



2010.01.04

James R. Arnold, *Jungle of Snakes: A Century of Counterinsurgency Warfare from the Philippines to Iraq*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009. pp.291. ISBN 978-1-59691-503-9.

Review by Bob Bergin, Alexandria, VA (bbergin99@gmail.com).

The title is apt, taken from former CIA Director James Woolsey's description of the post-Cold War world as "a jungle full of poisonous snakes," for all the insurgents, guerrillas, and terrorists that seem to have overrun it. In this first decade of our new century there are active counterinsurgency operations "on every populated continent except North America and Australia" (6).

Arnold is a military historian and author of more than twenty books. He examines four insurgencies and the campaigns waged against them: the United States in the Philippines, the British in Malaya, the French in Algeria, and the United States in Vietnam. In an epilogue, he reflects on the occupation of Iraq. At the start, he notes: "One inescapable conclusion is that a counterinsurgency is a long fight. *Jungle of Snakes* provides readers with a historical foundation so that informed citizens can assess how the fight is going" (7).

In 1898, the head of the Philippine Commission, William Howard Taft, guessed it would take fifty or a hundred years for the Filipinos to develop the Anglo-Saxon political principles needed for good government. After the war was won, the U.S. Senate was still troubled by "an apparent open-ended commitment of American soldiers and gold to the Philippines" (250).

The Philippine insurrection—which the United States defeated—grew out of the Spanish American war: when President McKinley decided to keep the islands after evicting the Spanish, the U.S. Army found a ragtag group of Filipino revolutionaries opposing American occupation. It did not seem very problematic: the insurgents were poorly armed, their leadership weak, and—after an early and disastrous attempt to fight as a regular army—they scattered into the interior's mountains and jungles.

The Americans tried to win the population with a "policy of attraction." Medical programs and the building of schools and roads would show American benevolence. The insurgents used terror to compel support for their cause and to discourage collaboration. Lacking collaborators, the Americans had no intelligence, and consequently little knowledge of how the insurgency was growing, or that all their good works were not winning over the population.

In the run-up to the U.S. presidential election in 1900, "the Philippines exploded into violence as the insurgents began a general offensive timed to influence the American election" (40). William Jennings Bryan ran on a platform opposing McKinley's Philippine policy. The insurgents recognized the value of trying to influence perceptions, but the year was 1900, not 1968. In Manila, war correspondents trying to tell the story were thwarted by strict military censorship, while the U.S. military "exaggerated its accomplishments ... to make it appear that the war was progressing smoothly" (33). Arthur McArthur, the American commander in the Philippines, had concluded—four months before the election—that America's "looming strategic defeat" demanded a "more stringent policy" and "relied on his censors to keep this information from the American public" (42, 40).

After McKinley's victory in the polls, the crueler war began. Carrying it out on the remote island of Samar was Brigadier General Jacob Smith:

He ordered his brigade to wage hard war, telling subordinates the more killing and burning the better.... He then set to work by ordering the concentration of Samar's inhabitants into protected zones on the coast. He treated the rest of the island as enemy territory. Smith sent his forces ... inland, where they killed opponents, real and imagined, burned houses and crops, and slaughtered livestock. Many of his subordinates kidnapped civilians and routinely applied physical abuse to extract intelligence. Eventually a comprehensive starvation

policy forced the insurgents to spend most of their time searching for food. Meanwhile, uncounted numbers of civilians also perished (54).

Hard measures brought the war to an end. “Before the conflict was over, two thirds of the entire U.S. Army was in the Philippines” (21). On 4 July 1902, Theodore Roosevelt—president after McKinley’s assassination—declared the war ended. Five years later, “20 percent of the entire U.S. Army still remained in the Philippines” (70). Reports of brutality prompted a Senate inquiry into army misconduct. The American people were disillusioned when they learned what it took to win the war, “and most were happy to forget about the distant islands as soon as possible” (66). Also soon forgotten were the lessons of a long and nasty fight.

In Algeria the outcome was different: the French Army won all the battles; the insurgents won the war. “Algeria was a notable example of the perils of fixating on the military defeat of an armed insurgency” (128). Insurgencies are essentially political conflicts, something the leaders of the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) understood well. In their war against French colonialism, the FLN relied on an international political climate that favored self-determination, and the French surrender at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam galvanized them.

On 1 November 1954, All Saints’ Day, the FLN launched seventy simultaneous attacks around the country, killing seven people and wounding four. It was “hardly a devastating blow.” But in France, the Prime Minister pledged “massive military reinforcements to restore order” (81). For two years the French Army conducted large, clumsy operations that found few guerrillas, but drove many Algerians into the maquis. Civilians on both sides were slaughtered indiscriminately as the FLN goaded Algerians into violence and “awaited the predictable French overreaction.” (90).

The nature of the war changed as the French buildup brought in veterans from Indochina, who understood guerrilla warfare and produced results. The FLN recognized they could not defeat the French army and moved the fight to the capital, Algiers, where they believed they could paralyze French rule through terrorism. To that point the war had been brutal; in the Battle of Algiers, French units “set out to prove that they were more extreme than the terrorists” (105). In the end, the FLN was defeated in Algiers, but the fight in the countryside went on, with more French victories, until the French commander was finally able to proclaim: “The military phase of the rebellion is terminated in the interior” (118).

The French won the shooting war, but press revelations of the army’s brutality and use of torture shocked the French public. Clergy, politicians, and veterans groups questioned their military’s methods. Political pressure grew inside France and abroad, and “de Gaulle concluded that the war was being lost because of waning domestic support and international opposition to colonialism” (122). This broad opposition was a victory for the FLN’s use of the media, aimed at the United Nations as well as France’s allies, to publicize French repression and brutality. The FLN leaders were not great military strategists, but they understood how modern insurgencies are won.

The Malayan Emergency was a communist insurgency, an “Emergency” because London insurance companies would not cover damages caused by civil war. The British were slow to get under way, but in time got everything right. It took twelve years, but Malaya became the textbook example of the way to defeat an insurgency.

Circumstances in Malaya gave the British many advantages. The enemy was the Malaya Communist Party (MCP), composed almost exclusively of ethnic Chinese, who made up thirty-eight percent of the country’s population and had long been at odds with the majority Malays; the insurgency could never become a nationalist movement. Even though the MCP was a Maoist party, its leaders ignored Maoist principles, particularly that “indiscriminate terror against the masses was counterproductive” (175). Even among the Chinese in Malaya, the MCP insurgency won “only halfhearted” support (178).

Unlike the French, the British stressed operating within the law and winning the loyalty of the population. They provided security and “convinced the people of Malaya that they intended to remain until they won” (176). They rejected the indiscriminate use of heavy weapons, thereby limiting harm done to civilians.

“Lastly, British leaders understood that winning the war in Malaya would take time and they fully committed to what one general called ‘the long, long war’” (177). At home, most Britons supported the effort.

The successful Malaya campaign influenced America’s early strategy in Vietnam, but the lessons of Malaya were not easily transferred. The British in Malaya had had complete control of the police, the civil service, and the military. In Vietnam, the Americans acted in support of the host government, “a weak reed dominated by an elite minority that was corrupt, inefficient, and badly frightened” (186). The Government of South Vietnam had little popular support and no real control in the countryside. It was called the “Saigon Government” for good reason.

There were promising early efforts by Malaya expert Sir Robert Thompson and by U.S. Special Forces and Marines working directly with the people, but the “American political leadership had come to the realization that the Communists were winning the war” (194). Their answer was to commit regular American ground forces to the fight. With the vast deployment of troops and firepower came large and aggressive search and destroy missions, where success was reflected in body counts.

“The [communist] National Liberation Front viewed their armed forces as tools to gain political goals. American generals saw their armed forces as tools to destroy the enemy military forces” (231). This became most apparent early in 1968. Skepticism about the war’s outcome was growing in the United States, and “far better than anyone in the Johnson administration, the Vietnamese Communists understood the link among international opinion, American public opinion, and battlefield outcomes” (212). At the end of January 1968, the Communists launched the surprise, nationwide Tet Offensive.

The outcome of Tet may have been an enormous success for the U.S. military, but the confidence of the American public was shattered. What Americans witnessed on their TV screens gave the lie to what their political and military leaders were telling them. The Communists were obviously much stronger than they had been led to believe. Polls showed most Americans now believed the war a mistake. Though American involvement in the war continued another sanguinary four years, waning support led to “the political decision to transfer the burden to the unsteady hands of the Vietnamese” (225).

In the book’s final section, “Reflections on a War Without End,” Arnold briefly ponders the challenges ahead, particularly the increase in destructive power available to combatants and the effect of modern communications, a “force multiplier,” to spread terror and control perceptions. “Modern insurgents understand the importance of the media and manipulate it [sic] with great skill” (240).

Turning to Iraq, Arnold asserts that, “by any measure” (241), the Surge, assisted by the Sunni Awakening, has accomplished its goals, but acknowledges it is uncertain what will happen as the U.S. presence diminishes. Similarly, Afghanistan’s future as the fight there intensifies is “unknowable.” We hear an echo from Vietnam when he notes that Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, “is derisively known as the ‘mayor of Kabul’ because his rule does not extend beyond the gun range of his foreign benefactors who provide security in his capital” (242).

Arnold quotes analyst Col. John Nagel on defeating an insurgency: “The way you win a counterinsurgency campaign is that you don’t—you help the host nation defeat the insurgency.” Because the one absolute certainty about insurgencies is that victory requires “a long-term commitment of blood and treasure,” the litmus test for American involvement should be whether “an insurgency truly poses a mortal threat to the nation” (252).

Jungle of Snakes gives a good foundation to better understand insurgencies, although it does not enable readers to assess “how the fight is going.” The battle is fought on many fronts, and progress in counterinsurgency programs is notoriously difficult to measure. Arnold’s four case studies are necessarily abbreviated histories of complex situations. But, in clear and precise prose, he provides a fairly complete picture of each conflict. The book is essentially a primer for the general reader, but it will not disappoint specialists seeking to revisit the basics of the four insurgencies examined. The bibliography points interested readers to some of the classic works on insurgency. If the book has a weakness, it is in the final section, where Arnold reflects too briefly on future challenges and on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In fairness,

however, it must be noted that *Jungle of Snakes* appeared in 2009, when those conflicts and American policy concerning them were in flux.