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# Op-Ed: Not Your Grandfather's Insurgency - Criminal, Spiritual, and Plutocratic

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## Op-Ed: Not Your Grandfather's Insurgency — Criminal, Spiritual, and Plutocratic

February 20, 2014 | Dr. Robert J. Bunker

The U.S. Army is facing both ongoing and projected austere economic times with deep troop and budget cuts. As a result, a concomitant rise in soul searching over the Army's "strategic Landpower" contribution to national defense is increasingly evident. This is a natural and expected occurrence for a Service that has been in the spotlight for over a decade in ground campaigns—albeit very much anti-insurgent focused—in Iraq and Afghanistan that, respectively, has and is coming to an end. This is taking place at the same time as two other major events. The first event is the continuing U.S. congressional disagreements associated with the federal budget, debt levels, sequestration, and sporadic governmental closures. The second event is that of the United States ramping up its engagement and containment posture in its relations with China, with the other Services now in the forefront. China will hopefully be a cooperative, rather than intransigent, power in this bilateral relationship, but it is an authoritarian great power rising nonetheless.

Still other globalization outcomes are in play and are of great strategic importance to both U.S. national security and the Army's relationship to it. These outcomes, derived from the rise of globalized capitalism, the migration of humanity to cyberspace, and related 21st-century advances and changes in the post-Cold War world are challenging not only our perceptions of the separation of crime and war, but of insurgency itself. Quite possibly, while it now finds itself in a reflective mood, the corporate Army will be more receptive to some of the insights provided herein, concerning the new forms of insurgencies. But first, before delving into how new insurgency forms are "new," we must ask the question what insurgencies were like in your grandfather's day.

**Your Grandfather's Insurgency.**

Old school insurgency or “people’s war” was typically dominated by Leninist, Trotskyian, Maoist, and related revolutionary thought. Such insurgencies are ideological in nature and may also draw upon nationalistic underpinnings, as was utilized in Vietnam. Specific characteristics of this type of insurgency are: it is premeditated, driven by the political, established by a parallel (shadow) government, utilizes violence—typically targeted and instrumental in nature, with the desired end state being political control over a nation-state.

Depending on the relative sophistication of the insurgents, a phased approach to insurgency—initially based on sequential and later on simultaneous phases—is utilized. The conditions influencing an insurgency, i.e. the popular grievances, may also be artificially accelerated. Seminal works in your grandfather’s insurgency literature include: *Guerrilla Warfare* (1937); *People’s War, People’s Army* (1962); and the *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla* (1969). These revolutionary-based insurgencies include those that took place in China, Cuba, Vietnam, Angola, and El Salvador.

### **Criminal, Spiritual, and Plutocratic Insurgency.**

Twenty-first century insurgencies are turning out to be very different than 20th century ones. An initial projection concerning the development of such insurgencies was penned by Dr. Steven Metz in his 1993 Strategic Studies Institute monograph, *The Future of Insurgency*. In that prophetic work, he posited that:

Two forms of insurgency are likely to dominate the post-cold war world. Spiritual insurgency is the descendant of the cold war-era revolutionary insurgency. It will be driven by the problems of modernization, the search for meaning, and the pursuit of justice. The other form will be commercial insurgency. This will be driven less by the desire for justice than wealth. Its psychological foundation is a warped translation of Western popular culture which equates wealth, personal meaning, and power.

Over the course of the last 2 decades, reality has increasingly mirrored theory with two forms of commercial insurgency—criminal and plutocratic—now evident. Additionally, elements of spiritual insurgency are also now identifiable in today’s world and appear to validate that projection. These new forms of insurgency can be summarized as follows:

- *Criminal Insurgency*: This variant of commercial insurgency was first articulated in 2008 and pertained to the ongoing narco-conflict in Mexico.<sup>1</sup> It focuses on criminal enterprises—the gangs, cartels, and associated mercenary groups—competing with the state. The intent of this criminality, which transcends the symbiotic nature of older forms of organized crime, is to free itself from state control to maximize profits from illicit economic activities. Unlike traditional insurgency, this form of insurgency may not be premeditated and was not initially

driven by political motivations. Eventual freedom from sovereign rule by such criminal groups, however, results in their *de facto* political control of the cities, towns, and regions under their influence. The Mexican states of Michoacán and Tamaulipas represent present examples of this reality.

- *Spiritual Insurgency*: This construct and its real world manifestations are less developed than the commercial insurgency variants but are increasingly evident. Elements of this insurgency form can be readily seen with the La Familia Michoacana cartel in Mexico and even more so in its successor, Los Caballeros Templarios (The Knights Templars). Santa Muerte sacrificial practices of Los Zetas cartel members must also be considered, along with the cult-like behaviors of the members of the Lord's Resistance Army in Central Africa. The narcocultura movement in Mexico and beyond—which promotes a criminal code, fast living, and rough justice with a gun—gives spiritual meaning, and a plethora of narcosaints to worship, to those that adhere to its values.
- *Plutocratic Insurgency*: This other variant of commercial insurgency, first identified in 2011 by the author, exists at the opposite end of the spectrum from a criminal and illicit economic based insurgency.<sup>2</sup> In this instance, the “winners of globalization,” represented by multinational corporations and global elites, are seeking to remove themselves from the regulatory, taxation, and, ultimately, political authority of states. This is done by promoting an extra-sovereign economy: using foreign tax havens, playing states off against each other to maximize profit, being a nonresident citizen so as not to pay taxes, and employing a bevy of lawyers and lobbyists within states to gain special privileges and economic considerations. This is very much representative of a Gilded Age (1870-1900) redux, but at a globalized level. No sovereign authority presently exists to contend with such an insurgent form; one that is an unintended consequence of globalized capitalism and is resulting in growing economic inequalities in Western states, yet has been relatively violence free. Some might argue, however, that law enforcement and judicial elements of co-opted states can be “legally utilized” by the plutocratic insurgents to suppress anti-plutocratic protests and demonstrations.

### **The “So What” Factor.**

The question must then be asked as to what these new insurgency forms mean for both the United States and for the Army that defends our nation. In the case of criminal and spiritual insurgency, contending with such conflicts definitely falls within the U.S. Army mission yet, at the same time, these are missions better left to policing and federal law enforcement agencies. The confounding factor is that when Army forces are deployed overseas in support of federal governments, often local (and sometimes regional and even national) police and law enforcement agencies have been corrupted and co-opted by the

criminal organizations themselves.

One logical outcome of identifying such new insurgency forms is that it causes us to stop and pause to reflect upon our Army's recent counterinsurgency (COIN) experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. These were definitely not your grandfather's revolutionary insurgencies, yet at the same time they did not fully have the characteristics of the criminal insurgencies taking place in Mexico and in some of regions of Central America. Quite possibly, they can be considered a transitional blend of people's war (tribal rather than Marxist based), criminality, and radical Islamic spirituality.

The emergence of plutocratic insurgency is in some ways more troubling and problematic than that of the two other insurgency forms. It represents globalized capitalism at odds with state moderated capitalism. Such an extra-sovereign challenge to states is representative of a shifting international order. Since this is the capitalist system essentially turning on itself, the U.S. Army currently has no part to play in such relationships. Still that Army is facing austere economic times, as is the nation that it defends, partially due to the rise of extra-sovereign corporations and global elites seeking to escape state authority.

In conclusion, while many eyes are now on China and its ambitions, we must also be cognizant of how the nature of insurgency is changing. Metz's theory has now become our reality. This new reality—reflective of an emergent post-modern world—will require a new and second interpretation of "strategic Landpower" directed at nonstate entities (e.g., transnational criminal organizations) in addition to traditional interpretations addressing states. At the same time, we must move beyond the blinders of both realist (state focused) and liberal (free markets are infallible) school tenets in our perspectives on international relations and accede that: a) nonstate entities now have the power to challenge states; and, b) globalized capitalism is increasingly in variance with Western state moderated capitalism which seeks to mitigate large inequalities in our social class structures.

## ENDNOTES

1. The criminal insurgency construct was first articulated by John Sullivan. See John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, "Rethinking insurgency: criminality, spirituality, and societal warfare in the Americas," Robert J. Bunker, ed., *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: The Gangs and Cartels Wage War*, London, UK: Routledge, 2013, pp. 29-50.

2. See Robert Bunker, "Plutocratic Insurgency," *Small Wars Journal*, September 6, 2012, available from [smallwarsjournal.com/blog/plutocratic-insurgency](http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/plutocratic-insurgency). A link to discussion notes with Nils Gilman—one of the editors of *Deviant Globalization* (Continuum, 2011)—concerning this construct accompanies the citation.

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