

USOM/RA  
c/o American Embassy  
Saigon, Vietnam

December 9, 1963

Colonel William Law  
Army Attaché  
American Embassy  
Vientiane, Laos

Dear Colonel Law,

Recently I read a very interesting airgram concerning the situation in Laos. There was, however, one paragraph in a field with which I have some familiarity, that is so erroneous that I feel compelled to take issue with it and write you directly, since it is attributed to your office.

The paragraph is quoted:

"1. Both successful counterinsurgency operations (e. g. Philippines) and effective repressions of revolts with a measure of popular support (e. g. Hungary) show us that:

"a. There must be one single authority directing the effort, orchestrating the simultaneous application of military, paramilitary, psychological, and civic action at each level of administration.

"b. A preponderance of armed force - on the order of 8 to 1 local superiority - aggressively used, is required for progress.

"c. The affected population must be reached and controlled before it can be won - or won back - by the government.

"d. The conduct of effective operations resembles the eating of a large apple. Look and choose your spot, bite, chew, swallow, and digest - one step at a time. The political direction looks and chooses, the military bites, the military and paramilitary chew, and turn it over to psychological and civic action to swallow and digest while the military takes another politically-directed bite."

The Philippine experience actually was quite to the contrary. There was, in effect, during the period of first success, i. e., late 1950 to the end of 1952, a single authority directing most of the useful efforts. Much of this work was not within the job description or the responsibility of the Secretary of National Defense but he did it. On the other hand, civil government by elected officials was in effect in all populated areas. The fact that the local officials, in some cases, up to province governor level, were largely elected by communist votes served rather to complicate the problem. The orchestration not infrequently was of a dissonance which would put avante-garde composers to shame.

The preponderance of armed forces achieved in the Philippines in terms of local superiority never approached the 8 to 1 figure cited. No reliable figures exist, although I am trying to get them and hope to be able to publish something on this in the next year or two. I know definitely of areas where success was achieved in spite of the fact that the insurgents possessed local superiority (province-wide) on the order of 3 to 1. It is certainly true that the armed forces must be used aggressively whether their numbers are superior to or inferior to those of the insurgents.'

We did not find it necessary in the Philippines to control the "affected population" before winning it back to the government. In fact, it is a misnomer, and, indeed, a psychological booby-trap, to speak of controlling the population in connection with the Philippine operation or, indeed, I believe, of any successful counterinsurgency conducted by forces and a government based on that population. The Philippine experience was that the support of the population was a primary requisite to elimination of the insurgents, but that the support of the people would not be effective unless military operations against the insurgents were also effective in that same area.

I find it difficult to consider effective counterinsurgency operation in terms of the eating of an apple. Trying to adapt to that metaphor, I would say that most often it would be the military who would choose the spot, the political who would bite, the psychological and civic action who would chew while the military swallows those counterinsurgents who have resisted the psychological chewing. Actually, these operations, of course, go on simultaneously, with the psychological and intelligence actions usually in the lead, followed rather closely by the military and civic action phases of the operation. Desirably, they should go on over all the affected areas, although in cases where the counterinsurgency is well developed or the friendly forces limited, either in numbers or in ability, it might be necessary to give priority of effort to certain areas while neglecting the others in all except the intelligence and psychological operation aspects.

Finally, the equation of the Philippine and the Hungarian experience seems extraordinarily far-fetched. In the one case, the effort was conducted by indigenous forces under a popularly elected government with extremely little outside assistance. In the other case, a popular revolution was crushed by military action almost wholly dependant upon the application of outside force. Most significantly, the Philippine government remained in power not only with the assent but with the support of the governed and the Hungarian regime is dependent upon outside support for its continued existence.

The problem in Laos may well be susceptible to solution by the effective application of the philosophy and techniques of counterinsurgency developed in the Philippines. Certainly, this seems to be true of the rather more highly developed insurgency in Vietnam today. Neither country offers any hope for successful elimination of communist insurgency by the tactics used in Hungary,

or in Malay for that matter. It remains to be seen if the future will give the communists the opportunity to apply the Hungarian technique to these nations.

I hope that these unsolicited comments will be taken in the spirit intended - as an effort to contribute to a better understanding of certain significant aspects of successful counterinsurgency and not as captious carping or nosy nit-picking. The paper to which they refer was very interesting, and evidenced much thought and work on the extremely interesting situation you have there.

Sincerely,

C T R Bohannan