Interview - Robert J. Bunker

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Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I see them revolving around our understanding of the modern state system, and even war itself within the context of the post-modern epochal transition taking place. Crime and war are blurring, state institutions are failing, and mercenaries have returned to the battlefield. We are seeing the rise of new war-making entities such as the Islamic State (IS) and the Mexican cartels while, at the same time, the European Union (EU) is attempting to create a post-Westphalian regional entity. These events and the many others like them taking place do not fit neatly into the modern political science paradigm because they are coming from the sub- and supra-national levels. Further, networked entities from these extremes are exerting great pressure on the 'Goldilocks Zone'—the perfect balance modern states dwell within, in which a strong middle class, conventional warfare, the formal economy, and sovereign prerogative exist. Ultimately, I think the dominant theories of Realism and Liberalism themselves are too limited for the levels of change we are facing and that some other form of "ism" is going to have to be developed to better account for what is taking place.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) has prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My thinking has been most greatly influenced by two mentors—Prof. Harold W. Rood who had taught at Claremont McKenna College and Prof. Lindsay Moore who taught at the Claremont Graduate School (now University), with both of whom I took a number of independent studies. Prof. Rood stressed an understanding of historical patterns and the intuitive detection of important anomalies that arise within them. Prof. Moore stressed original and creative thinking and also an appreciation of broader Western intellectual and scientific developments. My understanding of the world changed in 1987 when Prof. Moore and I theoretically projected that the United States was going to face a post-modern epochal transition equivalent to the shifts from the classical to the medieval, and the medieval to the modern eras. One moment I was viewing the world through the comforting bi-polarity of the Cold War with the Soviets and the next I realized that the wars that were coming were going to instead be with violent non-state groups such as terrorists, cartels, gangs, and mercenaries. Thus, 1987 is when I paradigm shifted. I've focused my professional career on that new reality ever since.

What do you think are some of the greatest 'lessons learned' from contemporary counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts that will impact on the security studies field?

I think more learning always takes place with failure rather than success and, unfortunately in the area of COIN—at least at the strategic level—great learning should therefore be taking place. The U.S. military and its allies actually perform well at the operational level. If you give them enough resources they can stomp out an insurgency in a locale in Iraq or Afghanistan but, ultimately, while they take action against one group another pops up elsewhere within a state. The U.S. does not have the will, resources, or even host government mandate to lock down an entire country by such operational level efforts. So the game plan shifts to the strategic level while these 'whack-an-insurgent' operations take place in the background. The vision is to promote good governance, local security responsibility, formal economic development, and a host of other programs in order to take a stressed or failing state and make it a productive sovereign within the international community. This strategic vision has crashed and burned for the U.S. in both Iraq and Afghanistan. This is due to many reasons related to tribal culture, indigenous corruption, factional resource competition, and even structural realities such as the illicit economy being much more profitable than the formal one. The take away or lesson learned from such limited operational success and dismal strategic COIN—development with guns—endeavors for the U.S. is simply don't do it. It's a futile activity like that of betting against the house in gambling and expecting to actually win.

Latin America is often under-examined within contemporary COIN literature, despite ongoing insurgencies in the region. What are the key differences between 'criminal insurgency', 'spiritual insurgency' and 'plutocratic insurgency'?

Criminal and plutocratic insurgency are variants of Dr. Steve Metz's 1993 commercial insurgency articulation published in a U.S. Army manuscript. Dr. John Sullivan coined the term 'criminal insurgency' in 2008, which is the bottom up variant of commercial insurgency being promoted by the Mexican cartels and derived from the illicit economy. The eventual political control of a town or region by an organized crime group is mostly accidental in nature and is an outcome of their striving for absolute impunity in their activities. I coined the term 'plutocratic insurgency' in 2011 which is the top down variant of commercial insurgency being promoted by the global 1% and multinational corporations and derived from the sovereign free economy. These groups tend to use lawyers and lobbyists rather than guns but do have the capacity to utilize private security and mercenaries if coercive force is needed. Their intent is to maximize profits by not paying taxes which helps to hollow out the state. This is acceptable, though, since public goods are of no interest to them because education and security for their families, like everything else, has become a private commodity. 'Spiritual insurgency' was also developed by Dr. Metz in 1993 as a companion to his commercial insurgency articulation. He views it as "the evolutionary descendent of traditional revolution." It is anti-material in nature and draws upon religion and spirituality. For the followers, it provides "personal meaning, the amelioration of discontent, and the punishment of injustice." For more on these types of insurgencies, *E-IR* readers can consult my new work *Old and New Insurgency Forms*, available for free from the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College.

What is unique about the Latin American context that has given rise to these insurgent manifestations?

In the case of Central America and Mexico, I'd say weak political capacity and a history of authoritarianism along with high levels of poverty, combined with being on the pipeline for the illicit drug (e.g. cocaine) producing Andean region to the major consumption market in the United States. Back in the day—in the late 1970s and into the mid 1980s—when Colombian cocaine entered the U.S. market via southern Florida, both Central America and Mexico had no geo-narco significance. Once the land route via Mexico into the U.S. opened up, the whole equation shifted. Smugglers in Mexico first morphed into cartels under state authority and then later began to challenge the state itself. The U.S. deportation of gang members—who grew up as kids on the streets of East Los Angeles yet were still illegally residing foreign nationals—back to their home Central American countries added further kindling to the smoldering fires of criminal insurgency as did shifts away from authoritarian to democratic governance that created institutional vulnerabilities (e.g. voids) that the cartels and gangs could exploit.

Why, and how, do cartels such as *La Familia Michoacana* and *Los Caballeros Templarios* (or The Knights Templars) seek to give 'spiritual' meaning to their strategic objectives?

I'm not sure if 'strategic objectives' is the right way to characterize what took place. It assumes some sort of

overarching rationality on the same level of Robert Pape's 'strategic logic of suicide terrorism' (*APSR*, August 2003) argument. With LFM and the *Templarios*, we were dealing with Christian cult-like behaviors and charismatic, but also delusional, leaders suffering from messiah complexes. All of those shrines that came later containing statues of Nazario Moreno and the medieval archetype based ceremonies with the crusader robes and swords was not rational from a Western utilitarian cost-benefit perspective. While arguments exist that some of the leaders may have been involved initially in a sham religion, one needs to remember that the young kids who are socialized in violent spirituality like this do indeed eventually become true believers—we have seen this same type of process with Nazi Germany 'Hitler Youth' sixty plus years ago and more recently with IS 'Cubs of the Caliphate.'

It appears that Mexico faces serious challenges in terms of cartels wielding 'competitive control' over many cities like in Michoacán. How have these cartels been able to consolidate such powerful territorial authority vis-à-vis the Mexican state?

When Mexico transitioned from decades-long one party autocratic rule under the PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*) into a multiparty democracy with eventual PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional*) presidential victories, 'institutional voids' developed within the governing structure. Under the older autocratic system, the state was able to effectively control drug smugglers and the early cartel structures that later developed, and also allow their party elites to covertly profit from this relationship. As power relations shifted, the cartels were able to effectively throw off the yoke of federal authority while, at the same time, co-opting and intimidating their way into local and state governmental structures such as elected officials, police forces, and the judicial system. With increasing cartel impunity also came a natural evolution that saw the criminal bosses begin to take on a political leadership role. This is like a bandit chieftain transitioning into a warlord—nature abhors a vacuum as does politics—with the result that cartel rule replaced state rule. Interestingly, such 'institutional voids' have also developed in some formerly authoritarian Islamic countries by means of external (the U.S. invasion of Iraq) or internal (the Arab Spring in Syria and Libya) events. Into the void, rather than democracy, developing al Qaeda and the Islamic State have inserted themselves.

Are there similarities between cartels and gangs operating in Mexico, and those seen in countries such as Honduras, El Salvador and other Central American states?

The larger of these groups are cloning themselves or may even be the same entities depending on how you look at the network dynamics. I would include East Los Angeles too in that question about the gangs. We have transnational gangs such as MS (*Mara Salvatrucha*)—later MS 13 for its ties to the *La Eme* (the Mexican Mafia)—and 18th Street (Barrio 18) that began in Los Angeles and have since migrated to Central America, Mexico, and now even to some spots in Europe. We had groups like *Los Zetas*—currently a former shell of themselves—with operatives not only in Mexico but in Central America, the United States, and beyond. The same goes for the Sinaloa Cartel but they are still very strong. Think of both the gangs and cartels as social cancers that have metastasized with cells that are now freely floating within the Western hemisphere. We are also seeing gang generation and cartel phase evolution and devolution taking place over time with these entities.

How has policy aimed at countering cartels and gangs impacted on state relations throughout the region, including with the US?

This is a very timely question as I read another article this morning about the U.S. push to demilitarize the domestic security policies of the Northern Triangle countries towards the gangs. For a number of Central American states, the gangs and cartels have grown in number and evolved in sophistication to the point that they have gone beyond a law enforcement problem and have become a direct threat to national security. Mexico is also at this point and, for some time now, has deployed the armed forces to take back parts of the country under cartel control—although they would never publically state that a criminal insurgency is actually taking place. The United States, on the other hand, is still only is dealing with criminal organizations that are at the law enforcement level of concern. Beyond the fact the U.S. and many of these Latin American countries are experiencing very different threat levels, the U.S. has far more developed institutional capacity—from both a rule of law and resource base perspective—to better respond to them in the first place. Once the military is deployed internally, human rights generally go out the window. In the case of

some regions of Mexico, it has gotten so bad that entire police forces have gone over to the cartels and the citizens have armed themselves into self defense units. What else can a sovereign state realistically do when it is physically losing control of its regions to violent non-state actors? Concerning your question, then, quite a bit of tension exists within the region.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of security studies?

Prospective students must really do their due diligence before getting into a security studies program. Quite a few of the older generation of security scholars simply do not understand the 21st century threat environment. Additionally, if the program you are looking at is in a department where only formal international political economy (IPE) is taught—that is, such studies never touch upon the informal or illicit economies—your education is going to be imperiled by delusional thinking. To have an actual impact upon the future, young security scholars need to learn about the world that actually exists today and not the one that existed decades ago.

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This interview was conducted by Alexandra Phelan. Alexandra is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.