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COMPARISON OF THE MALAYAN EMERGENCY AND VIETNAM WAR
AND APPLICATION OF LESSONS TO SOLVE
EL SALVADOR PROBLEMS AND APPROPRIATE
U.S. MILITARY ASSISTANCE

BY

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

COMPARISON OF THE MALAYAN EMERGENCY AND VIETNAM WAR
AND APPLICATION OF LESSONS TO SOLVE
EL SALVADOR PROBLEMS AND APPROPRIATE
U.S. MILITARY ASSISTANCE

An Individual Essay

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U.S. Army War College
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COMPARISON OF MALAYAN EMERGENCY AND VIETNAM WAR AND
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INTRODUCTION

The Malayan Emergency and Vietnam War were operations against communist insurgents in Southeast Asia; the largest conflicts undertaken by the protectors and most practiced democracy--the British and American people. Each conflict occurred at different timeframes with enemies of different economic, political and social backgrounds. Ways of life,, attitudes, cultures and motivation were also different. These differences were some of the crucial and deciding factors which determined the outcome of the conflicts. Some of the measures that were used in the conflicts may be useful as a guide to solve the problems in El Salvador which is infested by guerrilla activities at the moment.

AIM

The aim of this paper is to apply lessons of the Malayan Emergency and Vietnam War to solve El Salvador problems and to determine U.S. military assistance.

MALAYA

The British ruled over Malaya as a colony for nearly a century. They fought communist terrorists (CTs) of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), who were mainly Chinese allied with a small number of Malays and Indians from 1948¹ until 1960.² The British recognized several areas where they could win over the CTs. They believed that the war against communism was a war of political ideologies³ and established it as a civilian's war.⁴ A unified command and control system involving an integral political, military and

intelligence program under a director of operations was implemented.⁵ New villages were set up to remove squatters, mainly Chinese, from the CT areas of influence under police surveillance.⁶ The policy brought a significant result. The CTs lost one of their main sources of supply of food,⁷ and information on security forces (SFs) activities.⁸ Foot patrols were given predominance whether these were reconnaissance or fighting patrols. Deep patrols by the Special Air Service (SAS) were instituted to hunt the CTs and destroy vegetable crops which they grew in the middle of the jungle when the source of supply was cut off.⁹ Surrendered CTs were used in many ways to counter the insurgency.¹⁰ The imposition of gate checks, road blocks and curfews including constant patrolling of the jungle fringes prevented illegal foods, clothing, medicine and money from leaving towns, villages and estate labor lines and reaching CTs hands.¹¹ Forward bases which could either be permanent tactical bases or temporary patrol bases were set up in order to ease some of the logistical and administrative difficulties in administering the needs of troops in a jungle environment.¹²

Psychological warfare was directed against the CTs to emphasize their isolation from the people; to undermine confidence in their leadership and its policies; to create mistrust within the CT organization; to secure surrenders of individual CTs or even whole platoons.¹³ A system of reward was introduced for information to the killing or capture of CTs, with Chin Peng worth \$80,000 at the top of the list;¹⁴ and although the system was effective it also had a negative effect mainly on members of the SFs who did the dirty jobs of fighting the CTs but received little in return.

The Briggs Plan had originally envisaged clearing the country from south to north but when difficulties were encountered it proved easier to create "white areas" which were cleared of CTs as and when the opportunities

presented itself.¹⁵ At a later date primary schools were built throughout the entire country and attendance at these schools was free.¹⁶ The most dramatic decisions which outstripped communist policies were the granting of citizenship to the Chinese and Indians;¹⁷ and a complete independence of Malaya in 1957 giving all races the same status of identity.¹⁸ However, the remnants of active communist influences only ended in 1960.

VIETNAM

The Americans in Vietnam faced a different kind of enemy, an enemy who wanted to reunite the country after it was divided at the 17th parallel after France signed a ceasefire agreement at Geneva on 20 July 1954, following nearly eight years of fighting.¹⁹ The Viet Minh forces were to regroup in the north of the dividing line while the French union forces were to regroup to the south.²⁰ The communists began the rebuilding of the devastated northern half of the country. Through ruthless suppression of the opposition, economic development proceeded steadily with a very stable political framework. The south suffered through several periods of political crisis and changes of leadership between 1954 and 1967. The Emperor Bao Dai appointed Ngo Dinh Diem as Prime Minister who had a very difficult situation.²¹ Much of the country rice growing area was uncultivated; communications were chaotic; the army under French command until 1956 was demoralized;²² much of the administration was in the hands of the political religious sects like Cao Dor and Binh Xuyen.²³ Some one million refugees from the north crowded into Saigon where an already weak administration found it difficult to cope with the situation.²⁴ However, they were eventually settled after Ngo Dinh Diem had virtually broken the power of the religious and secret society sects.²⁵ Diem ousted Emperor Bao Dai in a referendum and proclaimed South Vietnam a republic with himself as president.²⁶ The Geneva Agreement had envisaged a

holding of general elections through the while of Vietnam in July 1956.²⁷ The election never material'zed. The north continually maintained that it desired country-wide elections but the south took the view that such elections would not be genuinely free in the north.

From 1956 Diem's popularity began to wane. Some economic progress was made, but this largely confined to towns. Land reform was not met and Diem's limited program of land distribution and tenancy reform contrasted favorably with policies of the government.²⁸ Arbitrary arrests, censorship, suppression of opposition and the ever increasing power in the land of his family were more and more resented by the people. Diem refused to listen to advise and suggestions from Washington inspite of ever increasing amounts of American aid. The general discontent and lack of meaningful social and economic reform was made full use of by the communist party who set the stage for the resumption of conflict. Terrorists incidents and clashes with South Vietnamese Army had become frequent and by early 1960 South Vietnamese government was faced with full-scale insurgency with communists in controlled large segments of the land and population and had developed a formidable army.²⁹

The United States who maintained South Vietnam as a strategy to contain China to dominate Southeast Asia intervened militarily rather than looking the problems through political terms.³⁰ The United States had become identified with a highly unpopular regime of President Diem;³¹ but the South Vietnamese government continued to lose control of the countryside to the communists, the Viet Cong. The "hearts and minds" policy of attempting to concentrate the peasants in "strategic hamlet," based on the Malayan model was unsuccessful and contributed little towards increasing the sense of security of the Vietnamese peasantry.³² The creation of free fire zones by the use of

aerial defoliants was obviously counterproductive in a country where subsistence agriculture was the way of life.³³ The total destruction techniques using artillery and aerial bombings were used against many villages or areas suspected of harboring communists. Foot patrol was often put aside and replaced by the use of high technology--massive firepower.³⁴

COMPARISON: MALAYA AND VIETNAM

As illustrated, clearly the vast differences of political and sovereignty status in each of the countries played significant roles for the success and failure of both conflicts. The British were a colonial power the sole legal authority in Malaya. They recognized that the center of gravity to win against communism was to separate the people from the CTs. But these terrorists were mainly Chinese;³⁵ and the removal of Chinese squatters from jungle fringes into resettlement areas had isolated the CTs from their daily food supplies and information of SFs activities. Whereas Vietnam was an independent country. The United States was therefore an advisor allied with an independent government. The United States also recognized that to separate the population from the communists was necessary, hence the implementation of the "strategic hamlet."³⁶ But the scheme was unpopular since it required people to move out of their villages; home towns where they grew up for generations. Thus, the security of the hamlet could not be instituted effectively.

The timeframe also had significant effect on the success and failure of both conflicts. In Malaya television could not show the horrors of war but the live television ground coverage brought the war into American homes which helped spread disillusion in the United States and eventually lost the war through lack of national support.³⁷

EL SALVADOR

The history of El Salvador was marked by Spanish domination and colonialization from 1522.³⁸ The Spanish authority weakened by uprisings and rebellions from mid-1700s, and colonialists ended in September 15, 1821 which opened a new era--the independence of El Salvador.³⁹ No social changes were made before the Spanish left and this arrangement was perfectly suited to the elite class, the creole.⁴⁰ Father Delgado, a newly appointed intendente by a new government in Guatemala City, exiled Barriere to Cuba when he refused to call municipal elections, fearing his opponents would win. Little changes and improvements to Salvadorans either in social, political and economic terms were made since the country achieved independence. The peasants became poorer and existed at poverty level.

The military came to power in a coup in December 2, 1931 the first in Salvadoran history.⁴² General Martinez assumed the presidency and later an election was held but the massive electoral fraud, particularly where the communists won, the results were annulled.⁴³ This added the rapidly mounting social tension in the countryside with more strikes and demonstrations and more violent repression by the government.⁴⁴ The peasants requested the government to make substantial reforms in the countryside but to no avail.⁴⁵ Rebellion broke out and the killing by government forces was estimated as high as 30,000.⁴⁶ During his repressive administration Martinez greatly increased the role of government in the economy. A mortgage bank was established to channel loans to coffee growers and coffee exports were managed by a government run export company.⁴⁷ Public housing program was created but the population growth surpassed homes available. A small number of families received land through land distribution.⁴⁸ The Martinez government ended by a military coup. But he

left the centralization of state power as Salvadoran political process. He converted the army into the most powerful political group in the country. The result was a division of labor, with the oligarchy managing the economy, and the military caring for political matters.⁵⁰

During the modernization era, 1944-1977,⁵¹ the administration changed hands rapidly through military coup. Each administration emphasized economic diversification, shifting emphasis from coffee to industry and new crops such as cotton.⁵² But each government was repressive and brutal, labelling any opposition--communist.⁵³ The 1972 presidential election was marred by fraud and the National Conciliation Party (PCN)--a combination of military and civilian, declared victory.⁵⁴ Social tensions continued to rise. Strikes were paralyzing the economy and unrest was deterring potential investors.⁵⁵ The opposition began to respond to government violence but repression in the countryside worsened. Although the PCN was denied the official status to govern but left intact the massive security apparatus--the Army, National Guard, National Police and Treasury Police.⁵⁶ In October 1979, the government of General Romero was overthrown in El Salvador. Experts who followed such events were visibly relieved. Less publicized than Nicaragua, El Salvador suffered from much the same festering sores of secret death squads, government torture and repression, and tens of thousands of ragged peasants eking out a starvation living on small rented farms.⁵⁷ However, after a decade of running the country, it became difficult to distinguish between the government and the military.⁵⁸ This was clearly demonstrated when a new Junta in power 1979, was unable to introduce new reform. The right rejected the Junta's reforms as communists inspired and the left felt that little good was likely to come from the same military which had brutalized the opposition and stolen elections for decades.⁵⁹ But for many Salvadorans the

opportunity for reforms and change had long passed. To a sizeable right-wing faction, reform was but an open door to Marxism. To the anti-reform faction which could count on a sizeable portion of the middle and professional classes reform meant a radical change not too far removed from outright revolution which threatened their jobs, property and rights. The anti-reform faction in El Salvador then did not consist solely of the extreme right, but could count on a sizeable portion of middle and professional classes in that nation as well.⁶⁰

Such a history, a tragedy and a long suffering of human life, is a good recruiting ground for communist inspired goal against the government. The Salvadoran Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) along with 6,000-8,000 guerrillas, claimed to have up to 1 million sympathizers, including 100 thousand militia members.⁶¹ The guerrillas onslaught on the economy has destroyed factories, stores, bases, private cars and public utilities, causing widespread disruption, unemployment and misery.⁶² The elections of March 1982 showed that the locus of guerrilla power had shifted to the countryside. The government controlled most of the major cities (though they remain subject to guerrilla incursions), the guerrillas much of the eastern and northern countryside.⁶³ With a substantial portion of the countryside under guerrilla control, the task to fight the guerrilla and to win back the population to government fold is considerable. The National Pacification Plan failed as soon as the guerrillas pushed against it.⁶⁴ The war was changing from one of isolated guerrilla attacks to a "war of movement" utilizing ever larger guerrilla contingents able to move freely and openly through greater areas of the countryside.⁶⁵

Experiences and lessons through Vietnam War indicates that when the insurgents have attained the capability to challenge the authority, the tasks

to isolate the insurgents and to win the population to government folds would be extremely difficult. Although the CTs in Malaya had never reached this stage, still it took 12 years to crush the CTs infrastructure and the will to fight with considerable number of manpower and resources being utilized.

TO COMBAT THE GUERRILLAS/WINNING THE POPULATION

Both Malaya and Vietnam created resettlements or strategic hamlets respectively, to isolate the insurgents from the population. The former was a success and the latter a failure due to the vast differences in the political nature and the time the conflicts occurred. The authority in El Salvador recognized that the center of gravity is the isolation of guerrillas from the population, hence the implementation of the National Pacification Plan which so far failed. Since the actors are Salvadorans, similar to Vietnamese problems, the chances for such a scheme to succeed, if it were to continue, would be minimal. To fight the guerrillas further and to secure the resettlements at the same time, would require a large number of SFs. In Malaya the ratio was 25:1 in favor the SFs with a large number of contingents from the British colonies.⁶⁶ The Salvadoran authority can never dream of such a luxury, and it has to contend with the forces available.⁶⁷ In this circumstance to achieve the separation of guerrillas from the people, the strategy would be to gain control of an area or village and remain to retain control over it. Once authority has been established and the necessary "hearts and minds" projects have satisfactorily been implemented, then move to acquire another area or village. It is essential for the authority to establish the size of an area or village that it is capable to secure with the means it has in hands. A large area or village may impede the authority's capability to secure. This may mean that a large area or village be divided into sectors in order to retain control and authority.

The advantages of this strategy are: firstly, the objective can be achieved with the means available, small in manpower requirements and cheaper in resources. No new houses or buildings need to be constructed. If needed, it will be in the form of an assistant which is one of an essential mission in winning the people's hearts and minds." Secondly, the people stay in their own home towns and can carry on their normal way of life. This strategy, however, can successfully be achieved only if the Salvadoran authority and the elite are genuine in their efforts to give and share with the people the wealth and life the normal people are entitled to have, not resorting to suppressing and killing but through peace and freedom.

CONCEPTS OF OPERATIONS

I visualize that the operational concepts to achieve the strategic objective of isolating the guerrilla's from the people will be as follows:

- o Unified Command. The formation of a unified command, similar to the structure implemented for the Malayan Emergency headed by a civil authority is essential in order to retain that the war against the guerrillas is a people's war; a war of ideology. The commander may be the president himself or a civilian appointed by the president. The unified command will determine the whole process of prosecuting the operations; dividing the tasks to be handled by civil authority and SFs. Respectively, the former is dealing with the "hearts and minds" projects, the welfare of the people; and the latter to fight and isolate the guerrillas so that authority can carry on with its tasks without much interference.

- o To gain access and control of an area or village. Inevitably, as guerrillas in El Salvador are in control of certain areas, the initial method to gain access to such areas will have to be made by SFs. I envisage two entry methods:

oo Direct Approach. This measure is a direct combat against the guerrillas in an area or village utilizing all the essential elements of ground troops and supporting arms such as aerial and artillery bombings. Such an operation is short and quick; but the Vietnam experience shows that the horror of war by killing civilians, women and children, has brought a negative perception of the authority's good intention by the people. In our era, the period of human rights,⁶⁸ this measure seems to be impractical. However, it may be used where the presence of unarmed civilian women and children are small and the chances of being hit by bombings and by other high velocity weapons are minimal.

oo Indirect Approach. Establishing a cordon around the area or village is a long drawn operation aiming to cut off the supply of arms and ammunition, and reinforcements coming into the area or village; and to inflict as much casualties on the guerrillas without resorting to aerial and artillery bombing. To achieve the aim, the technique will be:

ooo Establish a cordon and troops will be placed at vital locations to seal all access to and from the area or village, and on dominating features where guerrilla movements can be monitored. Vehicles and people going in and out of the area or village will be searched, and suspects will be detained for questioning. Those arrested are to be sentenced accordingly.

ooo Dominate the area by vigorous patrolling and ambushing by the infantry in and outside the cordon area. Special operations are to be carried out to locate guerrilla bases, training areas, armed cache and supply routes outside the cordon area or village. Once such facilities are found, they are to be destroyed immediately either by bombings or offensive operations. Special operations are also necessary inside the cordoned area or

village to pinpoint guerrilla locations and hideouts. Essentially the operations will lead to offensive operations depending on the guerrillas' reaction to SFs present in the area or village. The presence of SFs in or close to guerrilla locations or hideouts may spark a reaction of a follow-up which hopefully ends up in an area of own choosing such as an ambushed site. The guerrillas' ability to fight would eventually be weakened through lack of arms and ammunitions, and manpower replacements coming into the cordoned area or village. When this happens, SFs are to carry out clean-up operations as necessary.

Immediately the civil authority under the unified command establishes itself. The essential "hearts and minds" program is to commence. A curfew may be imposed at a certain period of time and relaxed according to the nature of the resistance. When an established authority has settled permanently in that area or village, a declaration of a "white area" may be announced. The success of such an enterprise is to be widely published through the media in order to show the genuine honesty of the authority to help the people. The process of taking another area or village is to continue. It may be necessary to utilize the method of direct approach in order to break the pattern of operations. But such a gamble only be made where civilian casualties are expected to be minimal.

U.S. ASSISTANCE

The Bipartisan Commission Report No. 148 of August 1986,⁶⁹ reported that a substantial progress has been made in areas of economic and domestic politics development. U.S. military assistance is inadequate to permit modern, humane, and successful counterinsurgency. The commission recommends that the United States provide significantly increased levels of military

assistance for greater mobility, more training, higher force levels and more equipment.

The concept of operations that I have outlined against the guerrillas can be effective only if the SFs are sufficiently trained and adequately equipped in two important areas. These are intelligence and psychological operations, and mobility, and U.S. training assistance in these fields are highly required.

o Intelligence/Psychological Operations Training. During the Malayan Emergency both intelligence gatherings and psychological operations were, respectively, carried out and utilized effectively and extensively. The establishment of a Special Branch with the main purpose too gather information on CTs was one of the main features of winning the war in Malaya. Likewise the extensive use of psychological operations from dropping of leaflets down to giving of rewards to those who gave information on certain key figures of the CTs organization. Voice announcements were also made from the air. Where illiteracy rate is high, such as in El Salvador, this media is important. The SAS was used extensively in the latter part of the emergency in order to isolate the CTs from the people. Crops and vegetables the CTs grew in the jungle were destroyed by the SAS. Bombing raids on CTs camps were possible and effective due to accurate information on locations of CTs camps and hideouts. U.S. training assistance in these areas is important for Salvadoran special operations to be effective particularly in the skills of accurate navigation, accurate shooting, handling of explosive devices to destroy ammunition dumps and food supply. Particularly now, where new methods and latest facilities are used to acquire intelligence, conducting psychological and special operations.

o Mobility. Mobility is important in counterinsurgency. Once an objective is acquired the SFs must be able to get to it in the shortest possible time in order to keep the guerrillas on their feet all the time. The quickest mean is either by vehicles, boats or helicopters. A small country with a small armed forces such as El Salvador, to have the capability to redeploy troops efficiently to another task is essential. Here U.S. training assistance and the provisions of adequate helicopters and vehicles are necessary.

o Other training. Other areas of training assistance in order to enhance the capability of the Salvadorans armed forces are also necessary but I believe without acquiring sufficiently the right knowledge and skills of the two items above, any operations against the guerrillas may not be effective.

CONCLUSION

I can see that the Salvadoran guerrilla problems will remain for a long time and so as the United States assistance in the areas of economic, political and military. The concept of operations that I have outlined I believe is a workable solution provided the authority is genuine in its effort to help revise the standard of living of the majority of the poor. A free area or village can be made as a model to convince the people of the authority's good intention.

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