

# T.E. Lawrence And the Mind of An Insurgent

By James J. Schneider

**I**n 1946 French Gen. Raoul Salan conducted several interviews with Vo Nguyen Giap, the Vietnamese general who planned and directed the military operations against the French that culminated in their defeat at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. Salan was part of a post-World War II negotiating mission established to finalize

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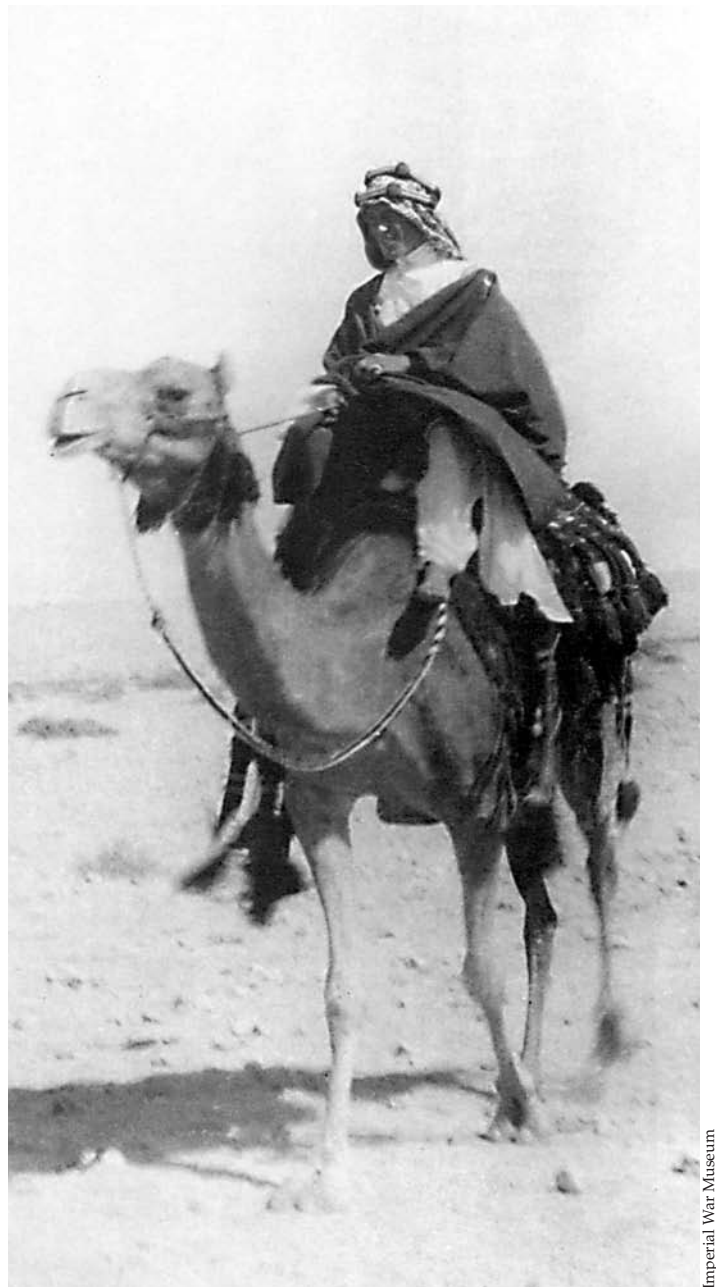
the return of French authority to Vietnam. Later he would command the French Expeditionary Corps in Vietnam from May 20, 1951, until May 1953, conducting the last successful military action against Ho Chi Minh. In an action designated Operation Lorraine, Salan's forces swept through the Red River Valley and the jungles of North Vietnam on October 11, 1952. The following year he turned over his command to Gen. Henri-Eugene Navarre, the ill-fated commander at Dien Bien Phu. During the 1946 interviews, Salan was struck by the influence of one man upon the thinking of Giap; that man was Thomas Edward Lawrence. Giap told Salan: "My fighting gospel is T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. I am never without it."

The essence of Lawrence's theory of guerrilla warfare that Giap refers to can be found in two places. The first and most accessible is in any of the many editions of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, especially chapter 33. The second place is in an article entitled "The Evolution of a Revolt," published in October 1920 in the *Army Quarterly and Defence Journal*. The two pieces are based on Lawrence's practical, hard-headed assessment of the situation then confronting the Arab forces in the Hejaz region of the Saudi desert during March 1917. Up until this time Lawrence had spent more than a year fighting beside the Arab Bedouin against the Turk. From this experience he derived two theorems of guerrilla warfare that form a theoretical foundation and point of departure for the rest of his insights related to conducting an insurgency. Lawrence asserted first that irregular troops are unable to defend a position against conventional forces; and, similarly, irregular troops are incapable of effectively attacking a heavily defended position. If these theorems were correct, Lawrence wondered, then of what value were his irregular forces in the first place? This became the basic question that he first sought to unravel.

Turning inward, Lawrence understood that like any other officer schooled in Western military thinking and traditions, his attitude toward war was dominated by the dogma of annihilation: an obsession that "the ethic of modern war is to seek the enemy's army, his center of power, and destroy it in battle." Yet it occurred to Lawrence that while no battle of annihilation had taken place, the Arabs were still winning the war: "As I thought about it, it dawned on me that we had won the Hejaz war. We were in occupation of 99 percent of the Hejaz. The

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JAMES J. SCHNEIDER, Ph.D., is a professor of military theory at the School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Command and Gen. Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kan.



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Turks were welcome to the other fraction. ... They were harmless sitting [at Medina]; if we took them prisoner, they would cost us food and guards in Egypt. ... On all counts they were best where they were, and they valued Medina and wanted to keep it. Let them!"

Lawrence wondered, then, if there were not other wars, different in kind from the war of annihilation that French generals like Ferdinand Foch and other contemporaries advocated and wrote of so enthusiastically. He concluded, following a recollection of his study of Clausewitz, that there was indeed more than one kind of war, that the determining factor was the aim for which the war was being fought in the first place.

It was simply not within the compass of Arab interests, nor even within their capability, to annihilate the Turks. Rather, the Arab aim was geographic: to occupy as much

## Lawrence's Six Fundamental Principles Of Insurgency

- First, a successful guerrilla movement must have an unassailable base.
- Second, the guerrilla must have a technologically sophisticated enemy.
- Third, the enemy must be sufficiently weak in numbers so as to be unable to occupy the disputed territory in depth with a system of interlocking fortified posts.
- Fourth, the guerrilla must have at least the passive support of the populace, if not its full involvement.
- Fifth, the irregular force must have the fundamental qualities of speed, endurance, presence and logistical independence.
- Sixth, the irregular must be sufficiently advanced in weaponry to strike at the enemy's logistics and signals vulnerabilities.

of the Arabic Middle East as possible.

Now if the aim of the Arab was one of geographic interest rather than the destruction of the enemy's forces, it put the role of the irregular in an entirely new light. Given the validity of the two theorems, what role did the Arab insurgent have in a war of occupation?

In order to address the latter question, Lawrence developed a simple conceptual framework. A conceptual framework is nothing more than a kind of mental pegboard to hang concepts or ideas in relation to each other, yet with sufficient structure to think of the ideas altogether as a coherent whole. Lawrence's pegboard consisted of three concepts or categories of analysis. Lawrence termed these three conceptual hooks the algebraical, the biological and the psychological.

By algebraical Lawrence meant those factors that are fixed in space and time and subject to calculation. Thus he began to calculate the size of the area that the Arabs would have to conquer and how many Turks it would take to defend it. Lawrence determined that it would require at least 600,000 troops to defend this territory adequately. The Turks had but 100,000 men and most of these were concentrated in and around Medina. Lawrence further recognized that the Turks, with their mental baggage filled with ideas about battles of annihilation, would approach the rebellion from the perspective of absolute war. But this would be a mistake because making war "upon rebellion is messy and slow, like eating soup with a knife."

The biological was the second element in Lawrence's framework. Later he uses the term "bionomics" to capture the idea of the wear and tear and friction within a military system. Lawrence concluded that rather than destroy the Turkish army, the Arab needed merely to wear it down.

Exhaustion, not destruction, would bring this about. It would be accomplished through direct attacks on the enemy's materiel: "The death of a Turkish bridge or rail, machine or gun, or high explosive was more profitable to us than the death of a Turk." Thus, the weakness of the irregular—his inability to stand toe to toe with the regular in battle—could be rendered irrelevant provided the Arab went against the enemy's readily accessible materiel. But the key to such a strategy was the possession of nearly perfect intelligence. Lawrence, himself an intelligence officer, noted that knowledge of the enemy had to be "faultless, leaving no room for chance. We took more pains in this service than any other staff I saw."

The final factor of analysis was the psychological. Lawrence understood that in an insurgency, the real battle lay within the minds of the opponents. To be successful the Arabs had "to arrange their [own] minds in order of battle, just as carefully and as formally as other officers arrayed their bodies." This also meant that moral support among the populace had to be mobilized for the rebellion.

In light of his analysis Lawrence developed a basic plan that he adhered to until virtually the end of the war. Its foundation rested upon a realistic assessment of the Arab irregular and his Turkish opponent. The object was to impose upon the Turks the burden of a long, protracted defense that would eventually exhaust them. The means of accomplishing this object was through the employment of small, highly mobile raiding units.

Lawrence recognized that the ratio of troops to space would determine the ultimate character of the war. In practical terms this profound insight meant that "by having [for example] five times the mobility of the Turks we would be on [equal] terms with them with one-fifth their numbers." Thus, Lawrence came increasingly to view desert warfare as more akin to naval warfare.

For Lawrence the camel was indeed a ship of the desert. The camel gave the desert guerrilla an incredible range of operations. In fact, the camel gave Lawrence and his Arab forces operational mobility. With the camel, troops were able to carry a ration lasting six weeks. Even under the hottest conditions, camels could travel three days without water. According to Lawrence this meant that the camels could cover nearly 250 miles between watering at an incredible sustained march rate of nearly 3.5 miles an hour. It also meant that the Arab irregular had the operational range of more than a thousand miles, sufficient to cast a threatening net over the entire Arabian Peninsula—and beyond. Even Lawrence had ridden 1,500 miles in a month without resupply.

Having rejected the necessity to defeat the Turk through decisive battle, Lawrence was able to dispense with the need for maintaining dense, vulnerable field formations that characterized the force structure of conventional armies. The primary maneuver formation that Lawrence exclusively employed was the raiding party, whereas the

Turk used the division. Lawrence's aim was to achieve "maximum articulation" of the Arab forces. If his strategic purpose was to expand into the vacant reaches of the Arabian Peninsula, then it only made sense that Lawrence employ clouds of raiders to occupy that vast territory. This approach, however, exploited the innate independence of the Arab irregular, and no one understood this better than Lawrence.

The Arab guerrilla, mounted on his camel, was an independent force unto himself. Lawrence wrote: "The Arab was simple and *individual*. Every enrolled man served in the line of battle and was self-contained. We had no lines of communications or labour troops. The efficiency of each man was his personal efficiency. We thought that in our condition of warfare the sum yielded by single men would be at least equal to the product of the compound system. ... In irregular warfare if two men are together one is being wasted."

**F**rom the foregoing analysis Lawrence distilled six fundamental principles of insurgency that even today have remarkable relevance. First, a successful guerrilla movement must have an unassailable base—a base secure not only from direct physical assault, but from attack in other forms as well, including psychological attack. Second, the guerrilla must have a technologically sophisticated enemy. The greater this sophistication, the greater this alien force would rely on forms of communications and logistics that must necessarily present vulnerabilities to the irregular. Third, the enemy must be sufficiently weak in numbers so as to be unable to occupy the disputed territory in depth with a system of interlocking fortified posts. Fourth, the guerrilla must have at least the passive support of the populace, if not its full involvement. By Lawrence's calculation, "Rebellions can be made by 2 percent active in striking force and 98 percent passively sympathetic." Fifth, the irregular force must have the fundamental qualities of speed, endurance, presence and logistical independence. Sixth, the irregular must be sufficiently advanced in weaponry to strike at the enemy's logistics and signals vulnerabilities.

In summarizing the practical relevance of his own theory, Lawrence provided the following bottom line: "Granted mobility, security (in the form of denying targets to the enemy), time, and doctrine (the idea to convert every subject to friendliness), victory will rest with the insurgents, for the algebraical factors are in the end decisive, and against them perfections of means and spirit struggle quite in vain."

From the foregoing we can derive several characteristics



*Lawrence showed his regard for the Arabs by wearing their dress.*

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of insurgent or guerrilla warfare that have relevance for today. First, for the insurgent, warfare is always offensive, never defensive; always protracted, never swift. Second, the news media, especially the electronic mode, is a weapon of the insurgent; it is his to manipulate, and if he manipulates it, he owns it. Third, guerrillas are always organized into the smallest possible—and most lethal—structure; this is how they survive in the first place. In current parlance, all are units of action; there are no units of employment. Fourth, and just as Lawrence understood, the ratio of troops-to-space determines the character of military operations. The simple physics of action makes the conventional force a mechanical solid under constant

pressure from the fluid-like insurgent forces. Fifth, because insurgents command precision information regarding the conventional force, insurgent actions become precision strikes. Last, because insurgents have the physical characteristics of a fluid and the cybernetic structure of a hive, they are the most evolved of human networks.

Although insurgent forces confront conventional armies with significant challenges, patience, diligence and sound judgment can defeat the guerrilla. This is already happening in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. To begin with, we must think like an insurgent; our every move, plan, concept and action must be evaluated and judged through insurgent eyes. Second, conventional action must be characterized by speed, shock, freedom of action and endurance. By endurance I mean moral endurance as strength of will and logistical endurance as action conducted independent of continuous supply. Third, we must cast an unblinking eye upon the insurgent through persistent surveillance and precision targeting. Fourth, we must present the insurgent with no obvious pattern, shape or structure. Fifth, we must defeat the insurgent by means of a strategy of inoculation: organizing our conventional forces into small, cellular offensive antibodies that vaccinate the local populace against the insurgent. Sixth, the pathology of insurgency suggests that we isolate the guerrillas physically, cybernetically and psychologically from their base of support and from the media. Finally, in fighting an insurgency, one dollar bill often equals 10 bullets; those that support the insurgent, as well as the insurgent himself, can be bought with any manner of emolument and blandishment.

There is, however, one other aspect of guerrilla warfare that merits special consideration—the role of the insurgent leader. In the end Lawrence's success in the Arabian Desert rested most heavily on his leadership skills and abilities. Yet this should remind us that leadership is the insurgent's greatest vulnerability; take away the leader and you have rendered the insurgency impotent and ineffective. A brief



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*The entry of the Arabs into the Red Sea port of Aqaba on July 6, 1917.*

examination of Lawrence's leadership style offers insight into the unique and sometimes rare qualities required of a successful insurgent leader. First, Lawrence combined wisdom, integrity, humanity, courage and discipline with empathy—the ability to identify emotionally with both subordinate and superior. In an insurgency, empathy plays an especially crucial role; it places the leader inside the hearts and minds of his men. He knows immediately and intuitively the physical and the psychological limits of his own troops. In guerrilla warfare the insurgent must always operate at the limits of normal human endurance—and often beyond—to maintain a moral advantage over his more powerful conventional enemy. Empathy also places the insurgent leader in the mind of his superior. Often operating out of communications and at vast distances from his higher headquarters, the leader must always operate as if his superior were at his side; as if he were his own higher headquarters.

Second, insurgent leaders like Lawrence are successful because they are enablers; they provide their men with the requisite motivation, training and skills necessary to accomplish a mission they otherwise could not accomplish alone. Enablers act much like catalysts in a chemical reaction—as a factor that induces or precipitates change and action. Lawrence achieved this in three ways. First, as a teacher he taught his guerrillas basic tactical skills of the attack. Second, as a designer he crafted plans and concepts that were skillfully executed within the overall strategic

Hart's book *Strategy*. The correspondence between the two makes manifestly clear the intellectual debt that Liddell Hart owed Lawrence, and for his part Liddell Hart was not hesitant to express his gratitude. He did so through a well-crafted biography entitled *T. E. Lawrence*, one of Liddell Hart's best works.

Liddell Hart recognized the genius in Lawrence and, more than most, understood its source. Liddell Hart, like Clausewitz before him, saw that men were not born to genius, but came upon it through hard study and practical application. T. E. Lawrence and others had struggled mightily against the shackles of personal weakness and imperfection to unchain that genius. Lawrence himself understood this when he wrote Liddell Hart concerning the biography:

Do make it clear that generalship, at least in my case, came not by instinct, unsought, but by understanding, hard study and brain-concentration. Had it come easy to me I should not have done it as well.

For my strategy [of insurgency], I could find no teachers in the field: behind me there were some years of military reading [and writing]. ... With 2,000 years of examples behind us we have no excuse when fighting, for not fighting well.

Without realizing it, T. E. Lawrence could not have written a better epitaph. 