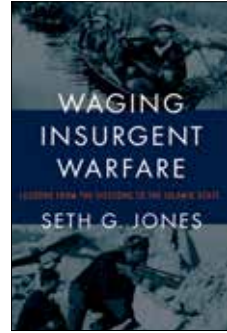


Book Reviews

Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State



By Seth G. Jones

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Reviewed by Dr Vladimir Rauta

Biography: Dr Vladimir Rauta is a Lecturer of International Relations at Staffordshire University. His expertise is in indirect third-party military intervention, or, simply put, proxy wars. His research has focused on unpacking the concept of proxy wars theoretically against a wide empirical research (from Africa to Ukraine).

Insurgencies, writes Seth G. Jones, are “a reality of international politics – and have been for centuries” (p. 4). Given the prevalence of insurgencies as global security challenges in the twenty-first century, the recently published *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State* is a welcome addition to an ever-growing body of literature. Caught between the search for overarching theories and the writing of encompassing histories, the study of insurgency is almost as daunting as it is puzzling. Nevertheless, Jones’ analysis stands out for it achieves the rare feat of bridging the long-standing divide concerning research into civil wars; namely academic study versus policymaking. It does so by keeping a clear focus on the topic. Without bypassing the burgeoning theoretical and empirical literature, Jones observes the phenomenon of insurgencies in a simple and elegant manner, from beginning to end, and across its key aspects.

His treatment of the topic can be described as essentially orthodox. Jones does not challenge current understanding of insurgencies, but rather critically expands it. Take, for example, his definition of an insurgency: “a political and military campaign by a nonstate group (or groups) to overthrow a regime or secede from a country” (p. 7). This is consistent with decades of scholarship. However, Jones manages to add value in two ways. First, by understanding that

discussions of counterinsurgencies need debate on insurgencies. In this way, Jones invites the reader, academic or not, to begin by thinking of the problem, with its puzzles and riddles, and only afterwards allows for considerations regarding possible solutions. Second, he presents insurgency as a complex phenomenon *determined by* and *reactive to* various processes *belonging or associated to* political violence. For this study, these are strategies, tactics, structure, propaganda, and outside support.

These five core determinants are each treated with clarity and rigour. In discussing them, the book performs well both in terms of its analytical depth, and empirical breadth. What enables this is a mix-methods approach which links quantitative rigour with qualitative detail. Purely on methodological grounds, the book gets the best of both worlds. Remarkably effective are the many anecdotal stories that frame each issue. As the case studies are developed from chapter to chapter, Jones builds a comprehensive picture of a very complex universe of insurgencies where each is unique and follows its own iterations. The many narratives strengthen this, and effectively present insurgencies as genuine, real-life events of significant importance and with grave consequences for security, be it national, regional, or international. For Jones, insurgency is not an abstract event; presenting its realities is the book's greatest accomplishment.

Jones' aims are to demonstrate the political utility and directionality of all the five determinants. In the analysis, two stand out as opening more questions than providing answers. This, however, is not a fault of the book, but rather of the puzzling nature of both concepts: strategy and outside support. The former is discussed as a choice between three options: guerrilla, conventional, and punishment. Jones does an exceptional job at detailing each by focusing on their diverging political aims. In doing so, he reminds the audience that conflating insurgency with guerrilla warfare is fallacious to say the least. However, the argument could have presented punishment more clearly, for it actually behaves as a coercive tool that spans both guerrilla and conventional strategic contexts. Thus, it can also be understood as subordinate to either strategy – guerrilla and conventional. The latter point, outside support, could have also benefited from a closer delineation of its two forms: direct and indirect. This is crucial, for the modality of channelling support produces different outcomes: direct (combat) support informs the presence of military intervention, while indirect support merges into proxy war.

Nevertheless, the book is very informative, both theoretically and empirically. Jones demonstrates how great power support to insurgents is both common and effective. He reiterates that, most often, guerrilla warfare is the go-to choice of strategy for rebels against their target governments. He emphasises the critical role organisational structures play, while also carefully detailing the implications behind the uses of various tactics from ambushes to suicide missions. Most importantly, Jones brings insurgency to the twenty-first century by linking it to social media outlets and to globalisation, more widely. As the book notes in its final chapter on counterinsurgency, it is critical to understand insurgency as evolving and keeping up not just with its immediate environment, but with the global one, regardless of

how remote and geographically isolated it might be. *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State* is, therefore, a *tour de force* on insurgency which benefits both academic and policy debates.

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