

The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

An independent weekly internet magazine
dedicated to the movement for economic justice,
social justice and peace - Providing commentary,
analysis and investigations on issues affecting
African Americans and the African world.

www.BlackCommentator.com

[Contents of Issue](#)

[Click here](#)

October 15, 2009 - Issue 346

[Home](#)

Both Forgotten and Misread - Part 2:

Robert Taber's The War of the Flea

By Daniel N. White

BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator

Click on the back button of your browser to return to non printer friendly page of this article

[Click here](#) to get helpful hints for viewing and printing this printer friendly plain text page

Taber, in his [War of the Flea: The Classic Study of Guerrilla Warfare](#), shows himself a first-rate analyst of political situations, both past historical ones and (then current) ones. Back when Flea was written, the United States, and other countries, Mao's China foremost, were infatuated with the notion of guerilla wars and wars of national liberation, wherein nationalist (per Mao) or Communist (per the US) guerilla forces would form up and attack and defeat the established post-colonial governments in the Third World, and establish some new (nationalist/communist) order. In the United States, theories of counterinsurgency, how to fight and win these wars of national liberation, were all in vogue throughout the 1960s, and a great deal of forest products were wasted on books and articles on the subject. Most all stunk. They were uncritically read then, and are completely unread today. It should be a permanently disqualifying embarrassment to cite Taber, harsh critic of US policies then, as an inspiration for US policy in our current wars, as the pundits are doing, but nobody has called them on it, alas.

At the time it was thought that quite potentially these wars would spread to older, more established countries with similar sets of problems of social inequality, such as the Latin American and Central American republics, and spread even to industrialized Western

countries, like the US. As it was, nationalism proved the driving force in most of these wars, not the US-feared desire for a communistic social order. Once the postwar questions of nationalism were sorted out, finally, in Africa (insofar as they have been - the LRA [Lord's Resistance Army] in Uganda, which is generally portrayed by the news media as a lunatic band of child-soldier zombies led by Joseph Kony the African Manson, is fundamentally a guerilla movement by the Acholi in northern Uganda against the central government.) the topic of guerilla wars faded out from military and political discourse and fashion both.

Since our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, counterinsurgency theory has come back into fashion, again. Most all the comments by military and pundits are a dreadful rehashing of the '60's American writers and theorists, without, as pointed out earlier, their having read them. A significant part of Flea is Taber's discussion of these writers' failings, and his writing on them is spot-on. From p. 173, Taber discusses the rationales for the guerilla wars professed by counterinsurgency experts:

"Whether the primary cause of revolution is nationalism, or social justice, or the anticipation of material progress, the decision to fight and to sacrifice is a social and a moral decision. Insurgency is thus a matter not of manipulation but of inspiration.

I am aware that such conclusions are not compatible with the pictures of guerrilla operations and guerrilla motivations drawn by the counterinsurgency theorists who are so much in vogue today. But the counterinsurgency experts have yet to win a war. At this writing, they are certainly losing one.

Their picture is distorted because their premises are false and their observation faulty. They assume - perhaps their commitments require them to assume - that politics is mainly a manipulative science and insurgency mainly a politico-military technique to be countered by some other technique; whereas both are forms of social behavior, the latter being the mode of popular resistance to unpopular governments."

Things haven't changed any since 1965. Insurgency remains a matter of inspiration. No counterinsurgency expert has ever won a war. And dang but Taber cuts to the bone when he remarks then how US politicians regard politics as a manipulative science. We certainly haven't changed there.

Taber's analysis of the simple possibility of suppressing a war of national liberation, and more important, its desirability, from p 177:

"Conditions have changed in the world. What is wanted today is manpower and its products. The raw materials of the undeveloped areas are of no use to the industrial powers...without the human effort that makes them available; strategic bases require the services and the good will of large populations; industry requires both large labor pools and ever-expanding consumer markets.

Under such conditions, to try to suppress popular resistance movements by force is futile. If inadequate force is applied, the resistance grows. If the overwhelming force necessary to accomplish the task is applied, its object is destroyed. It is a case of shooting the horse because he refuses to pull the cart."

Taber's analysis of the US' position in Viet Nam in 1965 is the best analysis I've ever read, and events proved him prophetic. From p. 177-8:

"The choices open to Washington in Viet Nam appear obvious. Unless the dissident Vietnamese population can be **persuaded** to embrace a solution acceptable to the United States (certainly a forlorn hope), the alternatives are: (1) to wage a relentless, full-scale war of subjugation against the Vietnamese people, with the aid of such Vietnamese allies as remain available; (2) seek a solution acceptable to the Vietnamese people, a step that would clearly entail negotiating with the Viet Cong; (3) quit the field and let the Vietnamese work out their own solution.

A fourth possibility does exist. Essentially it is a monstrous variation of the first. The United States can change the **character** of the war, or its apparent character, by expanding it; that is, by taking arms against Hanoi and, inevitably, against China. To do so, with the right kind of window dressing, could conceivably be justified in the minds of the American people and perhaps of their allies despite the tremendous expense and risk involved, where a losing war in the limited theater of South Viet Nam cannot be justified. Under cover of a general war, the two Viet Nams could, perhaps, be occupied and put under martial law, and the communist movement suppressed by overwhelmingly superior military force.

But then what? A southeast Asia held by American troops in the overwhelming numbers that would be required (and it would have to be all of Southeast Asia, not merely Viet Nam) would be a burden almost beyond endurance for the American economy and the American electorate, and would be of no conceivable use under such conditions except as a base for the ensuing war against China. War to what end? It staggers the imagination to think of the vast, interminable, and profitless conflict that would ensue, even assuming that it were confined to Asia - and we have no such assurance. The bloody, costly Korean war would appear as a child's game by comparison."

Our situation in Afghanistan and Iraq is a repeat of the above, except we don't have to fear a bigger war from big-power China or Russia. Just a bigger war from smaller players Iran (pop. 70 million) or Pakistan, (pop. 180 million) {South Vietnam's population in 1965 was all of 14 million}, that's all. Change some of the nouns, and all the rest of Taber's words read as well now as then. Nobody now in American politics sees things this clearly or talks this frankly about them. We have to ask again Taber's question above about Vietnam - "War to what end?" about our two ongoing wars. "But then what" - suppose that we did in fact achieve our military objectives, then what? Iraq, a basket case military dictatorship that conveniently allows us to station, at great expense, a large number of soldiers, for some uncertain purpose. The idea of any military success in Afghanistan is just to ridiculous to contemplate, and the idea that that country is usefully a ward of the US, as it would have to be, for any good purpose is insanity. There's no good end for our wars, and it is only a question of how long it takes us to pack up and leave, and whether or not we bother to negotiate some settlement with the locals before we do. That, and whether or not this time we have sense and are honest enough with ourselves to figure out why we did something so wrong and stupid twice in my lifetime.

Taber, alone of all the American writers on counterinsurgency from the 1960's, is worth

reading. It is sad that current events grant him the utmost relevance and may yet rescue him from obscurity, but we should all be thankful for his perceptive and accurate writings that are still of such great utility.

BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator, Daniel N. White, has lived in Austin, Texas, much longer than he figured he would. He reads more than most people and a whole lot more than we are all supposed to. He recommends all read his earlier piece in **BC**, [1975 Redux](#), which is still, in his estimation, the best piece on the Iraq surge anybody printed when it started. He is still doing blue-collar work for a living - you can be honest doing it - but is fairly fed up with it right now. He invites all reader comments, and will answer all that aren't too insulting. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. White.



[Contents of Issue](#)
[Click here](#)

[Home](#)

Click Here To
CONTRIBUTE TO **bc** NOW

Click Here To
CONTACT **bc**

Your comments are always welcome.

e-Mail re-print notice

If you send us an e-Mail message we may publish all or part of it, unless you tell us it is not for publication. You may also request that we withhold your name.

Thank you very much for your readership.

Website Design and Hosting provided by



Copyright © 2002-2009
www.BlackCommentator.com
All Rights Reserved