involving an external actor committing forces to support the COIN effort constitute a comparative group of particular interest to the U.S. Department of Defense, because the role of external actor in support of a COIN effort in another country is the most likely COIN-related role for U.S. forces in both the short- and long-term future.

Every Insurgency Is Unique . . . Or Is It?

One of the oft-repeated themes in the literature on COIN is that “every insurgency is unique” and, thus, every COIN campaign must be unique.¹ However, in *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers*, we found that the distinctiveness of insurgencies did not matter across the 30 cases analyzed in that original study, in that a relatively modest list of factors was able to perfectly discriminate the cases into wins and losses without making any recourse to distinctive features or narratives of exceptionality. This led to the conclusion there that “every insurgency may be unique, but not at this level of analysis,” noting that distinct features of cases may make it harder or easier to do the things that must be done in order to prevail but that these things remained constant across the cases studied.² Note that while we find that effective concepts and successful practices are consistent through history, the detailed case narratives show that the difficulty of implementing the recommended practices varied *greatly* from case to case. At this level of analysis, we identify what a COIN force must accomplish if it hopes to prevail; we do not offer advice about exactly how to do those things in any given context, nor do we note how difficult it will be to do those things in any given context.

¹ Each of the following documents contains the quotation “every insurgency is unique”: Joe Felter, “Taking Guns to a Knife Fight: An Empirical Study of Effective Counterinsurgency,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, Pa., August 31, 2006; John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2005; Sergio M. Giampietri and John H. Stone, Sr., *A Counterinsurgency Study: An Analysis of Local Defenses*, Monterey, Calif.: Naval Postgraduate School, September 2004; Raymond A. Millen, *Afghanistan: Reconstituting a Collapsed State*, Carlisle, Pa.: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, April 2005; Michael A. Norton, *Operational Leadership in Vietnam: General William Depuy vs. Lieutenant General Victor Krulak or Attrition Vice Pacification*, Newport, R.I.: Naval War College, May 19, 1997; Frank G. Hoffman, “Neo-Classical Counterinsurgency?” *Parameters*, Summer 2007; J. D. Harrill, *Phased Insurgency Theory: Ramadi*, Quantico, Va.: U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 2008; and Colin S. Gray, “Irregular Warfare: One Nature, Many Characters,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Winter 2007. Also see Appendix C.

² Paul, Clarke, and Grill, 2010a, p. 88.

Eliminating Poor Comparisons and Getting to the 59 Core Cases

With the broader data set considered here relative to the original *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers* research, we faced the possibility that cases would have such distinctive characteristics or narratives as to not be comparable with other cases. In fact, preliminary explorations of the case data revealed several instances in which the COIN force had followed many of the COIN practices endorsed in *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers* yet still managed to lose to the insurgents. The case narratives confirmed the validity of this observation but also revealed something else, something distinctive yet common to all of these peculiar cases: They were all “fought against the tide of history”—that is, against the trends of very strong global social and political forces. Specifically, they represented either the end of the colonial era or the end of apartheid. (Each case fought against the tide of history is so noted in the case summaries in Chapter Two.) What appeared at first to be something unique in each of several cases in fact turned out to be a whole category of exceptional cases. Rather than caveating every good COIN practice identified as “effective, except when fighting against the tide of history” throughout this report, we elected to exclude such cases from all core analyses.

We concluded that cases fought against the tide of history are apples to oranges with the typical COIN cases, the ones we wish to learn lessons from. To eliminate the unwelcome distinctiveness of otherwise “good” COIN practices failing to stem the tide of history, we added a factor to the factor list, “Case fought against the tide of history.” (See Appendix E for a full list of all factors and factor numbers.) Every case that was fought against the tide of history (either the end of colonialism or the end of apartheid) in its decisive phase was flagged for removal from the set of core cases. This made the most sense analytically and allowed for a more robust set of findings. The “tide of history” cases are listed in Table 3.1. Note that fighting against the tide of history is only surely observable as an *ex post facto* judgment. One is by no means guaranteed to be able to recognize fighting against the

Table 3.1
List of Cases Fought Against the Tide of History

Case	Date Span
UK in Palestine	1944–1947
Indochina	1946–1955
Kenya	1952–1956
Algerian Independence	1954–1962
Cyprus	1955–1959
Namibia	1960–1989
South Africa	1960–1990
Angolan Independence	1961–1974
Guinea-Bissau	1962–1974
Mozambique Independence	1962–1974
Zimbabwe/Rhodesia	1965–1980

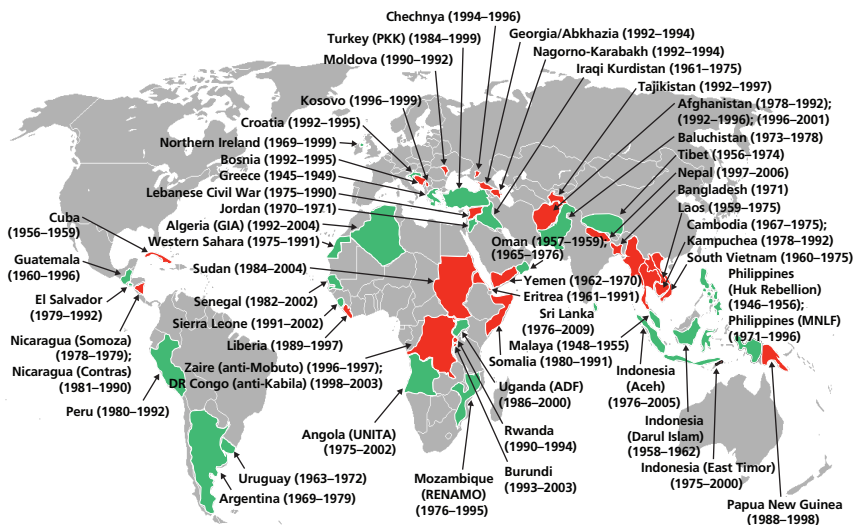
tide of history in the moment; it is only through repeated failures that such a tide is revealed.

The observant reader will notice that Kenya is included on the list and that Kenya was reported in the previous chapter as a COIN win. This might lead one to ask, “If you can win when fighting against the tide of history, then how strong is that tide, really?” Be reassured that, while the British did manage to suppress the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya, they also granted Kenya its independence just a few years later. The tide of history remains, appropriately, inexorable.

The even more astute reader may note that Malaya (1948–1955) is *not* listed as a tide of history case, though it clearly began as an anti-colonial insurgency. In fact, we did score the first phase of Malaya as fought against the tide of history, but the later phases (and, critically, the decisive phase) were not scored as such because the British had taken steps to transition power and authority to an indigenous government. Although they continued to help fight the insurgency in support of that new government, by the end of the conflict, the British no longer fought to retain colonial control.

With the class of cases fought against the tide of history flagged for removal from core analyses, we identified a single additional possibly distinctive case. In fact, it might well be argued that this last case of concern is also a member of a distinctive class that should be excluded from the analyses, though this argument might be weakened by the fact that there is but a single case in that class. The class in question denotes cases whose outcomes were so mixed, so close to the razor's edge of clarity on whether the outcome favored the insurgents or the government, that including it adds little information about what is or is not effective COIN practice. The case we ultimately decided belongs to this class (and, ultimately, excluded from the analysis) is La Violencia in Colombia (1948–1958). A detailed discussion of the grounds on which La Violencia was excluded can be found in Appendix A. This final exclusion left us with 59 cases, hereafter referred to as the 59 core cases, which formed the analytic foundation for the core analyses that follow. The 59 core cases are depicted in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1
Map of the 59 Core Cases



NOTE: Green shading indicates that the COIN force prevailed (or had the better of a mixed outcome), while red shading indicates that the outcome favored the insurgent (thus, a COIN loss).

RAND RR2911/1-3.1

Iron Fist and Motive-Focused Subpopulations

Within the 59 core cases, we further identified several subpopulations of particular comparative interest. In Chapter One, we identified two paths taken by the COIN forces in these historical cases. The first was the “iron fist” path, cases in which with the main efforts of the COIN forces were kinetic actions against an active insurgency. The second was the motive-focused path, in which the focus was on reducing the motives for supporting or participating in the insurgency—notably, sometimes with a substantial balance between motive focus and kinetic action against the insurgents. Seeing these two paths, and mindful of contemporary debate on COIN in which the merits of much more kinetic concepts are discussed, we wanted to identify cases representing each of these paths to see whether there were any differences in the correlates of success. Table 3.2 lists the 59 core cases and distinguishes them as either primarily motive-focused or primarily iron fist in the decisive phase of each case.

Table 3.2
Countries, Date Spans, and COIN Paths of the 59 Core Case Studies in the Decisive Phase of Each Case

Country (Insurgency)	Years	COIN Path	Outcome
Greece	1945–1949	Iron fist	COIN win
Philippines (Huk Rebellion)	1946–1956	Motive-focused	COIN win
Malaya	1948–1955	Motive-focused	COIN win
Cuba	1956–1959	Iron fist	COIN loss
Oman (Imamate Uprising)	1957–1959	Iron fist	COIN win
Indonesia (Darul Islam)	1958–1962	Motive-focused	COIN win
Tibet	1956–1974	Iron fist	COIN win
Guatemala	1960–1996	Iron fist	COIN win
Laos	1959–1975	Motive-focused	COIN loss
South Vietnam	1960–1975	Iron fist	COIN loss
Eritrea	1961–1991	Iron fist	COIN loss
Iraqi Kurdistan	1961–1975	Iron fist	COIN win
Yemen	1962–1970	Iron fist	COIN loss

Table 3.2—Continued

Country (Insurgency)	Years	COIN Path	Outcome
Uruguay	1963–1972	Iron fist	COIN win
Oman (Dhofar Rebellion)	1965–1975	Motive-focused	COIN win
Argentina	1969–1979	Iron fist	COIN win
Cambodia	1967–1975	Iron fist	COIN loss
Northern Ireland	1969–1999	Iron fist	COIN win
Jordan	1970–1971	Iron fist	COIN win
Bangladesh	1971	Iron fist	COIN loss
Philippines (MNLF)	1971–1996	Motive-focused	COIN win
Baluchistan	1973–1978	Iron fist	COIN win
Angola (UNITA)	1975–2002	Iron fist	COIN win
Indonesia (East Timor)	1975–2000	Iron fist	COIN loss
Lebanese Civil War	1975–1990	Iron fist	COIN loss
Western Sahara	1975–1991	Iron fist	COIN win
Indonesia (Aceh)	1976–2005	Iron fist	COIN win
Mozambique (RENAMO)	1976–1995	Iron fist	COIN win
Sri Lanka	1976–2009	Iron fist	COIN win
Nicaragua (Somoza)	1978–1979	Iron fist	COIN loss
Afghanistan (anti-Soviet)	1978–1992	Iron fist	COIN loss
Kampuchea	1978–1992	Motive-focused	COIN loss
El Salvador	1979–1992	Motive-focused	COIN win
Somalia	1980–1991	Iron fist	COIN loss
Peru	1980–1992	Motive-focused	COIN win
Nicaragua (Contras)	1981–1990	Iron fist	COIN loss
Senegal	1982–2002	Motive-focused	COIN win
Turkey (PKK)	1984–1999	Iron fist	COIN win
Sudan (SPLA)	1984–2004	Iron fist	COIN loss
Uganda (ADF)	1986–2000	Motive-focused	COIN win
Papua New Guinea	1988–1998	Motive-focused	COIN loss
Liberia	1989–1997	Iron fist	COIN loss
Rwanda	1990–1994	Iron fist	COIN loss
Moldova	1990–1992	Iron fist	COIN loss

Table 3.2—Continued

Country (Insurgency)	Years	COIN Path	Outcome
Sierra Leone	1991–2002	Motive-focused	COIN win
Algeria (GIA)	1992–2004	Motive-focused	COIN win
Croatia	1992–1995	Iron fist	COIN win
Afghanistan (post-Soviet)	1992–1996	Iron fist	COIN loss
Tajikistan	1992–1997	Motive-focused	COIN loss
Georgia/Abkhazia	1992–1994	Iron fist	COIN loss
Nagorno-Karabakh	1992–1994	Iron fist	COIN loss
Bosnia	1992–1995	Iron fist	COIN loss
Burundi	1993–2003	Iron fist	COIN loss
Chechnya I	1994–1996	Iron fist	COIN loss
Afghanistan (Taliban)	1996–2001	Iron fist	COIN loss
Zaire (anti-Mobutu)	1996–1997	Iron fist	COIN loss
Kosovo	1996–1999	Iron fist	COIN loss
Nepal	1997–2006	Iron fist	COIN loss
Democratic Republic of the Congo (anti-Kabila)	1998–2003	Iron fist	COIN loss

External COIN Actor Subpopulations

The other group of cases that we separated out as constituting one or more subpopulations were those with external supporters on the COIN side. We scored a number of factors related to external support for each phase of each case (see Appendix E). Because so many COIN forces received external support in the form of funding or materiel at some point during the case as to render the presence or absence of such support a meaningless distinction, we chose to focus on the commitment of military force by major powers. Further exploration of the cases revealed two distinct levels of external force commitment: (1) those that were restricted to advisers, special operations forces (SOF), and air power and (2) those that involved a substantial commitment of conventional ground forces, up to and including being the primary COIN force. These are not mutually exclusive categories,

nor are they meant to be; advisers or trainers, special operators, and air power commitments usually accompanied external commitments of significant conventional ground forces. A case was considered to involve external force contributions limited to advisers, SOF, and/or air power if such forces were present in any phase in the conflict and if in no phase did the external contribution include significant ground forces. A case was considered to involve external ground troops if in any phase an external actor provided significant ground combat forces. Table 3.3 lists the 28 cases (from the 59 core cases) that involved major powers as external force contributors and also indicates which were limited to advisers, SOF, and air power and which were full ground troop commitments.

Table 3.3
Countries, Date Spans, and Maximum Levels of Involvement for External Actor-Supported Counterinsurgencies

Country (Insurgency)	Years	Maximum Level of External Force Contribution to COIN	Outcome
Greece	1945–1949	Ground troops	COIN win
Philippines (Huk Rebellion)	1946–1956	Advisers, SOF, and/or air power	COIN win
Malaya	1948–1955	Ground troops	COIN win
Oman (Imamate Uprising)	1957–1959	Ground troops	COIN win
Tibet	1956–1974	Ground troops	COIN win
Guatemala	1960–1996	Advisers, SOF, and/or air power	COIN win
Laos	1959–1975	Advisers, SOF, and/or air power	COIN loss
South Vietnam	1960–1975	Ground troops	COIN loss
Eritrea	1961–1991	Advisers, SOF, and/or air power	COIN loss
Yemen	1962–1970	Ground troops	COIN loss
Oman (Dhofar Rebellion)	1965–1975	Advisers, SOF, and/or air power	COIN win
Cambodia	1967–1975	Advisers, SOF, and/or air power	COIN loss
Angola (UNITA)	1975–2002	Ground troops	COIN win

Table 3.3—Continued

Country (Insurgency)	Years	Maximum Level of External Force Contribution to COIN	Outcome
Lebanese Civil War	1975–1990	Ground troops	COIN loss
Western Sahara	1975–1991	Advisers, SOF, and/or air power	COIN win
Mozambique (RENAMO)	1976–1995	Advisers, SOF, and/or air power	COIN win
Sri Lanka	1976–2009	Ground troops	COIN win
Nicaragua (Somoza)	1978–1979	Advisers, SOF, and/or air power	COIN loss
Afghanistan (anti-Soviet)	1978–1992	Ground troops	COIN loss
Kampuchea	1978–1992	Ground troops	COIN loss
El Salvador	1979–1992	Advisers, SOF, and/or air power	COIN win
Liberia	1989–1997	Ground troops	COIN loss
Rwanda	1990–1994	Ground troops	COIN loss
Sierra Leone	1991–2002	Ground troops	COIN win
Croatia	1992–1995	Advisers, SOF, and/or air power	COIN win
Tajikistan	1992–1997	Ground troops	COIN loss
Nagorno-Karabakh	1992–1994	Advisers, SOF, and/or air power	COIN loss
Bosnia	1992–1995	Advisers, SOF, and/or air power	COIN loss

Some Preliminary Observations About the Subpopulations

In the full data, history favors the insurgents, and they won (or had the better of a mixed outcome) in 42 of 71 cases (roughly 60 percent of the time). Because of the number of cases and the mixed signals provided by the cases that were fought against the tide of history, no single factor or stack of factors representing a COIN concept (see the next chapter) perfectly discriminates all 71 cases into wins or losses. However, there are a few facts that cut across all the cases, regardless of

the various class exceptions. First, every winning COIN force was able to force the insurgents to fight as guerrillas (or win the preponderance of conventional engagements) in the decisive phase (see Appendix E). Second, every winning COIN force was able to reduce at least three of ten factors related to the tangible support of the insurgents in the decisive phase (details in Chapter Four). Third, every government that did not have at least four commitment and motivation factors in the decisive phase, lost (again, details Chapter Four). Fourth, every COIN force that failed to adapt to adversary strategic or tactical changes in the decisive phase, lost. These results hold across all subpopulations, because they hold across all cases, even those that are generally poor comparisons for the reasons discussed earlier.

Turning to the subpopulations provides an even finer level of granularity. Just considering the win/loss ratio for cases in each subpopulation is revealing. Among the 59 core cases, the insurgents prevailed in 31 (53 percent). This is understandably lower than the full data set proportion, as the largest excluded class was cases fought against the tide of history, predominantly a losing proposition for the counterinsurgents.

Among the 44 iron fist cases, the insurgents prevailed in fully 27 of them (just over 61 percent). In the 15 motive-focused cases, on the other hand, only four were COIN losses (27 percent). This clearly shows, without any further analysis, that while both paths *can* lead to victory, in actual practice the motive-focused path leads to victory more often. The iron fist path leads to victory well less than two-fifths of the time, while the motive-focused path leads there solidly more than two-thirds of the time.

Considering the 28 cases that involved forces from a major external power intervening on behalf of the government, 14 (50 percent) were COIN losses. For those contemplating intervening to support a government, this is good news; the rate of failure for externally supported governments is slightly lower than the base rate in the 59 core cases (53 percent), demonstrating that, by itself, being an external actor does not automatically doom one's COIN campaign to failure. Looking at the rate in the two subclasses of external supporters, COIN forces that received only advisers, SOF, and/or air power lost six of

13 cases (46 percent), while those that received significant external ground forces lost eight of 15 cases (53 percent). Given the relatively small number of cases in these subpopulations, these are not significant differences. Again, good news for the would-be external supporter: The outcomes of cases involving external COIN supporters are determined by factors other than the presence of an external supporter!

With the class exemptions now identified for removal and the subpopulations of interest defined, the report now proceeds to the core analyses, seeking answers to all project questions first for the core data, the 59 core cases. The subpopulations receive more detailed treatment in Chapter Six.