



SMALL WARS

JOURNAL

A Rose By Any Other Name

By Michael J. Coote

Journal Article | Jan 9 2012 - 3:55pm

Counterinsurgency (COIN) operations have been an integral part of warfare since 72 AD when the Romans defeated a Jewish insurgency at Masada.^[i] Throughout the ages, resistance to kingdoms, armies, and ideals have arisen from forces with differing ideological beliefs and motivations contrary to those in power. As a result of the timeless nature of insurgencies, operations directed at countering them have adapted to meet the technological advances and shifting tides of political and economic changes. Oddly, while the United States military has been very good at adapting in reactionary fashion on the battlefield, it has not done as good a job in adapting the terminology used to develop the policies and doctrine with which they wage war. The United States Military has not defined *insurgency* well. The limiting definition fails to frame the problem and can contribute to an inadequate response. The issues of defining *insurgency* will be investigated and highlighted against the backdrop of historical examples from the Spanish insurgents battling the French on the Iberian Peninsula in the Peninsular War of 1808-1814; the Colombian insurgency waged by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia against the government of Colombia (GOC) from 1969-present; and the narco-terror war being waged in Mexico, where 40,000 have been killed since 2006.^[ii]

From the Strategic to the Tactical level, the development of policies, plans and courses of action (COA), at their origin, depend on one thing: “Defining the Problem.”^[iii] The 2007 version of Joint Publication 1-02, The Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, defined insurgency as “An organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government.” Similarly, an insurgent was defined as, “a member of a political party who rebels against established leadership.”

Not unexpectedly, the 2011 version of Joint Publication 1-02, changed the definition of *insurgency* to reflect the realities of U.S. efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The new definition defines insurgency as, “The organized use of subversion and violence by a group or movement that seeks to overthrow or force change of a governing authority. Insurgency can also refer to the group itself.”^[iv] This new definition reflects the realities of the governance and security responsibilities realized by the United States and members of the international community in the wars waged in Iraq and Afghanistan. It also assumes, as applied to Iraq and Afghanistan, that those involved in perpetrating violence have an end state aimed at overthrowing or changing the governing authority. It discounts criminal activity based on monetary gain, activities undertaken to support a Jihad against the West, violence for violence sake, and violence undertaken by people extorted to participate.^[v]

While the JP 1-02 definition of insurgency is narrow in scope and very limited; the U.S. Army and U.S.MC Counterinsurgency manual, FM 3-24^[vi] does little to improve the definition. The manual was published with the stated purpose to: “Describe insurgency while....examining the more complex challenges of countering it.”^[vii] Paramount to countering an insurgency is defining it. The Counterinsurgency manual defines Insurgency as, “An organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a

constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict.”^[viii] This limited definition does not define those activities centered on anything short of overthrowing the government.

In historical context, the Peninsular War in 1808-1814 saw French troops under Napoleon occupy Spain and depose the Spanish King Ferdinand VII replacing him with Napoleon’s brother, Joseph. The ensuing unrest and guerrilla war in the province of Navarre contributed to the 500,000 killed^[ix] in that campaign and prompted Napoleon to declare: “That unfortunate war destroyed me; it divided my forces, multiplied my obligations, undermined my morale. . . . All the circumstances of my disasters are bound up in that fatal knot.”^[x] Napoleon and his army were seen as invaders; his foe was a Spanish guerrilla force, defined in the Army Special Operation Forces Unconventional Warfare manual as: “A group of irregular, predominately indigenous personnel organized along military lines to conduct military and paramilitary operations in enemy-held, hostile or denied territory.”^[xi] The definition of “guerrilla” does not seek to define the motivation for the activities, but rather defines the activity itself; designed to... “Conduct military and paramilitary operations.”^[xii] In all conflicts involving an insurgent movement, a dichotomy exists where, “One man’s freedom fighter is another man’s terrorist.”

According to the definition of insurgency in JP1-02, the French would claim the Spaniards were *insurgents*. The Spaniards would counter: They were guerrillas. Much like Carl Von Clausewitz, who stated *insurgents* were like second-rate troops and incapable of sustaining themselves,^[xiii] Napoleon realized too late, the potency of the insurgent movement he faced. He failed to recognize their collective destructive power and as such he did not levy an appropriate response which resulted in large part to his defeat.^[xiv]

The Colombian “insurgency” led by Latin America’s oldest guerrilla group,^[xv] the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, translated from the Spanish, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), began as a Marxist-Lenin based ideological movement in the 1960s.^[xvi] According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security however, they are now “the world’s leading cocaine manufacturer, responsible for the production of more than half of the world’s supply of cocaine distribution and two thirds of what comes to the U.S.A.^[xvii] with revenues of 17 billion dollars a year; making it impossible to separate the FARC’s ideological fighters from the drug traffickers. ^[xviii] The FARC has maintained the premise that they are engaged in a political struggle, *an insurgency*, against the established government. The U.S. Department of State disagrees and has declared the FARC a foreign terrorist organization.^[xix] This classification helped prompt 4.8 billion dollars of U.S. aid to the Security Forces of Colombia from 2000-2008; as well as the addition of U.S. military advisors to train the Government of Colombia (GOC) forces.^{[xx],[xxi]} The efforts of U.S. military advisors working with the host nation (HN) forces in country, were centered on Foreign Internal Defense (FID), and Counter-Drug/Counter Narco-Terrorism (CD/CNT) training. Military efforts in country were not directed at Counterinsurgency (COIN) labeled as such, but rather components of the full spectrum of Unconventional Warfare as outlined in FM 3-05.130, Army Special Operations Forces Unconventional Warfare.^[xxii] The fact that the FARC identified themselves as members of an insurgency did little to keep the United States from identifying them as something else. The U.S. took the totality of the FARC actions and responded using the full range of flexible deterrent options.

Clearly, the limiting FM 3-24 definitions did not fit the scenario in Colombia; however, the U.S. partnered with GOC forces and directed military operations, eerily similar to COIN, at an enemy that was not an “insurgency” with tremendous success. The results of which led to the laudatory remarks from the then Chairman of the House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere who during subcommittee testimony went on the record, talking about then, President Uribe of Colombia, saying, “What he has done with his country has been almost nothing short of miraculous in terms of improving the climate there, both

in terms of safety, in terms of drugs.”[xxiii]

The violence that has gripped Mexico, threatening the rule of law, undermining the efficacy of government and impacting the lives of citizens on both sides of the U.S. /Mexico border has some in Washington calling for a counterinsurgency strategy against Mexico's gangs. Patrick Corcoran, writing in the *Small Wars Journal* contends, “Mexico is not suffering from an insurgency. Hillary Clinton and other American officials have indicated that it is, but they are incorrect. An insurgency seeks either concessions from the state or its overthrow, and it uses attacks on the state or on civilians as a means to achieve that. Mexican gangs are seeking profits, and their attacks are overwhelmingly directed at competitors, not at government officials or innocents.”[xxiv] Therein lies the crux of the problem: *insurgency* and *counterinsurgency* have been narrowly defined by FM 3-24. Action or inaction can now be tied to a definition.

In February 2011, the Army’s second highest-ranking civilian official, Undersecretary of the Army, Joseph Westphal, suggested that U.S. troops may one day be needed to quell an “insurgency” in Mexico; a day later he recanted his statement publically apologizing, saying he had “mistakenly characterized the challenge posed by drug cartels to Mexico.”[xxv] Not everyone is apologizing for using the term “Insurgency” to capture what is happening in Mexico. On October 4, 2011, the Chairman of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, Connie Mack, convened a hearing with witnesses from the Department of State, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Department of Homeland Security to address concerns that the Mexican drug cartels represented an emerging criminal insurgency. Congressman Mack stated, “The current U.S. policy with Mexico does not seriously address the national security challenge we face. It is time that we recognize the need for a counterinsurgency strategy that can combat the evolution and resilience of Mexico’s transnational criminal organizations.”[xxvi]

There is confusion and disagreement in how the U.S. should respond in Mexico, in part because the definition for “Insurgency” ties the Ways and Means to an End with a political agenda. The instability that is created, the loss of human life, the impact on governance are closely related and it matters little to the person on the ground what the policy makers call the conflict: The results are the same. Nor is the destabilizing impact of the Mexican drug cartels confined to Mexico. In September 2011, the United States Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control released a report concluding, “Violence in Central America has reached crisis levels. Throughout Central America, Mexican drug trafficking organizations, local drug traffickers, transnational youth gangs, and other illegal criminal networks are taking advantage of weak governance and underperforming justice systems.”[xxvii]

If any further evidence is needed, the Office of the Secretary of Defense commissioned a study by the Rand Corporation in 2010 to evaluate the efficacy of COIN using statistical data applied to the 30 most recently resolved insurgencies. The report titled, “Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency”[xxviii] found without exception the balance of good versus bad practices perfectly predicts outcomes. In a related study in December of that same year, the Rand Corporation applied the statistical data gleaned from the COIN study to Mexico, and found “the counterinsurgency scorecard placed Mexico between historical winners and losers and reveals that contemporary Mexico is not unlike the first phase of several historical insurgencies.”[xxix]

Regardless of their agenda, groups whose systematic actions disrupt governance and infrastructure pose a threat to the stability of a country. The definition of “insurgency” and by extension, “counterinsurgency”, should be expanded to include the elements of destabilization, rather than focusing strictly on the agendas that drive them. Words shape definitions. Definitions shape perceptions. In the military, perceptions shape actions. It was true for the Spanish battling the French in the Peninsular War, the Colombians battling the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and it is true for the Mexican

government facing the drug cartels in Mexico; before a solution can be recommended the problem must be defined.

In 2011, during a presentation at the Army's Command and General Staff College, a well known military strategist and contributing author to the Counterinsurgency Field Manual, FM-3-24 was asked about the narrow definition of "Insurgency" found in that manual, to which they replied, "No one pays attention to that, and certainly it is not going to impact policy decisions on whether we go to war." [xxx] To the contrary, the evidence seems to indicate otherwise.

[i] Brooking, Emerson T., *ROMA SURRECTA: Portrait of a Counterinsurgent Power*, 216 BC - AD 72, 2011 2

[ii] New York Times, *Mexican Drug Cartels*, October 25, 2011, online at: http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/mexico/drug_trafficking/index.html; accessed on Nov 05, 2011.

[iii] Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning, Operational Approach III-3*, Aug 11, 2011.

[iv] Joint Publication 1-02 *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* 8 November 2010(As Amended Through 15 October 2011) 165.

[v] Meredith et al. *Small Wars Journal*, "Afghanistan: The De-evolution of Insurgency". (October 8, 2020), 8.

[vi] Department of the Army/ Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *FM 3-24; MCWP 3-33.5, Counterinsurgency* December 2006.

[vii] *Ibid.*, 1-1.

[viii] *Ibid.*, Glossary-5.

[ix] Esdaile, Charles. 2002. *The Peninsular War: a New History*. Online at: <http://peninsularwar200.org/history.html> accessed on November 4, 2011.

[x] Tone, John Lawrence. *The Fatal Knot: The Guerrilla War in Navarre and the Defeat of Napoleon in Spain*

University of North Carolina Press, 1994, Introduction.

[xi] *Army Special Forces Unconventional Warfare*, FM 3-05.130 September 2008, Glossary-10.

[xii] *Ibid.*

[xiii] Clausewitz, Carl Von. *On War*, Book Six Chapter 26 *The People in Arms*, Princeton Univ. Press 1976, translated by Howard, 479-483.

[xiv]Tone , John Lawrence, *The Fatal Knot: The Guerrilla War in Navarre and the Defeat of Napoleon in Spain*

(University of North Carolina Press, 1994),

[xv]Chaskel, Sebastián Latin America Studies Program, Council on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Foreign Policy Towards*

Latin America's Oldest Guerrilla Group, Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE) July 2008, 1.

[xvi]Ortiz, Roman D, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, Insurgent Strategies in the Post–Cold War: The Case of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia* ROMÁN D. 25:127–143, 2002.

[xvii]DHS; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, News Release September 2, 2011, online at: <http://www.ice.gov/news/releases/1109/110902newyork.htm> accessed on November 5, 2011.

[xviii]Bloomberg News, January 20, 2010 *FARC's Cocaine Sales to Mexico Cartels Prove Too Rich to Subdue*, online at: <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aQfKk3ykBBes> accessed on November 12, 2011

[xix]DHS; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, News Release September 2, 2011, online at: <http://m.ice.gov/news/releases/1109/110902newyork.htm?f=m> accessed on January 5, 2011

[xx]United States Government Accountability Office, GAO Report 09-71, PLAN COLOMBIA, *Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance*, October 2008, 29.

[xxi]Arrington, Vanessa 7th Special Forces Group (ABN), U.S. Special Forces Arrive in Colombia, January 16, 2003, online at: http://www.groups.sfhq.com/7th/2003_01_arrive_in_colombia.htm accessed on November 6, 2011.

[xxii]Headquarters Department of the Army, *FM 3-05.130, Army Special Operations Forces Unconventional Warfare*, September 2008.

[xxiii]House of Representatives, 110th Congress, 2nd Session, Serial No. 110–159, *CRISIS IN THE ANDES: THE BORDER DISPUTE BETWEEN COLOMBIA AND ECUADOR, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REGION* (Briefing and hearing Before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, April 10, 2008), 47.

[xxiv]Corcoran, Patrick, *Small Wars Journal, COIN in Mexico? A Response to Robert Culp's Strategy for Military Counter Drug Operations*, March 5, 2011, online at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/691-corcoran2.pdf> accessed on December 12, 2011.

[xxv]Laplante, Matthew, *The Salt Lake Tribune, Army official recants insurgency in Mexico statement*, (February 8, 2011) online at: <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/home/51217078-76/mexico-government-official-westphal.html.csp>

accessed on January 5, 2011.

[xxvi]Congressman Connie Mack on October 4, 2011, E-Press Release, *Mack Holds Hearing on Mexico's Criminal Insurgency*, online at <http://mack.house.gov/index.cfm?p=Home> accessed on October 7, 2011.

[xxvii]United States Senate Caucus on the International Narcotics Control, *Responding to Violence in Central America*, 112th Congress, September 2011, Reports & Legislation online at: <http://drugcaucus.senate.gov/reports.html> accessed on January 5, 2011

[xxviii]Christopher Paul, Colin Clarke, Beth Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency*, (RAND, National Defense Research Institute prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2010).

[xxix]Christopher Paul, Agnes Gereben Schaefer, Colin P. Clarke, *The Challenge of Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations An Assessment of Mexican Security Based on Existing RAND Research on Urban Unrest, Insurgency, and Defense-Sector Reform*, (RAND, National Defense Research Institute prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2011).

[xxx]Q&A Session at the US Army Command and General Staff College in 2011; In keeping with the school policy of non-attribution, the speaker's name/date have been omitted.

About the Author



Michael J. Coote

Michael J. Coote is a Special Forces trained U.S. military officer assigned to the United States Southern Command. He has been intimately involved with foreign internal defense programs throughout Central and South America for most of his twenty-five year career.

Available online at : <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/a-rose-by-any-other-name>

Links:

{1} <http://smallwarsjournal.com/author/michael-j-coote>

Copyright © 2012, Small Wars Foundation.



Select uses allowed by Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#).
Please help us support the [Small Wars Community](#).