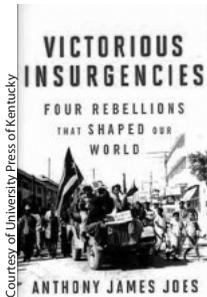


this is an important mission for the US military, but how much America can afford to dedicate to it and where the priority efforts should be directed.



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## ***Victorious Insurgencies: Four Rebellions That Shaped Our World***

by Anthony James Joes

**Reviewed by Louis J. Nigro Jr.,** US Ambassador (Retired) and author of *The New Diplomacy in Italy*

A recent New Yorker cartoon has one front-office type telling another across his desk, “Those who fail to learn from history are entitled to repeat it.” Professor Anthony Joes’s latest book on the subject of insurgency is a superb textbook for anyone—student, teacher, or specialist—who would learn from the historical record what makes some insurgencies successful and what factors rendered the ruling regimes unable to overcome them.

Professor Joes’s credentials could hardly be better: If there were a scholarly counterpart to Standard and Poor’s, it would give him a AAA+ rating in Asymmetrical Warfare Studies. In this book, drawing on a lifetime of study and analysis of insurgencies, Joes reflects on why these four succeeded where others failed: Mao Tse-tung in China; Ho Chi Minh against the French in Vietnam; Fidel Castro in Cuba; and the mujahedeen against the Soviets in Afghanistan.

In his brief remarks addressed to US policymakers regarding future counterinsurgency operations, Joes takes the realist position that countering most future insurgencies will be seen as limited wars by state actors like the United States, but will be seen as total wars by the insurgents themselves. “This imbalance can wear down the patience of even the strongest power,” according to Joes, who finds few cases outside the “immediate Western Hemisphere” in which insurgents threaten the “truly vital” interests of the United States. Joes counsels that in responding to most future insurgent threats, US policymakers craft strategies based on “limited support to indigenous counterinsurgent forces,” by delivering technical, intelligence, and financial assistance—and especially by interdicting outside assistance to the insurgency, which is as much a diplomatic as a military task.

Joes’s thesis is that the four regimes that failed to overcome insurgencies had three things in common: they had “surprisingly serious internal political weakness”; they committed “striking military errors”; and their best efforts were undermined by “the insurgency’s external environment, especially of outside assistance to the insurgents, both direct and indirect.”

More specifically, Joes holds that all four ruling regimes were poorly served by military leadership that underestimated the insurgent enemy; policymaker offer peaceful political roads to change as alternatives to armed insurgency; could not prevent “vital outside direct assistance” to the

insurgents; and failed to commit sufficient military forces to their conflicts, because of commitments or threats or pressures elsewhere. Joes believes that the decisive factor was the fourth and final one, which would make the ruling regime's failure an essentially military one, rooted in defeat on the battlefield.

Professor Joes's own deeply informed narrative of the four cases, however, makes a powerful argument that the decisive factor is in fact an insurgency's ability to exploit the possibilities of the geopolitical and diplomatic context in which it worked. Conversely, the unsuccessful counterinsurgent ruling regimes were much less agile in exploiting those international possibilities. The most important lesson of the many that Professor Joes teaches, at least for this reviewer, is that the geopolitical and diplomatic context is just as critical for wars of insurgency as for conventional interstate wars. The success of the insurgent depends greatly on the willingness of their state-actor friends and allies to provide invaluable direct support—material, technical, and financial—and to isolate the ruling regime diplomatically, which tended to delegitimize the ruling regime while empowering and legitimizing the insurgency in the international arena.

Joes shows convincingly how much Mao benefited from the Japanese assault on China, which forced Chiang Kai-Shek to fight on two fronts from 1937-45, and after 1945 from massive Soviet support, which outpaced US support to Chiang. The author demonstrates how Ho's insurgency was especially dependent on the international context—Japanese occupation during World War II and active Japanese assistance in the waning days of the war; Nationalist Chinese occupation of northern Vietnam after the Japanese departed; and important direct support from the Chinese Communists after 1949. Meanwhile, Ho's French opponents were isolated diplomatically; the United States favored decolonization generally and European allies like the British and the Dutch were busy liquidating their own Asian empires, while France was desperately trying to maintain its Indochinese imperium.

Joes deftly describes how Castro's ability to take Havana was dependent on Washington's decision to withdraw its support of Batista and to pressure him to leave power, as well as by active albeit clandestine support from several Latin American and European countries. Joes notes that the *mujahedeen's* victory over the Red Army was advanced by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics's diplomatic isolation in its Afghan adventure (only India outside the Soviet Bloc recognized the Kabul regime) as well as by enormous foreign diplomatic, economic, and material support from Europe, the Muslim World (especially Pakistan and Saudi Arabia), China, and, of course, the United States.

Whether one agrees completely with Professor Joes's final conclusions or not, readers of this book will find in it the essential stories to four consequential and successful insurgencies as well as cogent analysis of the political, military and diplomatic strengths and weaknesses of the insurgents and the regimes they defeated.