



The Conference of Defence Associations
Commentary

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“Ironies in the Canadian left’s view of insurgencies”

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This column is not about Afghanistan, and I am certainly no expert on the intricacies of, or prospects for, our role in the NATO mission there. But I do wish to comment on a major generic misconception that is popular in certain circles in Canada, particularly on the left. There is a constant litany from such quarters insisting that any campaign abroad to help secure another state against the depredations of irregular insurgents is automatically doomed to failure.

This is illogical. Historically, the great majority of insurgencies fail. This may not be obvious at first glance to the casual observer, because most insurgencies fail so completely that they are almost invisible after a time in the historical record. They become footnotes about failed uprisings, failed coups, or failed revolutions in histories written by the victors. Some get listed as “periods of disturbances” or “periods of lawlessness”.

Canadians should have a good sense of this, as our four homegrown insurgencies all failed (two in 1837, one in 1869 and one in 1885). British assistance was a factor in their defeat in all cases. And despite the popular myth that these failed insurgencies hastened subsequent reform, there is little evidence that the later political changes would have been slower if the insurgents had eschewed force and used purely legal political means to advance their ideas, and indeed reform might rather have been speedier.

Successful insurgencies are much rarer, but because they change regimes, and sometimes systems of government, they are often better known. One of the most famous of these is of course the Vietnam War, which still looms large in the American psyche. Americans were well primed to over-react to their abject failure in Vietnam for two reasons. First, their special view of insurgencies owes something to the fact that the United States was born of a successful insurgency. And secondly, their national myth held that, up to Vietnam, they had never been defeated. So it is perhaps not surprising that one portion of the American public now firmly believes that insurgencies are destined to succeed.

It is a great irony that the Canadian left assumes that the story of Vietnam is the invariable rule for all insurgencies, because this viewpoint is evidence of the extent to which the Canadian left is influenced by the American experience. Bear in mind that the Canadian left relies upon its anti-Americanism as its unifying narrative. Without it, the Canadian left, which at one time was an intellectual powerhouse, has in recent decades become a bunch of single-issue lobbies flying in loose formation. So the irony is that the part of the Canadian body politic which most relies on disagreement with the policies of the United States as its stock in trade is also the part which is the most intellectually colonized by the United States.

If the left hadn't unconsciously succumbed to these assumptions of American politics, they might, given Canada's older traditional alignment with Great Britain, have remembered a notable defeated insurgency in what is today Malaysia. The insurgency in Malaya had some of the characteristics of the one in Vietnam, and overlapped the Vietnam War chronologically. The British victory in Malaya paved the way for today's Malaysia, an imperfect, somewhat struggling democracy which nonetheless has many of the features that the developed world hopes for in nations of the developing world.

And there is one further irony in the Canadian left giving exaggerated weight to the Vietnam experience when analyzing contemporary counter-insurgency assistance efforts by the developed world. That irony lies in comparing the ideologies of the insurgents, then and now. The insurgents in Vietnam and Malaya preached (even if they did not practice) a line that had at least some resonance with the traditional Canadian left: egalitarian ideals, land reform, social justice and opposition to capitalism. The insurgents encountered in most settings today absolutely do not. Instead, they preach systemic inequality, bizarre justice and absolutely rigid top-down political, economic, social and intellectual control, policies that should galvanize any self-respecting social democrat or socialist to want to rush to the barricades to oppose them.

So here's hoping the Canadian left recovers soon from being colonized by its US counterpart.

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