

Draining the Swamp: The British Strategy of Population Control

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“The first reaction to guerilla warfare must be to protect and control the population.”

— Brigadier Richard L. Clutterbuck
*The Long, Long War: Counterinsurgency
in Malaya and Vietnam*

“What the peasant wants to know is: does the government mean to win the war? Because if not, he will have to support the insurgent.”

— Sir Robert Thompson
*Defeating Communist Insurgency:
The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam*

“When you’re up to your ass in alligators, it’s hard to remember that you came to drain the swamp.”

— Anon.

Thirty years after the end of the Vietnam War, the United States and its Army again find themselves confronted with a tenacious insurgency, this time in Iraq. Given our decidedly mixed record in counterinsurgency operations, we tend to look elsewhere for successful models. Many look to the British, especially their exemplary and thorough victory in Malaya, to provide such a model.¹ Commentators cite the British Army’s superior organizational adaptability and flexibility, strategic patience, their predilection for using the minimum force necessary, the relative ease with which they integrated civil and military aspects of national power, and the apparent facility with which they adapted their strategies to local circumstances of geography and culture.

We would indeed do well to emulate the aforementioned characteristics of British counterinsurgency practice, but there was more to British suc-

cess in Malaya than a good attitude. The key element of their success was the effective internment of the Chinese “squatter” population, the segment of Malayan society from which the insurgents almost entirely drew their strength.² By interning the “squatters” in fortified “New Villages,” the British and their Malayan allies were able to deny the communist insurgents access to recruits, food, and military supplies. It also allowed them to narrow the scope of their intelligence efforts, as the insurgents had to maintain contact with their base under the very noses of the Anglo-Malayan government.

This strategy was liable to abuse. In Kenya, against the contemporary Mau Mau rebellion, the British employed the same strategy as they had in Malaya, in this case interning basically all of the ethnic Kikuyu. The system of detention camps and fortified villages quickly degenerated into what historian Caroline Elkins has called “Britain’s Gulag in Kenya.”³ Eventually, the ensuing scandal forced Britain to grant independence even more rapidly than the accelerating pressures of decolonization would have anyway. Still, the colonial administration was able to defeat a much larger and more widely supported insurgency, more quickly, than it had in Malaya.

A strategy of population control was not invariably effective, however. In Vietnam, the Diem regime’s British-advised and American-supported attempt to implement this strategy, the Strategic Hamlet program, not only failed to weaken the insurgency but actually exacerbated popular resistance. On the other hand, the situation in Vietnam differed significantly from that in Malaya and Kenya. In contrast to the insurgent movements in those two countries, isolated both from external support and concentrated in a socially distinct minority, the Viet Cong enjoyed robust external support from North Vietnam and at least minimal legitimacy among the ethnically homogeneous South Vietnamese. Indeed, it was Diem’s power base, the minority Catholic community, that was in danger of being isolated.

As troubling as it might be, the evidence suggests that the main lesson to be drawn from the British practice of counterinsurgency is that physical control of the contested segment of the population is essential. Further, that control is greatly facilitated when the insurgency’s support is concentrated among a small and relatively unpopular minority of the population.⁴ When that condition obtains, as it did in Malaya and Kenya, a strategy of population control can succeed. When conditions are different, as they were in

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Vietnam, this strategy will fail. In Iraq today, the situation resembles that which obtained in Malaya and Kenya more than it resembles conditions in Vietnam. A strategy of population control could therefore be applied, provided it was modified to account for local circumstances and the evolution in international mores.

Draining the Swamp: Controlling the Chinese “Squatters” in Malaya

According to US Army Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl and others, British authorities in Malaya took some time even to realize that they were beset with communist “alligators” before realizing that only “draining the swamp” could eliminate them. This they did by systematically concentrating the Chinese squatter population, roughly 500,000 of Malaya’s 1950s population of approximately 5,000,000, into fortified and tightly controlled “New Villages.” Denied effective access to supporters and supplies, the insurgency melted away. Physical control and security thus put the British in an advantageous position that their subsequent and much-praised military and intelligence operations merely exploited. Over the period between the implementation of the Briggs Plan in 1951 and the granting of Malaya’s independence in 1957, this strategy of population control broke the back of the communist insurgency.

According to Lieutenant General John Coates of the Australian Army, the Malayan insurgency benefited almost as much from British inattention and ineptitude as its own inherent strength. In his operational analysis of the Malayan Emergency, Coates discovered that the British mostly relied on the communists’ commitment to disarm and join the political process in the immediate postwar period. Officials blithely ignored barely concealed subversion until the scope and scale of communist attacks compelled the government in London to intervene. By that time, insurgents were killing almost 200 civilians, police, and officials a month.⁵

British inattention had obscured the insurgency’s weaknesses. Most important, the Communist Party was never able to broaden its appeal beyond the Chinese squatters, comprising about one tenth of Malaya’s population.⁶ The squatters, as their name suggests, lived in ramshackle communities in the jungle, on land to which they had no legitimate title. The indigenous Malays bore little love for the Chinese, originally imported by the British to work in Malaya’s rubber plantations and tin mines under stringent limitations. Moreover, while all ethnic Chinese resented the Malays’ entrenched advantages, those in the urban and entrepreneurial classes had little yearning for a socialist utopia. Even most of the squatters were far more concerned with material improvements in their lives than with establishing a new political order.⁷

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Thus the communists were left depending upon a minority of a minority to accomplish the revolution.

For that reason, it was relatively simple to isolate the insurgency physically and politically. Sir Robert Thompson, a Malaya veteran who later went on to advise the Diem regime in Vietnam, noted how important it was that Malaya’s short border with friendly Thailand could be sealed easily.⁸ Within Malaya, it was a matter of denying insurgents access to potential sources of support. Understanding that squatters constituted both the insurgency’s base of support and its Achilles’ heel, the Anglo-Malayan government moved to bring them firmly under government control. Sir Harold Rawdon Briggs, appointed Director of Operations in 1950, is generally credited with realizing that controlling the population was essential to defeating the insurgency. Over the next two years, the British relocated the entire squatter population into approximately 423 “New Villages,” intended to be inaccessible to the communist guerillas.⁹

The government did more than put barbed wire and entrenchments between the insurgents and the squatters; it neutralized the desire to support the insurgents. Briggs conceived of the counterinsurgency campaign as a “competition in government,” which informed the location, design, and organization of the New Villages. First, the government attempted to minimize disruption to community life. Whenever possible, the British relied upon regroupment, in which existing communities were consolidated and fortified, resettling or moving everyone only when absolutely necessary. In either case, life in the resulting New Village represented a significant improvement over the squatters’ ramshackle jungle dwellings. The government provided better infrastructure, ensuring access to medical care and education. Another key difference was that the squatters now had a formal right to the land on which they lived. These small but significant steps eliminated many of the grievances which had animated the squatters, thereby depriving the insurgents of considerable support.¹⁰

There is nothing controversial about combating an insurgency by improving the lot of the population, but there was a substantial element of re-

pression to the strategy as well. Access to each New Village was tightly controlled. Villagers were subject to search upon exit and entry. Smuggling food, medicine, or other militarily useful items was subject to severe punishment. Frequently it did not come to that. Instead, those caught smuggling often led the authorities to the guerillas in order to avoid punishment. Enforcing these and other emergency regulations was the responsibility of the police, mostly ethnic Malays, who were not inclined to align themselves with the Chinese, let alone with the communists. Usually the police detachment would also include one or more ethnic Chinese Special Branch officers, responsible for ferreting out subversive elements within the community itself. The police detachment also would be responsible for defending the community, assisted by a "Home Guard" drawn from the community itself. The formation of this Home Guard not only removed a manpower burden from government forces, it also actively involved squatter communities on the side of the government. The army assumed responsibility only for operations outside the wire, being distributed so as to be able to rapidly reinforce villages in the event of attack. Overseeing the integration of the different elements were top-flight administrators, many of whom spoke Chinese and had been drawn from throughout the British Empire.¹¹

The government then focused on destroying the insurgency, conducting a campaign of indirect approach. Instead of concentrating immediately upon the areas where the insurgency was strongest, Sir Gerald Templer, Briggs' successor, focused on building support for the government where the insurgency was weak. Such a policy had the advantages of gradually accreting strength to the government through enhanced economic activity. It also created the appearance of momentum, and it created a favorable contrast with conditions in areas troubled by insurgents. Of course, this policy affronted businessmen and officials in areas where the communists were strong. When, in response to their entreaties, the government attempted to attack the guerillas directly, such operations were rarely decisive.¹²

Establishing the New Villages required not only physical infrastructure but a legal one as well. The Emergency Regulations of 1948 and 1949 that established the New Villages gave the government significant powers: control of food, which it could ration or restrict as a form of collective punishment; unlimited police powers of search and seizure; the ability to detain suspects indefinitely or deport without trial; and, obviously, the right to forcibly resettle populations. Death was the penalty for many of the more serious infractions of these regulations. Such measures affront modern sensibilities and undoubtedly led to some abuses. For instance, Anglo-Malayan government did impose collective punishment, albeit sparingly. One of Sir Gerald Templer's first acts as High Commissioner was to impose a 22-hour-a-day curfew on the rebel strong-

hold of Tanjong Malim, simultaneously halving its food ration.¹³ Even unwitting mistakes could have drastic consequences. General John Coates regrets the fate of Malayan aborigines, resettled to protect them from insurgent intimidation, noting in passing that “thousands died.”¹⁴

On the other hand, the procedural protections to which Western society was accustomed, even in 1950, would have proved unworkable against an insurgent campaign of murder and intimidation. As the quotation from Sir Robert Thompson at the beginning of this article indicates, the government’s determination to win, and its willingness to take the measures necessary to prevail, will often determine the allegiance of the uncommitted. While such broad and severe measures were essential to controlling the insurgency, Malayan veteran Brigadier Richard Clutterbuck argued that it was equally important that these powers were formally spelled out and impartially applied. Such formalities replaced the potential perception of government actions as arbitrary and abusive with an understanding that the government was strict but effective. They also ensured that the Anglo-Malayan actions went no further than the British government and elites within Malayan society were willing to support.¹⁵

The tight control over the Chinese squatters was the decisive element in British strategy. It enabled the other aspects of that strategy which recent analysts have praised so much. In the words of Thompson, describing the general application of such a strategy, “The ‘hold’ aspect of operations is undoubtedly the most crucial and the most complex, involving as it does the establishment of a solid security framework covering the whole population living in the villages and small towns of a given area.”¹⁶ Access control and surveillance identified insurgent supporters. Officials could then exploit these individuals to find their contacts both in the jungle and in the villages, enabling the intelligence-directed operations, for instance. Isolating the population forced the insurgents to reveal themselves if they wanted access to that population, and greatly complicated the insurgent task in mobilizing the population.

The results speak for themselves. By 1957, insurgent strength had declined from its estimated peak of 8,000 in 1952 to a total of 2,000, of which only about 200 were active combatants. Attacks plunged from a monthly peak of about 100 in 1952 to about 20 in 1957. The insurgency, of course, did not merely wither. Exploiting the favorable conditions created by population control through offensive operations to kill or capture insurgents still took several years. Because the government had control of the population, however, the insurgency could not make good its losses. But while victory could be measured in 1957, the decisive point had been reached in 1952. As Clutterbuck put it, “The government had won a major victory, though this was not to become apparent until the middle of the following year [1953].”¹⁷

Incurring Moral Hazard: Suppressing the Mau Mau

The British applied the same strategy in Kenya to combat the Mau Mau insurgency, which officially lasted from 1952 to 1956, but they applied it with a far heavier hand. Like the communists in Malaya, the Mau Mau in Kenya drew their support almost exclusively from one ethnic minority, the Kikuyu. As in Malaya, the British overlooked the Mau Mau's considerable growth in strength and support until several spectacular murders forced the colonial administration to acknowledge its existence. At that point, the government overreacted. Sir Evelyn Baring, the newly appointed governor, imported the Malayan model wholesale in order to combat the insurgency. Unfortunately, Baring's government applied it without the sensitivity and restraint that had characterized Britain's conduct of the Malayan Emergency. At one point, almost every Kikuyu male of military age had been detained, with the remaining Kikuyu interned in fortified villages. These villages resembled Malaya's New Villages, but without the amenities. An earlier passage in this article noted Caroline Elkins' characterization of the resulting system as "Britain's Gulag in Kenya." Historian David Anderson, in his *Histories of the Hanged*, asserts that the colonial regime "became a police state in the very fullest sense of that term."¹⁸ In the end, Britain's domestic reaction to revelations of the nature and scope of the brutality accelerated Britain's retreat from empire, much as revelations of torture soured the French public on the war in Algeria. For all that, Baring's government had effectively crushed the Mau Mau by then, and had done so using the colony's internal resources. Britain's suppression of the Mau Mau thus teaches us how a population control strategy can get out of hand. It also supports the troubling conclusion that it is control of a given population, and not cultural sensitivity toward it, that was the decisive aspect of the British practice of counterinsurgency.

Britain's victory in Kenya was due in no small part to the structural vulnerabilities of the insurgency. At first glance, the Mau Mau may seem to have posed a much more formidable threat than the squatters in Malaya. The Mau Mau had gained a much stronger hold over Kenya's 1.5 million Kikuyu than the communists had over Malaya's ethnic Chinese. Elkins asserts that almost all of those 1.5 million people had taken some form of the Mau Mau oath to expel the British or die trying. Actual combatants numbered around 20,000 at the peak of the insurgency, though how many of these were effective fighters remains open to question.¹⁹ Yet the Mau Mau's success in mobilizing the Kikuyu apparently came at the cost of alienating Kenya's other groups. To be sure, their goals of ejecting the British and redistributing British-held land enjoyed wide support. The Mau Mau, however, failed to advance a political program for what would replace British domination, or even a strategy for ejecting them. This failure pre-

vented them from drawing support from other segments of Kenyan society, who dreaded the prospect of Kikuyu domination even more than they detested the British overlordship. Finally, in contrast to the Malayan communists, who could draw upon their World War II experience of guerilla warfare against the Japanese, the Mau Mau lacked either the experience of or any preparation for guerilla warfare. Their attacks thus consisted mostly of small-scale massacres of isolated white settlers, and, more frequently, Africans. Structurally, the Mau Mau could wreak havoc, but not forge a revolution.²⁰

The Mau Mau's failure to broaden their appeal allowed the British to isolate the Kikuyu from the rest of Kenyan society, and to draw resources from that society to suppress the rebellion. Drawing on the example of Malaya, Baring enacted wide-ranging emergency regulations to enable him to combat the insurgency. He established a network of fortified villages for the purpose of isolating guerilla fighters from their base of support. As in Malaya, these villages were supposed to represent an improvement over previous communities. Unlike Malaya, there were not enough resources available to realize this intent. The inhabitants of these villages, mostly women, children, and the elderly, were forced to build the villages themselves.

Conditions in those villages were brutal. The Home Guard, recruited from Kikuyu loyalists or ethnic rivals of the Kikuyu, treated the inhabitants as spoils of war. Rape, murder, and other forms of despoliation and maltreatment were not uncommon. As for the men, most were either fighting in the jungle or under detention. At the high point of the insurgency, 70,000 Kikuyu were in detention camps, where conditions were even worse. While one might question Caroline Elkins' tenuously supported estimate of 100,000 deaths, it is probable that a great many civilians lost their lives in detention camps and fortified villages. These conditions constituted a very real stain on Britain's honor, and the revelations over the extent of the abuse occasioned public outrage. The Macmillan government, already unsentimentally committed to wholesale decolonization, accelerated Kenya's autonomy as a result of popular uproar over the so-called "Hola River Massacre" in 1959, in which several inmates were murdered.²¹

Perhaps the most horrifying aspect of this system of abuse was that it arose through neglect, not intention. Even the impassioned Elkins is unwilling to attribute the cruel conduct of the Kenyan counterinsurgency primarily to malice aforethought, attributing much of the result to the lack of resources. Unlike Malaya, Kenya could not claim to be part of the Cold War. Thus Governor Baring had to make do with the colony's own financial and human resources, especially the fairly racist and highly self-interested white settler population. These settlers were more likely to take vengeance than to ameliorate legitimate grievances. The much larger population to be controlled also

placed a much greater strain on available resources. Most important, Baring had considerably less room to conciliate the insurgents. In contrast to the situation in Malaya, Baring was responsible for maintaining Britain's somewhat unjust colonial domination, a goal to which few Kenyans could subscribe from altruism. Thus instead of enlisting support, Baring had to buy it with whatever he could expropriate from suspected rebels. All this made the conflict especially and unnecessarily cruel.²²

Even so, these tactics broke the Mau Mau. With independence, power passed peacefully to Jomo Kenyatta. While Kenyatta had been falsely imprisoned for fomenting their rebellion, he had in truth steadfastly refused any connection with the Mau Mau, even while in prison. Out of prison and in power, he continued to grant former Mau Mau neither credit for independence nor a share of power in post-independence Kenya. Kenya remained a member of the Commonwealth of Nations. With constrained resources and flawed instruments, Baring had defeated an insurgency of larger scope and greater appeal than the one that had challenged the British in Malaya. He had also deeply compromised Britain's moral status.²³

Vietnam: The Failure of the Strategic Hamlet Program

One place where a strategy of population control did not work was Vietnam. Of course, given the war's ultimate result, it is hard to argue that anything else did, either. In the early 1960s, things looked different, however. Hoping to replicate Britain's success in Malaya, South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem initiated the Strategic Hamlet program under the direction of his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. Diem relied heavily on advice he got from Sir Robert Thompson, who had played a prominent role as a member of Sir Gerald Templer's administration in Malaya. Thompson and others would later argue that Diem implemented the plan poorly, striving for quantity over quality. The speed and scope with which people were transferred into these fortified camps ensured that the process not only alienated the peasantry whose support Diem was trying to gain, but also was ineffective in the end.²⁴ In any event, America abandoned the Strategic Hamlet program with the Diem regime after the November 1963 coup, narrowing its focus to the formidable challenge of defeating the People's Army of Vietnam and main force Viet Cong maneuver formations. This approach, often referred to as the strategy of attrition, proved an even bigger mistake in the end.

Yet while no counterinsurgency strategy attempted in Vietnam proved ultimately successful, those which eventually showed promise contained many of the same elements. The Marine Corps' Combined Assistance Platoon program, largely successful where applied, focused on providing security to villagers by embedding Marine squads in local village militias,

and the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program of US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) achieved limited success by coordinating security and civic action at the village level in a manner reminiscent of Malaya's New Villages.²⁵ Yet if these initiatives produced any success, it was not enough to enable South Vietnam to gain the internal strength and cohesion required to resist North Vietnamese conquest indefinitely.

The most compelling explanation for the failure of the Strategic Hamlet program lay in Vietnam's vastly different recent history, geography, and demography. In contrast to the relatively weak Malayan communists or the Mau Mau, the Viet Cong could build on the remnants of the Viet Minh insurgency that had defeated the French. Moreover, the Viet Cong were vigorously and continuously supported by North Vietnam, unlike the Malaysians and the Mau Mau, who largely had to fend for themselves. Most important, it was the Diem regime, and not the insurgents, that drew its strength from a distinct minority of the population, the Vietnamese Catholics, while the communists took special care not to alienate the Buddhist majority. Indeed, deriving their lineage from the Viet Minh, the National Liberation Front proved better able to lay claim to a legitimizing nationalist ideology.

Conclusion: Applying the British Model Today

The results of this comparative historical analysis are troubling. In Malaya, Sir Harold Briggs and his successor, Gerald Templer, combined a strategy of population control with an effective "hearts and minds" campaign to better the living conditions of the Chinese squatters, breaking the back of the insurgency in about five years. In Kenya, Evelyn Baring executed a far crueler version of the strategy employed in Malaya. There, the violence and brutality of repression clearly outweighed the feeble and poorly resourced attempts to win Kikuyu "hearts and minds." Nonetheless, the Mau Mau were essentially broken in four years. This comparison suggests that the vital element in both counterinsurgency efforts was the effective internment of the subject populations, and not efforts at social amelioration. While we would like to believe that "winning hearts and minds" is both important and effective, these examples suggest that the effort is neither essential nor decisive. Instead, what will determine success in counterinsurgency is how effectively the insurgent may be denied access to his base of support. The question is whether this analysis has any bearing on our current situation, especially in Iraq.

It may not. The situation there differs considerably from that which obtained in 1950s Malaya and Kenya. Iraq's military geography is considerably more challenging. Like Vietnam, and unlike either Malaya or Kenya, Iraq shares long and porous borders with neighboring states—in this case Syria and

Iran, neither of which favors the emergence of a democratic, Western-oriented Iraq. Foreign fighters flow over these borders virtually unhindered. There are also a lot more people in Iraq. There are almost as many Sunni Arabs as there were Malayans. Moreover, unlike Malaya's small and easily sequestered villages, Iraq's population largely resides in relatively large, contiguous urban areas. Samarra, Falluja, and Tal Afar, all scenes of recent combat, each number about 200,000 or more. The United Nations estimates that Iraq is about 79 percent urbanized.²⁶ Breaking these cities down into manageable and defensible units would present considerable challenges in implementation. At a more fundamental level, even with our Iraqi partners, we don't have enough administrators, police, and soldiers with a sufficient working knowledge of Iraqi society and culture. Such administrators and police were critical to Britain's victory in Malaya in the 1950s.

Most important, there is one critical difference—and it is that our current strategy is showing signs of succeeding. Iraq's third successful election in the course of one year provides evidence that we and the Iraqis are successfully isolating the insurgents politically, if not physically. In particular, vigorous Sunni participation indicates a move away from violence toward participation in the political process. *The National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* states that progress on the political front has led ordinary Iraqis to provide better intelligence on insurgent activity. According to the Brookings Institution's December 2005 *Iraq Index*, such tips reached an all-time high in November. More important, the Iraqis' increasing commitment to the political process has led to an increasing and tangible commitment to the Iraqi state. In a key indicator, recruiting for Iraqi security forces continues to outpace requirements. Moreover, according to Lieutenant General David Petraeus, those security forces are increasingly capable of independent operations.²⁷

Iraq resembles Malaya in one critical respect, however: the insurgency is concentrated in one social minority, the Sunni Arab population, and lacks broader appeal to Iraq's other constituent elements.²⁸ Clearly, not all Sunnis support the insurgency, either actively or tacitly, but there is reason to believe that some Sunni elites are attempting to leverage the insurgency to lay claim to a disproportionate share of Iraq's political power and wealth.²⁹ And while recent polls indicate that a majority of Iraqis want an end to the US occupation, that shared aspiration does not necessarily translate into support for the insurgency. The evident aims of the insurgency—a return to Sunni dominance, perhaps tinged with the imposition of a harsh Sunni religious orthodoxy—inspire opposition rather than support among Iraq's majority Shia population and ethnic Kurds.

Unfortunately, another key similarity is that the insurgency has steadily gained in strength and effectiveness, just as the Malayan insurgency grew in the years before 1952. Estimates of insurgent strength have climbed

from about 5,000 in the summer of 2003 to a current figure that hovers between 15,000 and 20,000, though the increase does appear to have leveled off recently. Moreover, the insurgency continues to grow in sophistication and effectiveness. Average daily attacks have reached a high of between 80 and 100. While monthly US casualties are below their peaks in April and November 2004, the general trend has been upward, as it has for the number of Iraqi civilian dead.³⁰ Just as the British experienced in the early stages of Malaya, we find ourselves clearing an area of insurgents only to find ourselves returning to the same place to fight a different group of insurgents later on.³¹ These facts may dictate a willingness to consider a modified strategic concept of intensified population control.

Now is not the time to implement such a strategy, however, and we should refrain from doing so as long as current methods continue to show signs of progress. In the short term, a policy of internment might well engender more support for the insurgency. International opinion would not stand for interning Iraq's Sunni Arab population, and US soldiers might well balk at forcing civilians into internment camps. Unless explained very effectively to Americans, it probably also would erode domestic support for the war. It is an option—but one that need not be exercised immediately.

If events recommend a change in strategy, however, it might be possible to entice Sunnis into internment voluntarily, as an alternative preferable to being continually fought over. The Sunni Arab community is not monolithic. As several analysts have pointed out, tribes are actually the dominant organizing unit for Iraqi society.³² Some Sunni tribes can undoubtedly be won over to support of the government, just as the British managed to fracture ethnic solidarity among the Chinese in Malaya. By submitting to a regimen of tighter control, such communities could avoid becoming a battleground and get better access to reconstruction aid. Rather than being imprisoned in internment camps, the Sunnis would be joining “gated communities” with enhanced security and perhaps better access to reconstruction support. The key is keeping such communities small enough to deny insurgents the ability to infiltrate them and coerce support from the inhabitants. In effect, these Sunni communities would be opting out of the war. Such “opting out” would work in our favor, by progressively narrowing the insurgents' potential base of support. Foreign fighters would have fewer places to hide, as they would no longer be able to simply move in anywhere and coerce the silence of neighbors. Though this strategy would not eliminate insurgent freedom of action, it would narrow its scope, allowing US and Iraqi security forces to concentrate their assets on unsecured areas. Moreover, just as it did in Malaya, the establishment of secured communities should facilitate the collection of intelligence. Controlling this population would simultaneously strike at the source of the insurgency and

contribute to convincing large sections of the Sunni minority that their war is over. Such a system would comprise an important element of our continually evolving strategy, whose security component is “clear, hold, and build.” The core of US strategy would still remain fostering democratic political institutions, effective security forces, and a robust economy.

We neither can nor should impose this strategy upon the Iraqis. It must be their choice, and it probably should be their choice of last resort. Only the Iraqis could hammer out the necessary compromises to ensure that a strategy of stringent population control gains and retains popular legitimacy. Our role would be to help the Iraqis develop a workable plan, and to support them in its execution. If this strategy were to be implemented, however, it would be vital that we help provide the resources necessary to prevent the strategy from degenerating into mere repression, as it did in Kenya. It should go without saying that this strategy would have to be very carefully explained to the American public, to the world, and especially to the Iraqis, so that everyone would understand why they are doing it and what they hope to achieve.

The time may come when the Iraqi majority is no longer satisfied with the extent of voluntary cooperation offered the Sunni Arab community. If the insurgents continue to strike at will, and if the Sunni community persists in its active and tacit support of the insurgency, the Shiite and Kurdish majority may cease to tolerate a situation in which their alternatives are enduring torment and terror indefinitely or submitting to domination by a detested minority. If that point is reached, involuntary internment may prove to be the least bad remaining humane alternative. International opinion, which views with equanimity the minority’s imposition of collective terror upon the majority, will undoubtedly oppose such a strategy as “collective punishment.” What the British practice of counterinsurgency suggests, however, is that it just might work.

NOTES

1. In this vein, General Peter Schoomaker commended Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl’s outstanding analysis of the British Army’s performance as a learning organization during the Malayan Emergency, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Westport: Praeger, 2002), to the House Armed Services Committee in the summer of 2004. Nagl’s prescient study rose to prominence once we found ourselves embroiled in Iraq. For other references to the British model, see Robert M. Cassidy, “The British Army in Counterinsurgency: The Salience of Military Culture,” *Military Review*, 85 (May/June 2005); or James D. Campbell, “French Algeria and British Northern Ireland: Legitimacy and the Rule of Law in Low-Intensity Conflict,” *Military Review*, 85 (March/April 2005).

2. See, for example, Richard Clutterbuck, *The Long, Long War: Counterinsurgency in Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), p. 64.

3. Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005).

4. Experts in the field seem to realize this, but write only very obliquely about the subject. In Kalev Sepp, “Best Practices in Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review*, 85 (May-June 2005), 8-12, Dr. Sepp lists population control as a “best practice,” but limits his discussion to identity cards and other administrative measures. In John A. Lynn, “Patterns of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review*, 85 (July-August 2005), 27, the author briefly acknowledges the role that physical isolation and internment played in the Malayan Emergency without touching on its propensity for abuse.

5. John Coates, *Suppressing Insurgency: An Analysis of the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1954* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 2-3. Richard Clutterbuck, an Army officer seconded to the Special Branch during the emergency, also thought that the Anglo-Malayan government had been slow to recognize the problem.
6. For the story of Lai Tek, see Clutterbuck, pp. 18, 29.
7. Coates, p. 86.
8. Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), p. 19.
9. Clutterbuck, p. 57.
10. Coates, p. 82.
11. Coates, p. 83; Clutterbuck, pp. 61-62.
12. Clutterbuck, p. 113.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 80-82. Coates and Nagl also cite this incident.
14. Coates, p. 92.
15. Clutterbuck, pp. 36-41.
16. Thompson, p. 121.
17. Statistics are taken from Clutterbuck, p. 87; the quotation is from p. 64. John Coates confirms the assessment that internment was the decisive element in victory (p. 83), as does Sir Richard Thompson.
18. David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), p. 5.
19. The figures are from Elkins. Anderson, while acknowledging that support for the Mau Mau was widespread, doubts that it ever attained quite these proportions.
20. Anderson (p. 4) notes the weaknesses of the insurgents, especially the failure to appeal to other ethnic groups.
21. Elkins makes frequent reference to Baring's reliance on Malayan precedents for emergency regulations (p. 55) and "villagization" (p. 235). For the cosmetic nature of efforts at social amelioration, see p. 115. For the use of forced labor to build the villages, see p. 129. She and Anderson concur that shame at these practices accelerated British withdrawal; Elkins (p. 356), Anderson (p. 329).
22. Elkins makes frequent reference to the expediencies forced on Baring by pecuniary necessity, including the involvement of illegal settler operations in "screenings" for Mau Mau suspects, the prevalence of forced labor (p. 129), the squalid nature of life in the fortified villages (p. 237), and so forth.
23. I should note that Britain may well have been able to achieve the same result, at lower cost and much less loss of life, by negotiating with Kenyatta in 1954 instead of imprisoning him.
24. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (3d ed.; New York: McGraw Hill, 1996), pp. 98-99.
25. For a nuanced discussion of the history of counterinsurgency strategies in Vietnam, see Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995). Many readers will no doubt be aware of Lewis Sorley's argument that a strategy of population security had largely proved successful within South Vietnam by 1972; see his book *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedies of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999).
26. United Nations Settlement Program, Iraq, <http://www.unhabitat.org/habrdd/conditions/westasia/iraq.htm>.
27. George W. Bush, *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* (Washington: The White House, November 2005), pp. 9, 21. The Brookings Institution's *Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post-Saddam Iraq* (<http://www.brookings.edu/iraqindex>), 19 December 2005, supports the claim of increased intelligence from civilians; see table, "Tips Received from Population," p. 25.
28. Anthony Cordesman, "The Developing Iraqi Insurgency: Status at End - 2004," draft paper, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 22 December 2004, p. 12.
29. See Frederick W. Kagan, "Blueprint for Victory," *The Weekly Standard*, 31 October 2005, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/006/249zzgbd.asp>; Gary Schmitt, "Why Iraq's Sunnis Won't Deal," *The Washington Post*, 13 September 2005, p. A27.
30. Estimates of insurgent strength are drawn from the Brookings Institution, *Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post-Saddam Iraq*, "Estimated Strength of Insurgency Nationwide," 4 August 2005, p. 15. The assessment of effectiveness follows that of Cordesman.
31. See stories on the border village of Qaim, "Insurgents Assert Control Over Town Near Syrian Border," *The Washington Post*, 6 September 2005; and on Samarra, John R. S. Batiste and Paul R. Daniels, "The Fight for Samarra: Full-Spectrum Operations in Modern Warfare," *Military Review*, 85 (May-June 2005), http://www.army.mil/professionalwriting/volumes/volume3/september_2005/9_05_3.html.
32. William S. McCallister, Charles Kyle, and Christopher Alexander, "The Iraqi Insurgent Movement," Naval Post Graduate School, November 2003, <http://library.nps.navy.mil/home/Iraqi%20Insurgency%20Movement.pdf>.