LESSONS FROM VIETNAM
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With US troops seemingly bogged down in an insurgency in Iraq, many have drawn upon the memory of Vietnam to try and understand the current conflict. Politicians such as Edward Kennedy have termed situation in Iraq as “George Bush’s Vietnam.” While this paper will not touch upon the similarities and differences between the two conflicts, it will examine what, if any, lessons can be learned from Vietnam and other Cold War Marxist insurgencies that can be used in the current insurgency. It will attempt to explain why Marxist insurgencies occur, and whether the solutions that were successful in some of those cases are applicable to Iraq.

During the decades following the conclusion of World War II, various countries that were newly decolonized were convulsed by insurgencies seeking to replace the standing government with a Marxist or Maoist form of government. According to Timothy Lomperis, these insurgencies were the result of a society that wanted to modernize. In Lomperis’s own words, “insurgencies, as part of a larger process of modernization, are best understood as crises in national political legitimacy and that struggle between the two sides is over competitive claims to, and definitions of, this legitimacy.” Legitimacy is defined as the “justification upon which authority is based and rule rendered rightful.” Therefore “insurgencies are won or lost by the relative amounts of legitimacy the two competing sides achieve and by the impact of foreign intervention.” Lomperis’s thesis about insurgencies, while not completely applicable to the current situation in Iraq, does provide possible avenues to understand the insurgency, and therefore offers the possibility of defeating it, or at the very least weakening it to such a degree that it will die on its own. The specific case study of the insurgency of Malaya in 1948-1960 is very similar to that of Iraq today in many ways. Understanding the
insurgency in Malaya, its causes and effects, and the solutions used by the western powers to defeat it can therefore be useful for defeating the current insurgency in Iraq. Other case studies used by Lomperis do not have as much in common with Iraq as Malaya, and hence are not as useful in explaining or understanding the current conflict.

According to Lomperis, there are three levels of political legitimacy that both insurgents and incumbent regimes must obtain in order to succeed. The lowest form of legitimacy is what he defines as interest-level legitimacy. This is when people passively support the regime at hand, not seeing any reason to join it actively nor oppose it violently. As long as the regime provides basic necessities, the people will go accede to regime decisions. The middle level is called opportunity-level legitimacy, where people support the regime actively because they have a stake in the regime. It provides them with a job, money, or other benefits. In this middle stage, active mobilization of popular support is possible for either side. The third and highest form of legitimacy is belief-level legitimacy, where the population supports the government actively without any benefit or interest, often at great risk to themselves. They truly believe that their government has the right to rule. The ideal of both the incumbent regime and the insurgents is to win by gaining belief-level legitimacy, where the populace truly believes in their right to rule. While most people never possess such devotion, it is still necessary for a select cadre to have such belief. They are the “steel to the frame upon which both sides must depend.”

To obtain such adherents, the insurgents and incumbent regime must battle each other for each ascending legitimacy level. In order to move up the ladder of legitimacy, both sides need to provide certain things to the populace that will engender their support. Lomperis considers these things societal access and political reform. Societal access involves economic improvement to increase the popular standard of living, and necessitates an increase in jobs and wages and enhancement in education. In the context
of the Third World, the most important key to societal access is land reform, where the land that previously belonged to one aristocrat is broken up and redistributed to the masses. Political reform is defined by the presence of political parties, fair local and national elections and a large voter turnout that allow for any political party to participate.\textsuperscript{6} “Legitimacy depends on which side makes good on key reforms that justify political rule...land reform and...free fair and competitive elections—the true Achilles heel of a revolutionary strategy of Marxist peoples war.”\textsuperscript{7}

Lomperis’s thesis of political legitimacy deals with seven cases of Marxist guerrilla warfare during the Cold War: China 1920-1949, Greece 1941-1949, The Philippines 1946-1956, Malaya 1948-1960, Cambodia 1949-1975, and twice in Vietnam (both French and American interventions 1946-1975). Because of this, the comparison of any specific case study, or even the overall thesis, to the insurgency in Iraq has severe limitations, since the Iraqi insurgency is certainly not based on Marxist principles and, as it will be shown, does not follow the rules that are laid down for a popular Marxist revolution. According to Lomperis, Marxist insurgencies are composed of five basic components. The insurgencies need to espouse a communist ideology that will compete with the incumbent’s notion of government. The Marxist notion of people’s war “shares with its incumbent adversary the goal of expanded political community.”\textsuperscript{8} The insurgency needs to be unified in its efforts and goals. It must be able to operate on its own and establish bases for providing supplies and safe haven. Most important of all it must espouse what Mao termed the ‘mass line.’ It must exploit a nation’s unique tradition of political legitimacy in order to obtain popular support and mass mobilization.\textsuperscript{9} Lomperis seems to recognize that his theory is meant only for Marxist popular wars, rather than other types of insurgencies. There were other, contemporary insurgencies to the Marxist ones, such a Algeria in the 1950s and the Basque insurgency, which did not follow a Marxist insurgency strategy. However “these
other strategies placed less emphasis on the mobilization of popular support, and, as a result the role of national legitimacy” does not apply as well, since the reason for appealing to and trying to achieve national/political legitimacy is to attain popular mobilization. Marxist insurgencies base their ideas around popular mobilization and support something that then makes the theory of political legitimacy a necessary condition for achieving that support. Lastly, according to Mao, another goal of an insurgency is to survive long enough to develop into a conventional army which can challenge the incumbent regime. Even Mao understood that an insurgency in and of itself cannot defeat conventional armies in conventional battle.

The Iraqi insurgency certainly is not based on a Marxist concept of people’s war. It could be argued that accordingly, the Iraqi insurgents do not seek popular support, unlike the insurgencies during the Cold War that were not based around Maoist principles (such as the Basque case). If so, then the whole theory of political legitimacy seems out of place. The theory was expounded by Lomperis to explain how insurgents and incumbents battle for the hearts and minds of the general public and how each side can win over the other if they achieve belief level legitimacy with the public. If there is no need for popular mobilization or at least no ability to achieve popular support, then Lomperis’s overall theory of insurgencies—that they are all about political legitimacy—does not apply. If one looks at the Iraq insurgency, one sees a crucial issue that prevents popular support from ever being achieved by the insurgents. Iraq is split into three ethnic groups: the Shi’a, Sunna, and Kurds. All have a long history of violence against each other. The insurgency is primarily composed of Sunni Ba’athists and nationalists who want to reestablish the Ba’athist regime that existed under Saddam Hussein or at the very least a government that maintains Sunni power. While the Shi’a are the majority of the Iraqi population, the Sunna, under Saddam, ruled over them quite violently. It is thus unsurprising to expect
that there is no need for political legitimacy, since the regime the Sunna want to reestablish never had popular legitimacy in the first place. It possessed what Lomperis calls ‘nonlegitimacy’—rule by force rather than popular support. Due to a culture of mutual ethnic hatred and Shi‘i memories of the violence of the Saddam era, there can be no spillover effect of Shi‘i popular support for the Sunni insurgents. The other major group of insurgents is the foreign jihadists, who have been responsible for many terrorist attacks against Shi‘i civilians and government officials, something unlikely to gain Shi‘i support. If the Iraqi insurgency is not based on popular support or mobilization, and hence the theory of political legitimacy does not apply, American counterinsurgency tactics should reflect this reality. Defeating the Iraqi insurgency will take more than societal access in economic issues, combined with political reform. So, while elections in Iraq are good, they will have no any major effect on insurgent activities. According to the Brookings Institution, the daily number of insurgent attacks has actually gone up from 2003-2005, from about 32 to 90, despite several elections and the drafting of the constitution. This seems to reinforce the point that the insurgency is not based on the concept of political legitimacy and will continue despite the increased political legitimacy that the Iraqi government receives.

Stephen Biddle makes the same argument. To him, the Iraq conflict is not a Marxist people’s war or a national liberation struggle; rather, it is a communal civil war based along ethnic and sectarian lines. It is not a class-based conflict revolving around issues of good governance or ideological issues like nationalism. The insurgents are not battling the regime for allegiance of the common pool of citizens, as communal civil wars have, by definition, no common pool of uncommitted citizens. The Sunna support the insurgency, while the Shi‘a, being an opposing ethnic group, never will. Instead, communal civil wars are about what Biddle terms “group survival”. This is primarily a
security problem, “driven by mutual fear,” since every side “worries that other groups with historical grievances will try and settle scores.”11 Shi’a and Kurds fear a Sunni restoration of power, believing they will face mass killings reminiscent of the Saddam years. Sunna fear Shi’i-Kurdish retributions for persecutions committed under Saddam’s regime. In such a communal civil war, all possible economic aid would not alleviate such fears at all. Would “Sunnis really get over their fear of Shiite domination if only the sewers were fixed and electricity kept working?”12 In the end, according to Biddle “Survival trumps Prosperity.”13

Additional differences from the Lomperis model include the idea that a Marxist insurgency must be a unified group with concrete goals, a premise which is completely absent in Iraq. Not only are there two separate groups—the foreign jihadists and the Sunni Ba’athists—but their goals and tactics completely diverge from each other. The Ba’athists and nationalists have mostly focused their attacks on US and Iraqi soldiers, while the foreign jihadists target Iraqi civilians. Furthermore, their goals are completely different. The Ba’athist’s want to reestablish a secular Ba’athist dictatorship, while the jihadists want to create a unstable state to allow them to set up a sanctuary somewhat akin to the Taliban’s Afghanistan. While they both share the immediate goal of expelling the US from Iraq, these groups could not be further from the ideal insurgent group according to Marxist doctrine. Lastly, it is almost certain that none of the Iraqi insurgent groups ever hopes to follow Mao’s intentions and expand into a conventional army in order to defeat the US in open battle. Not even the most idealistic insurgent could ever expect such a force, even if it somehow became unified, to survive conventional engagement with the most powerful military in the world. In every case where the insurgents have tried to stand and fight the Americans ‘man to man,’ as in Fallujah, they have died where they stood.
Lomperis, however, believes that his theory can in certain respects be applied to other cases, like Iraq. While the Iraqi insurgency is not Marxist in nature, that does not mean that the US and the incumbent Iraqi government should not focus on gaining political legitimacy through elections and economic development. Not only would it gain the support of the Iraqi people, which could lead to greater intelligence about the insurgents, but it could also be used to co-opt various groups of Sunna who currently support the insurgents but would stop if given political power. Remember that while economic development may not be important to the Sunna, it is important to Shi’a and Kurds, who otherwise might be tempted to engage in their own insurgency against the US, which would create a high intensity civil war. This possibility is supported by polls showing that while 46 percent of Iraqis approve of American assistance with economic development, they also feel that the US is doing a poor job, and a stunning 59 percent of Shiites oppose the coalition forces. Muqtada al-Sadr’s short lived rebellion was a good indication of this opposition. With a Shi’i majority in the country, the US, already stretched thin in Sunni areas, would be hard pressed to fight both Sunna and Shi’a. For the sake of the Shi’a alone, it is important to have a viable economy combined with a stable and democratic government, if only to prevent them from starting an uprising. While the initial American invasion of Iraq enabled Shi’i support for the US, constant economic trouble and violence has eroded much of that goodwill. According to the Brookings Institution, while 88 percent of Sunna believe that attacks on American troops are legitimate (which is unsurprising), 41 percent of Shia agree, despite the fact that 84 percent of Shi’a feel that Iraq is headed in the right direction.

I would argue that, contrary to Biddle, both economic and political legitimacy are capable of defeating the Sunni insurgency. Assuming the Sunna are more concerned with group survival than economic prosperity, the US should focus on political development
and legitimacy as much as economic development. Establishing a secure constitution that guarantees Sunni security would go a long way to alleviate the fears of Sunna, who would in turn give the Iraqi government some form of legitimacy. This would allow Sunna to join the government and co-opt insurgent groups into laying down their arms. Such a constitution would give the Sunna a stake in the government (opportunity level legitimacy). Once this is accomplished, one can focus on economic development, which would further strengthen Sunni support for the government. The current government, under the premiership of Ibrahim al-Jafari, includes a Sunni deputy president, deputy prime minister, minister of human rights and, perhaps most importantly, a Sunni defense minister, which can help alleviate the fear of Shiite reprisals. A Sunni heads the army, the organ that would theoretically carry out such reprisals, and another Sunni is in charge of insuring human rights (Brookings Institution).

However even this isn’t certain. When asked about the issue on which they would want their preferred political party to focus, 49 percent of Iraqis made economic infrastructure their first choice, and 38 percent gave job creation as their second choice. Surprisingly, only 6 percent of Iraqis, including Sunna, considered amending the constitution important enough to be their first choice, and only 2 percent made it their second choice (Brookings Institution). Economic performance is still important even in an ethnic civil war, perhaps even more important than political security. Further, Sunni insurgents have repeatedly attacked oil pipelines in an effort to curtail economic performance. There have been over 306 attacks since the beginning of the insurgency. One wonders why Sunni insurgents even bother with such economic factors if their concern is about group survival.

Lomperis argues that ultimately, the best way to defeat a insurgency is by inviting the insurgents to run as a political party. Not only does this force that group into focusing
their energy into politics instead of violence, it lets voters decide if they prefer the future envisioned by the communist to that of the regime. If, using the political legitimacy model, the US can co-opt the Sunnis to joining the government, that would remove any support the insurgents have and enable the insurgents to lay down their arms to join political groups. In fact, according to the Brookings Institution, the number of tips about insurgent activity has gone up from 5 to 150 a day from 2003 to 2005, which seems to indicate that the longer the Iraqi government lasts and the more stable it becomes, the more political legitimacy it gains, even with Sunna. The millions of Iraqis who braved violence and went to vote seem to show that they even have belief-level legitimacy, in which they are willing to brave danger in support of their government. Additionally, it is possible that some form of political legitimacy applies to the insurgents. Lomperis argues that within national legitimacy, the political kind is more important than the economic, but even so, “no regime is beyond insurgent challenge until political legitimacy is supported by solid policy and economic performance.” This seems to apply to Iraq, for while political legitimacy seems to been achieved through fair elections and open political parties, economic performance is still down. According to the Brookings Institution, crude oil production and electrical power are down from pre-war levels. While the American and Iraqi governments hoped to return oil production to the 2.5 million barrels per day of prewar Iraq, by March 2006 it had only climbed to 2.0 million barrels. Similarly, electricity production, whose pre-war level was 16-24 hours of electricity per day, is only up to 8 hours in Baghdad. Perhaps these economic problems mean that full political legitimacy has not been achieved yet and hence the insurgency continues. As mentioned earlier, Iraqis made clear in polls that they preferred their representatives to deal with economic infrastructure and job creation, not constitutional change. It appears that economic performance is vital indeed.
Specifically, the case study of Malaya applies very well to the current situation in Iraq. In fact, Malaya shows that even in cases of ethnic civil war, Marxist people’s wars can still be waged and defeated. Malaya was made up of three ethnic groups: Chinese, Malays and Indians. The communist insurgents were primarily among the Chinese. Because of ethnic differences, the communists were never able to garner the popular support needed for a people’s war. Further, the insurgents had little if any outside support, either in money or weapons, while the incumbent Malayan regime was aided by British troops. Ostensibly, foreign intervention by the British cut against traditional ideas of legitimacy or \textit{bumperis}—that the continent belonged primarily to the Malays. However, Malays tolerated the intervention because of their hatred for the Chinese; they hoped that the British would be able to prevent the Chinese from gaining power. While the British were unable to co-opt the Chinese insurgents, they were able to isolate them in the jungles. Without popular support the communist insurgency collapsed. This situation is similar to Iraq, in which there are also three ethnic groups, preventing any insurgency from spreading to other ethnic groups because of mutual hatred. Additionally, Iraqi insurgents do not enjoy any major outside funding, while the Iraqi regime not only has both American support and intervention inside Iraq. It is true that traditional Iraqi conceptions of political legitimacy focus hatred towards any foreign occupier and engender a duty to expel them. This conception was molded by the British colonization of Iraq in the 1920s. However, while this conception is only strengthened by the presence of 150,000 US and British soldiers in the country, most Iraqis seem content to allow the US and Britain to stay and defeat the insurgents, much like in Malaya, because of fear of a rise in Sunni power. In fact, a Brookings Institution poll that showed that while most Iraqis oppose the US occupation, they don’t think that the US should leave till the security
situation improves.

It seems that the US can still enjoy the benefits of political legitimacy by creating a stable Iraqi government that ensures free, open elections and parties; enforces a constitution that protects Sunna and gives them a stake in the government; and improves the economy. This would help defeat the insurgency, and may even deflect some of Shi'i anger at having a foreign occupier on Iraqi soil. In this respect, American-created political legitimacy would deflect the traditional political legitimacy that resents foreign occupation.

In addition to the overall strategy of obtaining political legitimacy, others have suggested that the US embark on other, more specific tactics to help defeat the insurgents. Former defense secretary Melvin Laird has written about the need to ‘Vietnamese’ the situation in Iraq—to train Iraqis to take the place of US servicemen. This strategy would relieve pressure and possible negative affects of foreign intervention on the traditional legitimacy of an Iraqi people that deplores foreign invasion or occupation. It would also enable the Iraqis to have a vested interest in their own government—opportunity-level legitimacy. According to Biddle, however, such an Iraqization needs to definitely include Sunna in the army and police forces, since without any Sunni participation in those organs, the Shi'i-dominated army and police could be used against Sunna. The fear of Shi'i reprisals would continue and group survival would not be insured, requiring further insurgent activity. Currently, the US military has engaged in search and destroy missions, in which American forces clear out a town such as Fallujah but then leave, allowing more insurgents to re-enter and requiring a second battle to retake the city. Andrew Krepinevitch’s proposed ink blot strategy, however, focuses American protection on strategically important areas, such as oil refineries and Sunni neighborhoods, which are the main areas of the insurgency. This would enable the
building of a stable economy, while simultaneously denying insurgents a safe haven. However, critics have claimed that with a country the size of Iraq and the small numbers of coalition troops safeguarding the sensitive areas, the ink blot strategy would be next to impossible. A good solution to both of these problems would be to use Iraqi troops to guard key economic sites, such as oil refineries and borders, which are in Shi‘i-dominated areas. This would allow coalition forces to focus on Sunni neighborhoods, which would be violently hostile to the presence of the Shi‘i-dominated army and police forces. However, this would make coalition forces bear the brunt of the fighting, increasing their casualties. Additionally, this would only be a temporary solution, since coalition troops would have to depart eventually, leaving the Sunnis without any protector and with a Shi‘i-dominated army and police.

Finally, it is always tricky to determine if an insurgency is gaining ground or losing it before its termination, but there are indications that the insurgency’s performance has declined since the opening days after the occupation. While the number of attacks has gone up from 26,496 in 2004 to 34,131 in 2005, it appears that their effectiveness has declined. US troop casualties (number of wounded) declined from 7989 in 2004 to 5939 in 2005, and troop deaths declined from 848 to 846. Similarly, Iraqi civilian deaths have remained at around 200-500 in the past few months. While such figures are grim indeed, they do suggest that the insurgency, though far from over and perhaps even growing in size, is not as capable as it once was. However, despite any coalition gains in fighting the insurgency, only economic and political reform will lead to any sort of political legitimacy among Iraqis--Sunni, Shi‘i and Kurdish—that will break the back of the insurgency. But it should be somberly noted with regards to Iraq that in every insurgency case that Lomperis studies, it took at least eight years for either side to gain enough political legitimacy to take control of the government. This may prove to be the eventual Achilles’
heel for the American effort to bring democracy to Iraq and to defeat the insurgency. ◆

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3 Ibid, 6.
5 Ibid, 64.
6 Ibid, 63.
7 Ibid, 7.
8 Ibid, 14.
12 Ibid, 8.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid, 321.