Eric Hobsbawm

Vietnam and the dynamics of guerrilla war

Three things have won conventional wars in this century; greater reserves of manpower, greater industrial potential and a reasonably functioning system of civilian administration. The strategy of the United States in the past two decades has been based on the hope that the second of these (in which it is supreme) would offset the first, in which the USSR was believed to have the edge. This theory was based on faulty arithmetic in the days when the only war envisaged was one against Russia, for the Warsaw Pact powers have no greater population than NATO. The West was merely more reluctant to mobilize its manpower in conventional ways. However, at present the argument is probably more valid, for some of the Western states (like France) will almost certainly stay neutral in any world war that is likely, and China alone has more men than all the Western powers likely to fight in concert. At all events, whether the arguments were right or wrong, the United States has since 1945 put its money entirely on the superiority of its industrial power, on its capacity to throw into a war more machinery and more explosives than anyone else.

Consequently, it has been badly shaken to discover that a new method of winning wars has been developed in our time, and that it more than offsets the organization and industrial power of conventional military operations. That is guerrilla war, and the number of Goliaths who have been felled by Davids with slingshots is now very impressive: the Japanese in China, the Germans in wartime Yugoslavia, the British in Israel, the French in Indo-China and Algeria. At present the United States itself is undergoing the same treatment in South Vietnam. Hence the anguished attempts to pit bombs against small men behind trees, or to discover the gimmick (for surely there must be one?) which allows a few thousand ill-armed peasants to hold at bay the greatest military power on earth. Hence also the simple refusal to believe that it can be so. If the United States is baffled it must be due to some other—measurable and bombable—reason: to the aggressive North Vietnamese, who actually sympathize with their Southern brothers and smuggle trickles of supplies to them; to the terrible Chinese who have the nerve to possess a common border with North Vietman; and no doubt eventually to the Russians. Before common sense flies completely out of the window, it is therefore worth taking a look at the nature of modern guerrilla war.

There is nothing new about operations of a guerrilla type. Every peasant society is familiar with the 'noble' bandit or Robin Hood who 'takes from the rich to give to the poor' and escapes the clumsy traps of soldiers and policemen until he is betrayed. For as long as no peasant will give him away and as long as plenty will tell him about the movements of his enemies, he really is as immune to hostile weapons and as invisible to hostile eyes as the legends and songs about such bandits invariably claim.

Both the reality and the legend are to be found in our age, literally from China to Peru. Like the military resources of the bandit, those of the guerrilla are the obvious ones: elementary armaments reinforced by a detailed knowledge of difficult and inaccessible terrain, mobility, physical endurance superior to that of the pursuers, but above all a refusal to fight on the enemy's terms, in concentrated force, and face to face. But the guerrilla's major asset is non-military and without it he his elpless: he must have the sympathy and support, active and passive, of the local population. Any Robin Hood who loses it is dead, and so is any guerrilla. Every textbook of guerrilla warfare begins by pointing this out, and it is the one thing that military instruction in 'counterinsurgency' cannot teach.

The main difference between the ancient, and in most peasant societies endemic, form of bandit operation and the modern guerrilla is that the Robin Hood type of social bandit has extremely modest and limited military objectives (and usually only a very small and localized force). The test of a guerrilla group comes when it sets itself such ambitious tasks as the overthrow of a political regime or the expulsion of a regular force of occupiers, and especially when it sets out to do this not in some remote corner of a country (the 'liberated area') but over an entire national territory. Until the early 20th century hardly any guerrilla

movements faced this test; they operated in extremely inaccessible and marginal regions—mountain country is the commonest example—or opposed relatively primiture and inefficient governments native or foreign. Guerrilla actions have sometimes played an important part in major modern wars, either alone in exceptionally favourable conditions, as with the Tyrolese against the French in 1809, or more usually, as ancillaries to regular forces—during the Napoleonic Wars, for example, or in our century in Spain and Russia. However, by themselves and for any length of time, they almost certainly had little more than nuisance value, as in Southern Italy where Napoleon's French were never seriously inconvenienced by them. That may be one reason why they did not much preoccupy military thinkers until the 20th century. Another reason, which may explain why even revolutionary soldiers did not think much about them, was that practically all effective guerrillas were ideologically conservative, even if socially rebellious. Few peasants had been converted to left-wing political views or followed left-wing political leaders.

The novelty of modern guerrilla war, therefore, is not so much military. The guerrillas of today may have at their disposal much better equipment than did their predecessors, but they are still invariably much worse armed than their opponents (they derive a large part of their armament—in the early stages, probably most of it—from what they can capture, buy or steal from the other side, and not, as Pentagon folklore holds, from foreign supplies). Until the ultimate phase of guerrilla war, when the guerrilla force becomes an army, and may actually face and defeat its adversaries in open battle, as at Dienbienphu, there is nothing in the purely military pages of Mao, Vo Nguyen Giap, Che Guevara or other manuals of guerrilla warfare, which a traditional *guerrillero* or band leader would regard as other than simple common sense.

The novelty is political, and it is of two kinds. First, situations are now more common when the guerrilla force can rely on mass support in widely different areas of its country. It does so in part by appealing to the common interest of the poor against the rich, the oppressed against the government; and in part by exploiting nationalism or the hatred of foreign occupiers (often of another colour). It is, once again, only the folklore of military experts that 'peasants want only to be left alone'. They don't. When they have no food, they want food; when they have no land, they want land; when they are cheated by the officials of a remote capital, they want to get rid of them. But above all they want rights as men and when ruled by foreigners, to get rid of the foreigners. One ought to add that an effective guerrilla war is possible only in countries in which such appeals can be successfully made to a high percentage of the rural population in a high proportion of the country's territory. One of the major reasons for the defeat of guerrilla war in Malaya and Kenya was that these conditions did not obtain: the guerrillas were drawn almost entirely from among the Chinese or Kikuyu, whereas the Malays (the rural majority) and the rest of Kenya remained largely outside the movement.

The second political novelty is the nationalization not only of support for the guerrillas but of the guerrilla force itself, by means of parties and, movements of national and sometimes international scope. The partisan unit is no longer a purely local growth; it is a body of permanen and mobile cadres around whom the local force is formed. They link it with other units into a 'guerrilla army' capable of nation-wide strategy and of being transformed into a 'real' army. They also link it with the noncombatant national movement in general, and the politically decisive cities in particular. This implies a fundamental change in the character of such forces: it does *not* mean that guerrilla armies are now composed of hard-core revolutionaries infiltrated from outside. However numerous and enthusiastic the volunteers, the outside recruitment of guerrillas is limited partly by technical considerations, partly because many potential recruits, especially from among city intellectuals and workers, are simply not qualified; they lack the sort of experience which only guerrilla action or peasant life can give. Guerrillas may be started by a nucleus of cadres, but even a totally infiltrated force such as the Communist units which maintained themselves for some years after 1945 in Aragon (Spain) soon had to begin systematically recruiting among the local population. The bulk of any successful guerrilla force is always likely to consist of local men, or of professional fighters who were once recruited as local men, and the military advantages of this are immense, as Che Guevara has pointed out, for the local man 'has his friends, to whom he can make a personal appeal for help: he knows the terrain and all the things that are likely to happen in the region; and he will also have the extra enthusiasm of the man who is defending his own home'.

But if the guerrilla force is an amalgam of outside cadres and local recruits, it will nevertheless have been entirely transformed. It will not only have unprecedented cohesion, discipline and morale, developed by systematic education (in literacy as well as military techniques) and political training but unprecedented long-range mobility. The 'Long March' transferred Mao's Red army fron one end of China to the other, and Tito's partisans achieved similar migrations after similar defeats. And wherever the guerrilla army goes, it will apply the essential principles of guerrilla war which are, almost by definition, inapplicable by orthodox forces: 1. To pay for everything supplied by the local population; 2. not to rape the local women; 3. to bring land, justice and schools wherever they go; and 4. never to live better than, or otherwise than, the local inhabitants.

Such forces, operating as part of a nation-wide political movement and under conditions of popular support, have proved themselves extraordinarily formidable. At their best they simply cannot be defeated by orthodox military operations. Even when less successful, they can be defeated, according to the calculations of British counterinsurgency experts in Malaya and elsewhere, only by a *minimum* of 10 men on the ground for every single guerrilla; that is to say, in South Vietnam by a *minimum* of something like a million Americans and puppet Vietnamese. (In fact, the 8,000 Malayan guerrillas immobilized 140,000 soldiers and policemen.) As the United States is now discovering, orthodox military methods are quite beside the point: bombs don't work unless there is

something other than paddies to make craters in. The 'official' or foreign forces soon realize that the only way to fight guerrillas is by attacking their base, i.e. the civilian population. Various ways of doing this have been proposed, from the old-fashioned Nazi method of treating all civilians as potential guerrillas, through more selective massacre and torture, to the presently popular device of kidnapping entire populations and concentrating them in fortified village compounds, in the hope of depriving the guerrillas of their indispensable source of supplies and intelligence. The US forces, with their usual taste for solving social problems by technological means, appear to have a preference for destroying everything over large areas, presumably in the hope either that all guerrillas in the area will be killed along with the rest of the human, animal and vegetable life, or that somehow all those trees and underbrush will be vaporized, leaving the guerrillas standing up and visible, where they can be bombed like real soldiers. Barry Goldwater's plan to defoliate the Vietnamese forests by nuclear bombs was no more grotesque than what is actually being attempted along these lines.

The difficulty with such methods is that they merely confirm the local population in their support of the guerrillas, and provide the latter with a constant supply of recruits. Hence the anti-guerrillas devise plans to cut the ground from under the enemy's feet by improving the economic and social conditions of the local population, rather in the manner of King Frederick William I of Prussia who is reported to have run after his subjects in Berlin, beating them with his stick and shouting: 'I want you to love me.' But it is not easy to convince people that their conditions are being improved while their wives and children are being drenched in burning oil, especially when the people doing the drenching live (by Vietnamese standards) like princes.

Anti-guerrilla governments are more likely to talk about, say, giving peasants the land, than actually doing it, but even when they carry out a series of such reforms they do not necessarily gain the gratitude of the peasants. Oppressed peoples do not want economic improvement alone. The most formidable insurrectionary movements (including very notably the Vietnamese) are those that combine national and social elements. A people who want bread and *also* independence cannot be conciliated merely by a more generous distribution of bread. The British met the revolutionary agitation of the Irish under Parnell and Davitt in the 1880's by a combination of coercion and economic reform, and not without success—but this did not forestall the Irish revolutionary movement which threw them out in 1916–22.

Nevertheless, there are limitations to a guerrilla army's ability to win a war, though it usually has effective means to avoid losing one. In the first place, guerrilla strategy is by no means applicable everywhere on a national scale, and that is why it has failed, or partly failed, in a number of countries, e.g. Malaya and Burma. Internal divisions and hostilities—racial, religious, etc—within a country or a region may limit the guerrilla base to one part of the people, while automatically providing a potential base for anti-guerrilla action in another. To take an obvious case; the Irish Revolution of 1916–22, essentially a guerrilla operation,

succeeded in the 26 counties but not in Northern Ireland, despite a common frontier and active or passive help from the south. (The British Government, by the way, never made this sympathy an excuse to drop bombs on the Shannon barrage in order to force the Dublin government to cease its aggression against the free world.)

Again, there may be peoples so inexperienced or so lacking in effective cadres as to allow large-scale and wide-based guerrilla insurrections to be suppressed, at least for some time. That is perhaps the case in Angola. Or the geography of a country may facilitate local guerrilla action, but make co-ordinated general guerrilla warfare remarkably difficult (as perhaps in some Latin American countries). Or a people may be simply too small to win independence by direct action without major outside aid against a combination of occupying countries determined to suppress them. This may be the case with the Kurds, superb and persistent guerrilla fighters of the traditional kind, but who have never achieved their independence.

Beyond these obstacles which vary from country to country, there is the problem of cities. However great the support for the movement in the cities, however urban the origin of its leaders, cities and especially capital cities are the last place a guerrilla army will capture or, unless very badly advised, tackle. The Chinese Communists' road to Shanghai and Canton ran via Yenan. The Italian and French resistance movements timed their urban insurrections (Paris, 1944; Milan and Turin, 1945) for the very last moments before the arrival of Allied armies, and the Poles who did not (Warsaw, 1943) were wiped out. The power of modern industry, transport and administration can be neutralized for a significant length of time only where it lies thin on the ground. Small-scale harassment, such as the cutting of one or two roads and rail tracks, can disrupt military movement and administration in difficult rural terrain, but not in the big city. Guerrilla action or its equivalent is entirely possible in the city—after all, how many bank robbers are ever caught in London—and there have been some recent examples of it, for instance in Barcelona in the late 1940's, and various cities in Latin America. But it has little more than nuisance value, and merely serves to create a general atmosphere of lack of confidence in the efficiency of the regime, or to tie down armed forces and police which might be better used elsewhere.

Finally, the most crucial limitation of guerrilla warfare is that it cannot win until it becomes *regular* warfare, in which case it must meet its enemies on their strongest ground. It is comparatively easy for a widely backed guerrilla movement to eliminate official power from the countryside, except for the strong points actually physically occupied by armed forces, and to leave in government or occupation control no more than the isolated cities and garrisons, linked by a few main roads or railroads (and that only by daylight), and by air or radio. The real problem is to get beyond that point. Textbooks devote a good deal of attention to this ultimate phase of guerrilla war, which the Chinese and Vietnamese handled with brilliant success against Chiang Kai-shek and the French. However, those successes should not induce mistaken generalizations. The real strength of guerrilla armies lies not in their ability to

turn themselves into regular armies capable of expelling other conventional forces but in their political strength. The total withdrawal of popular support may produce the collapse of local governments, often —as in China and Vietnam—heralded by mass desertions to the guerrillas; a crucial military success by the guerrillas may bring this collapse into the open. Fidel Castro's rebel army did not win Havana: when it had demonstrated that it could not only hold the Sierra Maestra but also take the provincial capital of Santiago, the government apparatus of Batista collapsed.

Foreign occupying forces are likely to be less vulnerable and less inefficient. However, even they may be convinced that they are in a war they cannot win, that even their tenuous hold can be maintained only at quite disproportionate cost. The decision to call off the wasting game is naturally humiliating, and there are always good reasons for postponing it, because it will rarely happen that the foreign forces have been decisively defeated, even in local actions like Dienbienphu. The Americans are still in Saigon, apparently drinking their bourbon peacefully, except perhaps for an occasional bomb in a café. Their columns still crisscross the country apparently at will, and their losses are not much greater than those from traffic accidents at home. Their aircraft are dropping bombs wherever they like, and there is still somebody who can be called the prime minister of 'free' Vietnam, though it may be hard to forecast from one day to the next who he will be.

Thus, it can always be argued that just one more effort will tip the balance: more troops, more bombs, more massacres and torture, more 'social missions'. The history of the Algerian War anticipates the one in Vietnam in this respect. By the time it was over, half a million Frenchmen were in uniform there (against a total Moslem population of 9 million, or one soldier to every 18 inhabitants, not counting the pro-French local white population), and the army was still asking for more including the destruction of the French Republic.

It is hard, in such circumstances, to cut one's losses, but there are occasions when no other decision makes sense. Some governments may take it earlier than others. The British evacuated Ireland and Israel well before their military position had become untenable. The French hung on for nine years in Vietnam and for seven years in Algeria, but went in the end. For what is the alternative? The old style of local or marginal guerrilla actions, like border raiding by tribesmen, could be isolated or contained by various relatively cheap devices which did not interfere with the ordinary life of a country or its occupiers. A few squadrons of aircraft could occasionally bomb villages (a favourite British device in the Middle East between the wars), a military frontier zone could be established (as on the old northwest frontier of India), and in extreme cases government tacitly left some remote and disturbed region to its own devices for a while, merely seeing to it that the trouble did not spread. In a situation like that of Vietnam today or of Algeria in the later 1950's, this will simply not work. If a people does not want to be ruled in the old way any more, there is nothing much that can be done. Of course, if elections had been held in South Vietnam in 1956, as was

provided by the Geneva agreements, the views of its people might have been discovered at considerably less cost.

Where does this leave the anti-insurrectionaries? It would be foolish to pretend that guerrilla war is an invariable recipe for successful revolution or that its hopes, as of now, are realistic in more than a limited number of relatively undeveloped countries. The theorists of 'counter-insurgency' can therefore take comfort in the thought that they need not *always* lose. But that is not the point. When, for one reason or another, a guerrilla war has become genuinely national and nation-wide, and has expelled the official administration from wide stretches of the countryside, the chances of defeating it are zero. That the Mau Mau were defeated in Kenya is no help to the Americans in Vietnam; all the less help when we remember that Kenya is now independent, and the Mau Mau regarded as pioneers and heroes of the national struggle. That the Burmese Government has never been overthrown by guerrillas was no help to the French in Algeria. The problem of President Johnson is Vietnam, not the Philippines, and the situation in Vietnam is lost.

What remain in such a situation are illusions and terror. The rationalizations of today's Washington policy were all anticipated in Algeria. We were told by French official spokesmen that the ordinary Algerian was on the side of France, or if not actually pro-French, that he wanted only peace and quiet but was terrorized by the FLN. We were told, practically once a week, that the situation had improved, that it was now stabilized, that another month should see the forces of order regain the initiative, that all they needed was another few thousand soldiers and another few million francs. We were told that the rebellion would soon die down, once it was deprived of its foreign sanctuary and source of supplies. That sanctuary (Tunisia) was bombed and the border hermetically sealed. We were told that if only the great centre of Moslem subversion in Cairo could be eliminated, everything would be all right. The French therefore made war on Egypt. In the last stages we were told that there might just conceivably be some people who *really* wanted to get rid of the French, but since the FLN obviously did not represent the Algerian people, but only a gang of ideological infiltrators, it would be grossly unfair to the Algerians to negotiate with them. We were told about the minorities which had to be protected against terror. The only thing we were not told was that France would if necessary use nuclear weapons, because the French didn't then have any. What was the result? Algeria is today governed by the FLN.

The means by which the illusions are to come true is terror, mostly—in the nature of things—against noncombatants. There is the old-fashioned terror against civilians by frightened soldiers, demoralized by the fact that in this kind of war any civilian may be an enemy fighter, and culminating in the infamous mass reprisals—the razing of villages, such as the Nazis' Lidice and Oradour. Intelligent anti-guerrillas will discourage this, since it is apt to make the local population totally hostile. Still, such terror and reprisals will happen. Furthermore, there will be the more selective torturing of prisoners for information. In the past

there may have been some moral limitation on such torture, but not, alas, in our time. In fact, we have so far forgotten the elementary reflexes of humanity that in Vietnam we photograph torturers and victims and release the pictures to the press.

A second kind of terror is that which is at the base of all modern warfare, whose targets nowadays are essentially the civilians rather than the combatants. (Nobody would ever have developed nuclear weapons for any other purpose.) In orthodox warfare the purpose of indiscriminate mass destruction is to break the morale of population and government, and to destroy the industrial and administrative base on which any orthodox war effort must rest. Neither task is as easy in guerrilla war, because there are hardly any cities, factories, communications or other installations to destroy, and nothing like the vulnerable central administration machine of an advanced state. On the other hand, more modest success may pay off. If terror convinces even a single area to withhold support from the guerrillas, and thus to drive them elsewhere, this is a net gain for the anti-guerrillas. So the temptation to go on bombing and burning at random is irresistible, especially for countries like the United States which could strip the entire surface of South Vietnam of life without dipping too deeply into its supply of armaments or money.

Lastly, there is that most hopeless and desperate form of terror, which the United States is at present applying: the threat to extend the war to other nations unless they can somehow get the guerrillas to stop. This has no rational justification at all. If the Vietnamese war were really what the State Department pretends, namely an 'indirect' foreign agression without 'a spontaneous and local rebellion', then no bombing of North Vietnam would be necessary. The Vietcong would be of no more importance in history than the attempts to set up guerrilla warfare in Spain after 1945, which faded away, leaving few traces except some local newspaper stories and a few publications by Spanish policemen. Conversely, if the people of South Vietnam really were on the side of whatever general at present claims to be their government, or merely wanted to be left in peace, there would be no more trouble in that country than in neighbouring Cambodia or Burma, both of which had or still have guerrilla movements.

But it is clear by now, and should always have been clear, that the Vietcong will not go away quietly, and no miracle will transform South Vietnam into a stable anti-Communist republic within the foreseeable future. As most governments in the world know (though one or two, like the British, are too dependent on Washington to say so) there can be no military solution in Vietnam without at least a major conventional land war in the Far East, which would probably escalate into a world war when sooner or later, the United States discovered that it could not win such a conventional war either. And it would be fought by several hundreds of thousands of American troops, because the allies of the United States, though doubtless willing to send a token battalion or ambulance unit, are not fools enough to involve themselves seriously in a conflict of this kind. The pressure to escalate a little further will mount and so will the Pentagon belief in the most suicidal of all the many

Vietnamese illusions—that in the last showdown the North Vietnamese and Chinese can be terrorized by the prospect of nuclear war into defeat or withdrawal.

It is important for American generals (and for anyone else calculating war on assumptions derived from industrial societies) to realize that a nuclear threat will be regarded by the Chinese either as incredible, or as inevitable but not decisive. It will therefore not work *as a threat*, though doubtless the Chinese will not rush lightly into a major war, especially a nuclear one, even when they believe it cannot be avoided. As in Korea they are not likely to enter it until directly attacked or threatened. The dilemma of American policy therefore remains. Having three times as many nuclear bombs as the rest of the world is very impressive, but it will not stop people from making revolutions of which Mr McGeorge Bundy disapproves. Nuclear bombs cannot win guerrilla wars such as the Vietnamese are now fighting, and without such weapons it is improbable that even conventional wars can be won in that region. (The Korean War was at best a draw.) Nuclear bombs cannot be used as a *threat* to win a little war that is lost, or even a medium-sized war, for though the populace can be massacred, the enemy cannot be brought to surrender. The risk is that the United States will slide into nuclear war rather than face reality.

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