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## CHAPTER 11

### EL SALVADOR, IRAQ, AND STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR COUNTERINSURGENCY

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Insurgency: The organized use of subversion and violence by a group or movement that seeks to overthrow or force change of a governing authority.

— Joint Publication 1-02<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Insurgency as a form of war is not new. Colonial freedom fighters in this country utilized it. Napoleon's adversaries employed it. The Zionist movement used it. It was evident in Algeria in the 1950s, Vietnam in the 1960s, Afghanistan in the 1980s, and countless other examples. In the 20th century alone, Vietnam was the 48th small war fought somewhere in the world. Since the end of the Cold War, insurgencies have proliferated—not the least of which is Iraq.<sup>2</sup> Why has insurgency endured for centuries? What makes it so popular in this age? With so much experience to draw from, why does it remain difficult for governments to counter, or even prevent, an insurgency? One possible explanation of the persistence of insurgency is its ability to undermine an existing government. For democratic forms of government, this is particularly challenging because the power of the government is derived from the very same civil population that an insurgent cause seeks to influence.

The U.S. Government, and particularly the U.S. military, faced its largest insurgent challenge in Vietnam, where over the course of a decade a number of lessons emerged at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Arguably, the most important lesson of the Vietnam War for the U.S. military was you can win the majority of the battles but still lose the war. In other words, and with due deference to the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, without an enduring, definitive link between the political objectives and the military effort, victory is not certain.<sup>3</sup> That lesson seemed destined to be relearned in Iraq with the emergence of an insurgency following the U.S.-led invasion that dethroned Saddam Hussein in 2003. A great question loomed: Do democracies have the ability to defeat insurgencies?

Historically, examples of the defeat of insurgencies exist, such as the British in Malaya. Extensive research has been invested in examining the political and military policies, strategies, tactics, and techniques applied by the antagonists in both successful and unsuccessful insurgencies. No single case, however, can be utilized without first understanding its full context—political, social, and military. For example, Bernard Fall offered that using Malaya as an example for future counterinsurgent efforts was unworkable. In his opinion, credit is infrequently given to the opposition for its mistakes,

and when the communist insurgents in Malaya decided to confront the British in a straight forward military operation they, predictably, failed.<sup>4</sup> However, a greater insight is that the adaptive nature of insurgency has made its defeat illusive and difficult to codify. The adaptability of insurgencies is perhaps the most important reason democracies have not been properly prepared to fight them, and why this method of warfare has grown in popularity in the emerging global world order.

In the spring of 2005, it was rumored that the U.S. administration was considering pursuing a strategy for Iraq called the Salvadoran option, referring to U.S. involvement in Central America in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> When then Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld was asked at a news conference about the utility of using El Salvador as a model for countering the insurgency in Iraq, he stopped short of categorically denying it and declined any further comment.<sup>6</sup> While El Salvador is perhaps one of the least studied insurgencies, its study offers a unique and valuable perspective for successfully countering insurgency. It is considered a successful modern counterinsurgency effort by many, and it offers a number of strategic insights for the policymaker and the military strategist. Both the U.S. and Salvadorian experiences with counterinsurgency and regime change in El Salvador during the 1980s is prescient of the 21st century challenges confronting democracies around the world. However, understanding the specific context for El Salvador is critically important before its insights can be generalized and applied in another counterinsurgent effort.

This chapter examines the strategic environments that confronted El Salvador and the United States and the role that U.S. interests played in El Salvador's war. The seven dimensions of the Manwaring paradigm, or Small Wars Operations Research Directorate (SWORD) model, are introduced and used as the backdrop for analysis of the U.S. involvement in El Salvador from a strategic perspective.<sup>7</sup> In the course of doing so, legitimacy, unity of effort, and time emerge as the most critical dimensions of modern insurgency. In turn, these critical dimensions specifically suggest conclusions about the relevance of the El Salvador counterinsurgency to that of Iraq, and to counterinsurgency in general.

## EL SALVADOR BACKGROUND

El Salvador declared its independence from Spain in 1821, as did most of Central America. Despite participation in a short-lived federation of Central American states, El Salvador endured a number of wars with its Central American neighbors and several revolutions of its own. For the first 70 years of the 20th century, military dictatorships governed El Salvador and a ruling elite of right wing military officers and landed oligarchy emerged. Beginning in the 1970s, however, international trade and the creation of a regional market spurred significant economic growth in El Salvador. Ultimately the oligarchy pursued their own economic interests at the expense of the majority who were peasant farmers, as international demand for El Salvadoran goods, particularly coffee, grew.<sup>8</sup> Discontent among the El Salvadoran population increased as societal inequality and economic disparity widened. For example, landless peasants increased from 12 percent in 1960 to 40 percent in 1975.<sup>9</sup> The growing inequities and unrest created tensions among and within the oligarchy, military, and Church.

Beginning in 1960s, a civil war ensued between the government, run by the right-wing National Conciliation Party (PCN), and a number of left-wing anti-government guerrilla factions, represented most notably by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). The FMLN and others conducted attacks on bridges, electricity supplies, and irrigation systems, and even temporarily occupied towns.<sup>10</sup> By the late 1970s, consistent political, economic, and social problems created enough unrest in El Salvador that in 1979 a military coup ousted the country's ruler, General Carlos Humberto Romero, and then the more moderate and centralist Jose Napoleon Duarte soon assumed a provisional presidency. The decade following the coup was volatile as the El Salvadoran government and military, with U.S. economic and military assistance, countered a growing insurgency. The El Salvadoran government, the insurgents, and the United States were ill-prepared for the disorder that arose from 50 years of authoritarian rule.<sup>11</sup>

President Duarte was immediately challenged by the need to bring to justice right-wing death squads that were responsible for the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero in March 1980 and three American nuns later that year.<sup>12</sup> Even with U.S. support of the El Salvadoran government, an estimated 30,000 people were killed by right-wing death squads backed by the military. President Duarte suffered the political consequences of failing to gain control over the death-squads and was defeated in an election in March 1982. Two years later, in an election that turned out 80 percent of the El Salvadoran voting population, he was elected as President, and initiated negotiations with the FMLN that led to a peace agreement 8 years later. By that time, however, an estimated 75,000 people had been killed in El Salvador as a result of violence between the government and insurgents.<sup>13</sup>

From 1980-92, the U.S. Government funded extensive political and social reforms in El Salvador to help undermine the revolutionary insurgency. The left-leaning orientation of the FMLN, supported by Cuba and combined with tacit Soviet Union support of guerrilla forces in neighboring Nicaragua, led the United States to also provide extensive military aid and training to counter communist influence in the conflict. These U.S. efforts had effects at many levels within El Salvador. Most importantly, at the strategic level they had a significantly positive effect on the ability of the El Salvadoran government to pursue long-term stability and security. Eventually, El Salvador established an enduring democratic government and inclusive economic growth, which has led some to conclude that the U.S. strategy to counter the insurgency in El Salvador should be a model for other efforts, particularly in Iraq.

## U.S. INTERESTS IN EL SALVADOR

President James Monroe's proclamation of 1823 disparaging European intervention and colonialism in the Western Hemisphere, subsequently known as the Monroe Doctrine, was the long-standing measure for evaluating U.S. national interests in Central America. The known presence of Soviet missiles in the hemisphere created the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, and no Soviet missiles in Cuba became a vital national interest. The notion of another communist incursion into America's backyard was unpalatable to U.S. policymakers, and the ongoing violence in El Salvador and the Nicaraguan revolution seemed to indicate outside intervention. With the Cold War looming large in the minds

of many within the administration of President Jimmy Carter, the outcome of the 1979 El Salvadoran coup was interpreted as an opportunity to support a moderate, centrist government.<sup>14</sup> The vital interest of American continents free of Soviet influence would be well served.

The inauguration of President Ronald Reagan in January 1981 brought even greater emphasis on defeating the Soviet Union, and in particular the spread of communism around the world. In Central America, U.S. aid to El Salvador increased throughout President Reagan's two terms in office. For example, monetary aid went from \$264.2 million in fiscal year 1982 to \$557.8 million in fiscal year 1987.<sup>15</sup> The United States also provided military support teams to assist in training and advising the El Salvadoran armed forces, but the lack of U.S. domestic support at the time precluded the introduction of U.S. combat troops on any large scale.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately a democratically governed El Salvador prevailed but at great human cost. United Nations (UN) involvement in negotiating an enduring agreement between the government and the FMLN played a significant role in helping end the armed struggle, but the dissolution of the Soviet Union played an even larger part in minimizing the international influence of communism, eliminating outside support, and assuaging U.S. concerns over Soviet influence.

## THE SWORD MODEL

In 1984, then Vice Chief of Staff of the Army General Maxwell Thurman, a veteran of the Vietnam War, recognized the challenge of ongoing U.S. involvement in the insurgency in El Salvador and sought to avoid repeating the quandary that Vietnam had presented the military.<sup>17</sup> General Thurman commissioned the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College to study the strategic and doctrinal issues associated with U.S. involvement in insurgencies. In response, Dr. Max G. Manwaring developed two studies that analyzed 69 small wars, virtually all which had occurred since World War II.<sup>18</sup> The studies identified 72 variables that were ultimately whittled down to seven dimensions of insurgency. Dr. Manwaring moved to the SWORD of U.S. Southern Command, and the results of his studies were published as the SWORD model, or Manwaring paradigm, in 1992.<sup>19</sup>

The model identified legitimacy, unity of effort, information/intelligence, isolation, actions of intervening power, indigenous military capabilities, and external military support as the dimensions common to, and influential in, every insurgent conflict. These seven dimensions are strategic-level variables that predicted the outcome of the studied insurgent conflicts with a 90 percent accuracy rate.<sup>20</sup> This research suggests that despite the unique context of every insurgent conflict or irregular war, specific consideration, evaluation, and management of these variables in the development and implementation of the ends-ways-means of strategy are most likely to resolve conflict in a politically effective manner.

The lasting value of Dr. Manwaring's research is evident in the U.S. Army and Marine Corps *Field Manual (FM) 3-4 (MCWP 3-33.5), Counterinsurgency*. It reinforces Dr. Manwaring's assessment of the myriad factors in insurgent warfare that make it so complex. The preeminence of legitimacy and unity of effort in countering insurgency is demonstrated by dedicating much of the first two chapters to discussing them. Of equal



importance is the element of time. FM 3-24 acknowledges the relative and contextual nature of time in operational planning, but it is equally applicable to policy and strategy.<sup>21</sup> The advantage one side can generate against another in insurgency is often relative. In other words, it is a matter of comparison at a given moment in time in a given context. The moment of advantage may be short-lived, or it may persist. In either case, awareness of the temporal dimension of insurgency must be considered at every level of the conflict.

Dr. Manwaring argues that every element of the SWORD model plays an important part in the analysis of an insurgency.<sup>22</sup> He is entirely correct in his conclusion, however, for the policymaker and military strategist consideration of *legitimacy* and *unity of effort* over the course of *time* is most prescient. The strategic primacy of legitimacy, unity of effort, and time is evident in El Salvador's struggle to defeat its insurgency in the 1980s, and the Salvadoran struggle makes obvious the significance of these three variables for the counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq.

## THE MODEL APPLIED

### Legitimacy.

In [Peace Operations] PO, legitimacy is perceived by interested audiences as the legality, morality, or fairness of a set of actions. Such audiences may include the U.S. public, foreign nations, civil populations in the operational area, and the participating forces. If a PO is perceived as legitimate by both the citizens of the nations contributing the forces and the citizens of the country being entered, the PO will have a better chance of long-term success. . . . The perception of legitimacy by the U.S. public is strengthened if there are obvious national or humanitarian interests at stake. Another aspect of this principle is the legitimacy bestowed upon a local government through the perception of the populace that it governs.<sup>23</sup>

The single most important dimension in the development of counterinsurgency strategy is legitimacy. In fact, U.S. joint military doctrine for military operations other than war (MOOTW) published in 1995 declared, "legitimacy is frequently a decisive element."<sup>24</sup> Within the SWORD model, legitimacy is defined as the moral right to govern.<sup>25</sup> It is, in essence, an unwritten contract between the governing establishment and those it governs based on confidence that the governing body will engage in activities that are in the best interests of the governed. At a minimum, these activities include security, economic, and key social aspects of legitimacy. Ultimately those subject to the actions of a governing body must believe that governing actions are taken in their collective best interest in order for the government to maintain legitimacy. If the interests and needs of the governed are not met or there is a perception that they cannot be sustained, then legitimacy begins to erode and political vulnerabilities are exposed.

Political power is the central issue in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies, as each side strives to get the people to accept its authority to govern as legitimate. Nation-states whose governments have achieved legitimacy are relatively invulnerable to destabilizing actions whether internal or external.<sup>26</sup> For example, the constitutional monarchy of the United Kingdom (UK) has reigned for centuries and endured many challenges to its authority from domestic challengers and international enemies. Because of its legitimacy

in the eyes of the governed, the times that have tested the monarchy the most have often been those that have unified it the best as was evident in World War II. Hence, quite often the strategic center of gravity in insurgency warfare is legitimacy, which is perception-based and typically expressed through public opinion. El Salvador is an example of the preeminence of legitimacy as a dimension against subversion in any war.

A slow start on the part of the government and armed forces of El Salvador in implementing social and economic reforms following the 1979 coup created opportunities for opposition groups.<sup>27</sup> The FMLN, in concert with other left-wing elements, countered with popular promises to build the working class and redistribute wealth.<sup>28</sup> El Salvador's President Jose Napoleon Duarte intuitively recognized the political significance of the emerging discontent and implemented the changes necessary to surpass the promises of the FMLN and deliver results in a more timely manner.<sup>29</sup>

The promulgation of relatively effective reforms such as holding elections, developing a bureaucratic capability to promote economic growth, particularly in the agriculture industry, and demonstrating the ability to widely distribute commercial and financial resources to the society as a whole went a long way toward reinforcing the legitimacy of the Duarte government. The reforms were not perfect or all-encompassing, but they were tangible and more effective than anything the opposition could produce, which resulted in a perception among the people that the government was making concerted efforts to enact changes for the collective good.

### **Unity of Effort.**

Unity of effort emphasizes the need for ensuring that all means are directed to a common purpose. In [Peace Operations] PO, achieving unity of effort is often complicated by a variety of international, foreign, and domestic military and nonmilitary participants, the lack of definitive command arrangements, and varying views of the objective.<sup>30</sup>

Unity of effort is advocated throughout U.S. joint military doctrine and has made its way into the U.S. Government's interagency discussions and publications. For example, the October 2007 U.S. Department of State's *Counterinsurgency for U.S. Government Policy Makers: A Work in Progress* emphasizes the "complementarity of purpose and unity of effort required for interagency and international counterinsurgency operations."<sup>31</sup> The importance of unity of effort in counterinsurgency is monolithic because of the myriad of government and interest groups that vie for both influence and legitimacy. David J. Kilcullen coined the term "conflict ecosystem" in reference to the many participants in an insurgency and the resultant counterinsurgency efforts.<sup>32</sup> As illustrated in Figure 1, the conflict ecosystem is a complex system of legitimate and recognized government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as well as the insurgents and a number of less obvious and often illegal actors. The following graphic depicts the complexity of gaining and maintaining unity of effort in this environment.



**Figure 1. Kilcullen's Conflict Ecosystem.**<sup>33</sup>

The SWORD model defines unity of effort as “the necessary organization to coordinate and implement an effective unity of political-diplomatic, socio-economic, psychological-moral, and security-stability effort against those who would destroy the government.”<sup>34</sup> It is the act of centering all efforts on the ultimate political objective of survival, with particular emphasis on legitimacy. To achieve effectiveness against an enemy whose objective is to undermine the legitimacy and authority of the government, the efforts of all elements of power, at every level, must be unified in order to survive. In other words, strategic clarity is mandatory for unity of effort.<sup>35</sup> In particular, links between political and diplomatic efforts, sociological and economic factors, and security and stability efforts must be formalized to the maximum extent possible and reinforced regularly. Historical examples abound of the plight of nations unable to establish unity throughout their effort, from Hannibal's defeat of the Romans in the Battle of Cannae in 216 BC, to the British defeat in the American Revolutionary War. Unity of effort is simple in theory but difficult in practice.

Whatever relationship is established between the myriad elements involved in a counterinsurgent effort, all aspects of establishing unity of effort must be managed both vertically and horizontally. Vertical unity refers to establishment of unity of effort among the government's and insurgents' own organizational structures. Horizontal unity refers to the unity of effort established among the government or insurgents with external actors. The complexity of establishing and maintaining vertical and horizontal unity of effort is daunting for any government given the many additional NGOs and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) that participate in a mature conflict ecosystem.



Building unity of effort in El Salvador was a continuous work in progress, and even when the UN brokered a peace agreement, unity of effort was a relative term. The government of El Salvador had merely done a better job of achieving unity than had the FMLN. Both sides organized to the extent necessary for survival, and perhaps even moderate success, but not to the degree required to win.<sup>36</sup> Thomas Pickering, U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador from 1983 to 1985, said:

We had neither the doctrine nor the support, nor the coordination in the United States government that would really be required to deal effectively with that kind of operation. I don't think we ever developed it; we still are kind of ad hoc in our way of viewing the problems. That is really quite a critical comment.<sup>37</sup>

The El Salvadoran government, like the insurgents, was debilitated by discord among their subordinate political and military organizations. In the early 1980s, the vertical unity of the El Salvadoran government was inhibited by strife between the extreme-right and more centrist politicians.<sup>38</sup> The rift led to contradictory policies and insubordinate actions and was substantial enough that it resulted in the murder of politicians on both sides.<sup>39</sup> This lack of unity, and its resultant violence, undermined governmental legitimacy benefiting the insurgent position. The insurgents, however, had misgivings within their own effort about their objectives, let alone the best ways for achieving them. The former El Salvadoran insurgent Marco Antonio Grande lamented, "The Salvadoran problem was seen by the left as a problem of class struggle and a seizure of power, not as a problem of how to democratize the system."<sup>40</sup> As a result of such varying views on the ends for the insurgent effort, the FMLN was ultimately unable to consolidate the necessary effort to sufficiently exploit the El Salvadoran government's weaknesses and, as a result, slowly lost its own legitimacy.

A second example highlights the horizontal aspect of unity of effort. The United States, through its military support teams, encouraged the Salvadoran armed forces to grow into an image of their U.S. counterparts.<sup>41</sup> The result was a formidable military force most comfortable in conventional, battalion-size operations ill-suited for the sustained counterinsurgency operations required. Such a mirror imaging approach to developing the Salvadoran armed forces inhibited their effectiveness and confidence. Not only did it demonstrate the absence of a clear understanding of the dynamics of the insurgency at the time by the U.S. military, it was also a manifestation of lagging horizontal unity of effort between the United States and El Salvador. As a result, the success of the El Salvadoran Army in countering the insurgency was largely an extension of President Duarte's other strategic initiatives and assistance.<sup>42</sup>

## **Time.**

Of all the many dimensions of strategy, time is the most intractable. Compensation for deficiencies elsewhere and correction of errors are usually possible. But time lost is irrecoverable. The Western theory of war pays too little attention to war's temporal dimension.<sup>43</sup>

The dimension of time is perhaps the least analyzed of the elements of strategy formulation, yet its impact is wide and profound. Mistakes are made and corrections are applied in any conflict, but the time expended in the course of so doing affords the opposition the opportunity to utilize time with greater effect. In the absence of more tangible assets at their disposal, time is a weapon that insurgencies covet and use calculatingly.

Mao Tse-Tung recognized time as a strategic consideration as exemplified in his advocacy for protracted struggle. For example, he acknowledged the effect time had on the logistics and morale of the Japanese force that occupied China and mandated, "energies must be directed toward the goal of protracted war so that should the Japanese occupy much of our territory or even most of it, we shall still gain final victory."<sup>44</sup> History has demonstrated that an insurgent cause can prevail if it is able to outwait its opponent while making progress in the legitimacy dimension. The insurgencies in Algeria and Vietnam are two 20th century examples of the value of strategic patience. They also demonstrate the inherently slow pace of counterinsurgency operations, a fact that has bedeviled democratic governments and Western culture.

El Salvador's struggle against insurgency, like so many others, illustrates the strategic importance of time. Even in the most restrictive of timelines, the organized insurgent effort in El Salvador lasted from 1980-92, and it concluded only after years of the government and the FMLN negotiating through a variety of intermediaries and venues. During those 12 years, a strategic-level competition for domestic and international legitimacy existed. For example, in the United States the national interest, strategy, and success in El Salvador were the subject of considerable debate. Additionally, the demise of the communist government of the Soviet Union played a pivotal role in focusing Soviet national interests domestically, which terminated their continued support of the FMLN, both directly and through Cuba.<sup>45</sup>

Colin Gray observed that the mindset needed to combat an irregular enemy is not one that comes easily to Western militaries or strategic culture.<sup>46</sup> An examination of nearly every war since 1700 by the Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey offers an explanation. Blainey's book, *The Causes of War*, noted, "Nations confident of victory in a forthcoming war were equally as confident that war would conclude quickly."<sup>47</sup> Because of this optimism, patience is a virtue that many nations, particularly Western nations, do not possess. Furthermore, democracies depend on the leadership of elected representatives who serve a finite and relatively short period in office, a fact for which their adversaries have developed a deep appreciation. Consequently, the insurgent approach has frequently utilized time to overcome their material disadvantages.

## CORRELATIONS TO IRAQ

There is a natural desire to rely on historical experience to acquire an understanding of the dynamics of a current predicament, but fundamental to any such comparison is the understanding of the context surrounding both cases. From the preceding analysis, there are aspects of Salvadoran and U.S. strategy in El Salvador that are valuable to examining the situation in Iraq today. The following discussion, utilizing the analytical elements of

legitimacy, unity of effort, and time, provides a comparison of the El Salvador and Iraq insurgencies.

### **Legitimacy – Correlating El Salvador and Iraq.**

The conflict in El Salvador was viewed internationally, even in the 1980s, as a situation where insurgency fomented predominantly through the tacit support of outsiders. As a result, it acquired an international standing as another in a growing list of proxy wars between the East and West. Internal to El Salvador, however, it was a protracted struggle for political power, and at the same time a matter of daily survival for the people of El Salvador. The core of the struggle was establishing an enduring government that would run the country based on political, social, and economic values that were recognized by the people as legitimate. If that could be accomplished by the government, to a level that negated the FMLN's promises and abilities, the government's battle for legitimacy would be won.

The U.S. contribution to El Salvador was viewed by most in El Salvador as legitimate. Certainly from the perspective of the El Salvadoran government, U.S. economic and military aid was the linchpin that facilitated the realization of many government political, economic, and social reforms that positively influenced the population. Furthermore, U.S. military assistance, and the U.S. insistence on improving the human rights record of the El Salvadoran armed forces, improved the military's capabilities and standing throughout the country.

Though assistance to El Salvador was largely viewed among U.S. elected representatives as a necessary investment in both the Cold War and Latin America, U.S. involvement also faced considerable opposition because of the El Salvadoran military's alleged human rights abuses; a perceived lack of political, economic, and social progress in El Salvador; the emergence of the Iran-Contra affair; and partisan U.S. domestic politics. If it were not for President Reagan's personal commitment to defeating communism in Latin America and his election to a second term, waning American public support of U.S. national interests in El Salvador may have collapsed before communist support for the opposition failed.

Seen as a proxy war internationally, there was no organized opposition or consensus to U.S. support of the government of El Salvador. Though Mexico and France recognized the FMLN as a "representative political force" in 1981, they later influenced the insurgents to reassess their strategy in 1988 and pursue a negotiated settlement.<sup>48</sup> By 1992, the UN had officiated an extended process of negotiation that resulted in a peace agreement for El Salvador. The international legitimacy of the outcome in El Salvador was substantiated by the UN's role as both observer and verifier of the agreement, and by donor countries in their capacity to fund reforms.<sup>49</sup>

In contrast, the legitimacy of the Government of Iraq, as late as 2008, was cause for considerable concern. In a March 2007 BBC/ABC poll, 53 percent of the Iraqis polled expressed dissatisfaction with the way the Iraqi government was performing, compared with 33 percent in 2005.<sup>50</sup> The same poll showed that much of the pessimism stemmed from a perception that life had not noticeably improved. The Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki was installed in 2006 to serve until 2010. To the degree the serving

government is unable to secure the confidence of the people of Iraq, the government's legitimacy will be eroded.

*The U.S. National Strategy for Victory in Iraq*, published in November 2005, clearly establishes the objective of "a new Iraq with a constitutional, representative government that respects civil rights and has security forces sufficient to maintain domestic order and keep Iraq from becoming a safe haven for terrorists."<sup>51</sup> If, however, the Iraqi government is ultimately unable to gain and maintain the confidence of the people through measurable improvements in social and economic conditions, their ability to achieve a near-term political reconciliation within a very fractured society may well pass. This is not to say that the end state is not achievable—certainly the first, nor the second, elected leader of El Salvador achieved the national objective of peace and unity—but more time will be necessary to attain it.

Iraqi perceptions of the legitimacy of U.S. actions within Iraq depend considerably on the audience solicited. For much of the Sunni population, who surrendered power and prestige with the demise of the Ba'ath party, the U.S. invasion was an illegal occupation, while most of the Kurdish populace of Iraq viewed the same actions as liberating. The Shiite community was arguably of the liberated mindset early on, but some factions, such as Muqtada Al Sadr's Mahdi Army and Sadr Bureau, evolved over time toward a position desiring an end to the occupation now.

In late 2007, a convergence of Iraqi opinion about continued U.S. military presence in their country materialized. In November 2007, focus groups conducted by the U.S. military, comprised of Iraqis of all sectarian and ethnic groups, believed the U.S. military invasion was the root of the violent differences among them and viewed the departure of occupying forces as the key to national reconciliation.<sup>52</sup> The absence of the perception by Iraqis of any denomination viewing the continued U.S. presence in their country as legitimate undermines the effectiveness of U.S. efforts and has deleterious effects on an Iraqi national government already plagued with skepticism about its legitimacy from those it is intended to serve.

Within the U.S. population, the unexpected ongoing conflict in Iraq has proven to be a divisive political issue, much more so than the U.S. involvement in El Salvador was in its time. Much of the divisive fervor is easily attributable to the continued deployment of large American military forces to Iraq, which was not the case in El Salvador. Other reasons include a failure to make the case for vital U.S. interests, and partisan politics. Strong signals of a mandate for change to the U.S. strategy in Iraq were sent by the American people in the 2006 mid-term elections, and were confirmed in the 2008 Presidential election. All of these represent challenges to legitimacy.

The insurgency in El Salvador spanned three U.S. presidential election cycles and was somewhat divisive in its time, but the pace and proliferation of media coverage dramatically increased at the turn of the century. These changes pose new problems in attaining and sustaining legitimacy. The fast-paced media cycle and the availability of information and opinions regarding issues such as Iraq provides a continuing realtime venue for the repeated and minute scrutiny and challenging of the national interest and objectives, and critiques of progress toward achieving those national objectives. While this is the purpose of a free and open media in a democracy, the process subjects issues and decisions to constant exposure to, and often distortion of, the Western, and particularly



American, prism of impatience. In the minds of many Americans, if the United States has not achieved its objectives within 5 years of committing to involvement, then they are either inappropriate, or they are not going to be attained in a timely manner to make the continued expenditure of national treasure, particularly American sons and daughters, worthwhile.<sup>53</sup>

The U.S.-led multinational coalition operates in Iraq at the request of the Iraq government and with UN Security Council approval, which theoretically provided the coalition with international legitimacy. Yet, the lack of growth in the international political and military coalition that supports Iraq raises questions. A robust political, economic, or military commitment on the part of a regional ally such as Saudi Arabia or Jordan, or even a European ally such as Germany or France, would bolster the international commitment to the reconstruction of Iraq. Absent such a commitment, the true international perception of legitimacy must be reevaluated to determine why there is a lack of international resolve. Is it because of a concern about the Iraqi government, or the unwillingness to become involved so long as there is a robust American presence in Iraq, or a combination of such factors? Considerable opportunity for improvement in international legitimacy will grow when other nations, and the UN, recognize Iraq as a sovereign state and become involved in the long-term stability and growth of the country.

### **Unity of Effort—Correlating El Salvador and Iraq.**

It was previously identified out that unity of effort, as it pertained to the protagonists in El Salvador, was evaluated on a relative scale. None of the elected governments during the period of 1980-92 was particularly unified in their action by Western standards, but compared to the FMLN they were able to maintain unity at a higher level for a longer period of time. El Salvador's government consistently pursued improvement of political, economic, and social conditions, as well as military reforms, and the effort produced tangible results that the FMLN was unable to overcome. Furthermore, despite debate among U.S. lawmakers, economic and military aid to El Salvador remained reliable.<sup>54</sup> In contrast, support to the FMLN, whether it came directly from the Soviet Union or through Cuba or Nicaragua, withered as the Communist empire collapsed.

Unity of effort within the Iraq government remains a pivotal issue in determining the future of the nation. The ability of the elected Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish representatives to establish a political system that facilitates compromise and resolution of issues is the cornerstone of legitimacy for the government and is the foundation of defeating the insurgency. A December 2007 Pentagon report indicated that despite a reduction in violence in Iraq in the 3 months leading up to the report, the Iraqi government had made little progress in improving the delivery of electricity, health care, and other essential services.<sup>55</sup> The report also noted, "The government of Iraq's improvements in budget execution have translated into minimal advances in the delivery of essential services to the people of Iraq, mainly due to the sectarian bias in targeting and execution of remedial programs."<sup>56</sup> While the Iraqi infrastructure upon which essential services rely was in poor condition prior to the demise of the Saddam Hussein regime, it is the inability of the current government to create sufficient unity of effort that prevents it from meeting the people's expectations. One of the great truths of modernity is that when the people



perceive that their government cannot improve their condition, that the government will not be long tolerated.

Conversely, neither al-Qaeda in Iraq, nor any other insurgent subsidiary, has delivered tangible improvements of any scale in these areas either, so a window of opportunity still exists if the El Salvadoran example of *unity of effort is relative* holds true. How long that temporal window remains open is perhaps the ultimate question.

### **Time – Correlating El Salvador and Iraq.**

Twelve years of protracted political and military conflict transpired before political reconciliation occurred in El Salvador. During that time, the number of military forces and advisers ebbed and flowed as the momentum vacillated between the government and the insurgents. The shock of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 significantly contributed to the willingness of the FMLN to compromise, but the ability of the government to use the dimension of time to achieve unity of effort and enhance its domestic and international legitimacy placed it in a stronger position to negotiate a compromise with the FMLN that resulted in a favorable peace.

As of this writing, Iraq has had nearly 5 years of a growing insurgency vying for legitimacy. The insurgency's failure to achieve unity and provide a cohesive and credible vision for the future has allowed the Iraqi government the same rare privilege of time afforded the El Salvadoran government. Time is required to sever the unity of the insurgents and discredit their legitimacy as in Al Anbar province, and other parts of Iraq.<sup>57</sup> Such a use of time and the achievement of momentum must, however, correlate with positive improvements in the unity and legitimacy of the Iraqi national government if stability is to become a continuing reality. The government must be viewed as acceptable, fair, and legitimate by the majority of the people of Iraq regardless of their sectarian or ethnic affiliation. Furthermore, the government must provide sufficient internal security and support to allow economic and social evolution to occur on a scale acceptable to the Iraqi people. Only when the people realize tangible improvements, embrace progress, and build a new national identity will success be realized. History has demonstrated that failure to create success will provoke some governing alternative to emerge and present its bid for legitimacy. In El Salvador, it took several national governments to achieve results acceptable to the people, so it is reasonable to expect that it could take more than one government in Iraq as well.

### **CONCLUSION**

The strategic template provided by history rarely directly applies from one situation to the next. The myriad elements and influences that combine at one point in time to produce armed conflict, in these cases insurgencies, are not entirely the same notwithstanding the many similarities they might share. El Salvador in the 1980s and Iraq circa 2008 are alike in the absence of national unity and identity, the involvement of interest groups external to the country, and a significant investment on the part of the United States to cultivate a central government and military forces that will support stability within the region. As a result of these similarities, it has been suggested that the success of the past U.S.

model for involvement in El Salvador should be used to formulate a strategy for Iraq today. While there is value in this endeavor, any such process must be tempered with an appreciation of the unique circumstances of the two nations and the two periods in time. For example, there was no belief among El Salvadorans that the United States created the strife that initiated the insurgency that plagued El Salvador for over a decade. On the other hand, in Iraq, many perceive the United States did foment the conditions that led to an insurgency. Nonetheless, examination of the success of the El Salvadoran government in overcoming its insurgent challenge highlights several dimensions of Dr. Manwaring's model that, if successfully adhered to, can lead to success in Iraq.

First, the public-at-large must be persuaded of the legitimacy of the government and its actions. The people of a country ravaged by an insurgency must view their government as the legitimate national authority; one that is acting on their behalf to provide security and to improve their economic and social conditions. Equally important, if the United States, as an outside power, is supporting the threatened government, then the United States must achieve and sustain acceptable legitimacy within the threatened country, among the international community, and at home. Lack of legitimacy by the United States in the host nation, or abroad, greatly complicates the acquisition of international support, and of operations of any sort on the ground. Both El Salvador and Iraq demonstrate that the need to convince the American public, and to maintain their conviction, are two different, yet equally important aspects of domestic legitimacy that policymakers cannot ignore. In the spectrum of conflict where insurgency falls, American public support is very often the strategic center of gravity and must be assessed and addressed as such.

Unity of effort is a common theme within counterinsurgency theory and doctrine, yet creating it tends to be elusive. At its essence, insurgency is diametrically opposed to the targeted government—survival is at stake for both antagonists. Thus, insurgents seek to sever the influence and discredit the government with the population at every opportunity.<sup>58</sup> Clausewitz proposed that “war is merely the continuation of policy by other means.”<sup>59</sup> “Other means” is a revolutionary concept of war that Vladimir Lenin and Mao Tse-Tung embraced in proposing their theories of insurgency.<sup>60</sup> Mao's little red book codified the idea that physical confrontation is but one of several necessary ways to achieving political objectives in an insurgency.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, the whole of the threatened government must work together to achieve an “effective unity of political-diplomatic, socio-economic, psychological-moral, and security-stability effort against those who would destroy the government.”<sup>62</sup> Likewise, the U.S. national security professional must appreciate that no enemy today would logically seek to engage in a solely military confrontation with the United States. As such, the United States and her allies must anticipate insurgency and build unity of effort through a coherent marriage of their own national interests with shared strategic objectives in the counterinsurgent effort. This enables international and domestic resolve to be established on a foundation that will most likely endure the many assaults it will face in countering an insurgency while bolstering the legitimacy of the threatened government.

Time is a critical dimension to consider in any endeavor against an insurgency. The French and U.S. experiences in Indo-China as well as the El Salvadoran civil war confirm that time has strategic significance to all parties in conflict. For the insurgent, time can be used as a substitute for a lack of material goods in attaining their political objectives. For

the government, legitimacy and unity of effort possess a temporal element. For example, leaders in democratic governments must consider the impact of time on policy decisions that span subsequent election cycles. Both legitimacy and unity of effort tend to become increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of successful insurgent actions—yet time is often essential for a government to build unity of effort and legitimacy. For both the insurgent and government, time is relative and can run out as a consequence of failures or successes on either's part. Time must be an inherent part of the strategic calculation for all actors.

The political and security situation in Iraq in the fall of 2007, as described by General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker, is evidence the United States did not sufficiently consider these three primary dimensions in the early and mid-stages of formulating policy and strategy for Iraq. Improvements in the security situation in early 2008, however, suggest the United States is learning from this experience and is applying lessons with more positive effect today. It remains to be seen if time is available for the Iraqi national government to demonstrate sufficient unity to acquire legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens and the international community. Provided it can do so relatively quickly, a more unified international effort to assist the people of Iraq, and her government, may prevail in the manner that it did in El Salvador 26 years ago, and a "new Iraq with a constitutional, representative government that respects civil rights" may yet prevail.<sup>63</sup>

## ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 11

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58. It could be further argued that insurgency has evolved to the point it is diametrically opposed to democracy, thereby making it much more challenging to counter.

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