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Abstract: The Gadianton wars were different from most other wars in the Book of Mormon in that they were internal, often covert, and protracted. They included components of terrorism, assassination, insurgency, and other horrific aspects of war. We can trace similar characteristics from these ancient wars with the current conflicts that are occurring today, especially those in the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and Africa. The story of seventy years of fighting with the Gadianton robbers is told using a modernized perspective that focuses specifically on the methods by which the robbers fought the wars—secret base areas, propaganda, guerrilla-type attacks—strikingly similar to modern events.



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Ray C. Hillam

There are many kinds of war described in the Book of Mormon. Some are enormous in their destruction, followed by intermittent periods of “cold war.” Most are placed within the context of a highly polarized relationship in which the Nephites and Lamanites are cast as deadly rivals. While some Book of Mormon wars are limited in their objectives and means, others are unlimited, such as the war that led to the destruction of the Nephites by the Lamanites.

The Gadianton wars were different from most other wars in the Book of Mormon in that they were internal, often covert, and protracted. In part they grew out of internal dissent stemming from alienation and were fueled by a satanic lust for power. The characteristics of these protracted wars, are like some of the insurgencies and counterinsurgencies of modern times. Since World War II we have witnessed many forms of such wars in the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and Africa. As one who has studied the concepts and principles of contemporary insurgency and counterinsurgency, I find them strikingly similar to those in the Gadianton era.

The Gadianton Wars

It was during the troubled fortieth year of the reign of the judges (52 B.C.) that serious difficulty arose among the people of the Nephites. Since their judge, Pahoran had died, disagreement arose among three factions, each led by one of the several sons of Pahoran: Pahoran II, Paanchi, and Pacumeni. When Pahoran II was “appointed by the voice of the people,” Pacumeni supported him, but Paanchi decided he could not; he organized a rebellion and was caught, convicted, and condemned to death. His angry followers sent Kishkumen to assassinate Pahoran II. (Helaman 1:9)

After the assassination, Kishkumen escaped to the sanctuary of the rebels, who in turn could “mingle themselves among the people, in a manner that they could not be found” (Helaman 1:12). The rebels were able to remain within the Nephite body politic and could benefit from the impending war between the Nephites and Lamanites.

Pacumeni, who had succeeded Pahoran II, was killed during the Nephite war with the Lamanites, and Helaman II was appointed to fill

the judgment seat, an appointment that was equally unacceptable to Kishkumen and his band of rebels.

Within this environment of dissent, a man named Gadianton emerged as the leader of the rebels. Gadianton was an “exceeding expert in many words, and also in his craft, to carry on the secret work” of the rebels. He was a professional propagandist of the first magnitude, for he “did flatter them [his followers], and also Kishkumen,” and promised that “they should be placed in power and authority” (Helaman 2:4).

Gadianton dispatched Kishkumen to carry out his second assassination of a judge. But one of Helaman’s servants who had been able to penetrate the secret combination or infrastructure of the enemy and learn of the plan, entrapped Kishkumen, and killed him as he led him to the judgment seat of Helaman. That event brought the conspiracy into the open, and Gadianton and most of his followers were forced to find sanctuary in the wilderness. (Helaman 2:1–11)

After another war between the Nephites and Lamanites, a long period of peace and freedom, unprecedented prosperity, and a trend toward wickedness, the rebels, who called themselves Gadianton, reemerged. During the sixty-sixth year of the reign of the judges (27 B.C.), or approximately a generation after Gadianton and his rebels were forced to flee to the wilderness, they were able to infiltrate both societies, particularly the Lamanites. Once again, they were able to carry out their politics of terror, which led to the assassination of two judges—Cezoram and his son. (Helaman 6:15–19)

Initially they had found sanctuary among the Lamanites, but the Lamanite leaders, being politically embarrassed by their presence, “did use every means in their power to destroy them . . .” (Helaman 6:20). Their success in removing them from their midst came through (1) the building of the people’s faith in their leaders and obedience to law, (2) the vigorous and forceful suppression and pursuit of the robbers, and (3) a conversion program for those Gadianton rebels who would listen. (Helaman 6:34, 37) Because of this comprehensive strategy by the Lamanites, the band of robbers was utterly destroyed among them.

The Nephites had at the same time become particularly vulnerable to infiltration and subversion by the Gadianton rebels. Being soft and permissive, they were soon politically seduced, even “the righteous until they had come . . . to believe in their [the rebels’] works and partake of their spoils, and to join with them.” And “they [the Gadianton leaders] did obtain the sole management of the government” of the Nephites (Helaman 6:38–39) and “usurped the power and authority of the land” (Helaman 7:4).

During the reign of the Gadianton judges, Nephi, the son of Helaman, returned to the people of the Nephites. Seeing what had occurred, he began to preach repentance among the people and to lead an insurgency against

the Gadianton government. Nephi, who had earlier stepped down as chief judge in order to devote himself to the ministry, had charismatic qualities that enabled him to consolidate Nephite resistance to the Gadianton government. His sermons and prophecies produced a following of the faithful who formed an opposition to the corrupt and iniquitous rule of the Gadianton judges. By the seventy-second year, or four years after the Gadianton judges came to power, there were “wars throughout all the land among the people of Nephi.” After two years of civil war, which were followed by a great famine, the people began “to remember the Lord,” and they repented. Soon, the Gadianton leaders and their followers “were swept away by the people and they became extinct” (Helaman 11:1, 5–7, 10).

Thus, Nephi became a revolutionary leader in opposition to a politically illegitimate government established by the Gadiantons. He led a revolt against them and after several years of struggle established a government that was politically and morally legitimate. His strategy was similar to the one employed by the Lamanites some years earlier, although of greater magnitude. In both instances, once there was little popular support for the Gadianton leaders and their followers, they were easily defeated.

After a almost a decade of peace and prosperity, both the Nephite and Lamanite societies again became soft and vulnerable to insurgency. (3 Nephi 1:23–29) and with the growth of dissension, the number of rebels reemerged and multiplied, as did their sanctuaries and bases. The rebels, who had adopted Gadianton’s operational code or secret plans, began to launch more and more terrorist and guerrilla-type attacks against the governments and people of both the Nephites and the Lamanites. The Nephites and Lamanites in turn sent search-destroy missions into the mountains and wilderness to pursue them but were obliged to return, unable to rout them from their base areas and sanctuaries.

Over the years many Lamanites and Nephites joined with the rebels, and the mountains and wilderness became filled with them. Large base camps were built by the rebels for protection and, more important, for launching attacks. Thus, within a few years, a small group of rebels became a large conventional army and a major military threat to both the Nephite and Lamanite societies. Their leader, Giddianhi, called himself governor of the secret society of Gadianton.

After years of protracted war and military preparation, the rebel chieftain issued an edict to Lachoneus, governor of the land, which said:

Lachoneus, most noble and chief governor of the land, behold, I write this epistle unto you, and do give unto you exceeding great praise because of your firmness, and also the firmness of your people, in maintaining that which ye suppose to be your right and liberty; yea, ye do stand well, as if ye were supported by the hand of god, in the defence of your liberty, and your property, and your country, or that which ye do call so.

And it seemeth a pity unto me, most noble Lachoneus, that ye should be so foolish and vain as to suppose that ye can stand against so many brave men who are at my command, who do now at this time stand in their arms, and do await with great anxiety for the word—Go down upon the Nephites and destroy them.

And I, knowing of their unconquerable spirit, having proved them in the field of battle, and knowing of their everlasting hatred towards you because of the many wrongs which ye have done unto them, therefore if they should come down against you they would visit you with utter destruction.

Therefore I have written this epistle, sealing it with mine own hand, feeling for your welfare, because of your firmness in that which ye believe to be right, and your noble spirit in the field of battle.

Therefore I write unto you, desiring that ye would yield up unto this my people, your cities, your lands, and your possessions, rather than they should visit you with the sword and that destruction should come upon you.

Or in other words, yield yourselves up unto us, and unite with us and become acquainted with our secret works, and become our brethren that ye may be like unto us—not our slaves, but our brethren and partners of all our substance.

And behold, I swear unto you, if ye will do this, with an oath, ye shall not be destroyed; but if ye will not do this, I swear unto you with an oath, that on the morrow month I will command that my armies shall come down against you, and they shall not stay their hand and shall spare not, but shall slay you, and shall let fall the sword upon you even until ye shall become extinct.

And behold, I am Giddianhi; and I am the governor of this the secret society of Gadianton; which society and the works thereof I know to be good; and they are of ancient date and they have been handed down to us.

And I write this epistle unto you, Lachoneus, and I hope that ye will deliver up your lands and your possessions, without the shedding of blood, that this my people may recover their rights and government, who have dissented away from you because of your wickedness in retaining from them their rights of government, and except ye do this, I will avenge their wrongs. I am Giddianhi. (3 Nephi 3:2–10)

Lachoneus, alarmed by the boldness and arrogance of Gidianhi's demands, encouraged his people to strengthen their faith, and issued a proclamation that "they should gather together their women, and their children, their flocks and their herds, and all their substance . . . unto one place" (3 Nephi 3:13). He built fortifications and instructed the Nephite and Lamanite armies to defend them. He appointed Gidgiddoni as commander of the Nephite forces and appointed chief captains as Gidgiddoni's subordinates. As was the custom, only chief captains who in their own personal lives were righteous enough to have the spirit of revelation and also prophecy were chosen. And Gidgiddoni was "a great prophet among them," as was Lachoneus. (3 Nephi 3:19) Thus the resulting strategy against the enemy was based, in part, on revelation and prophecy.

Assembling the people and their sustenance into a protective area was only part of the strategy. They also implemented a food-denial program, leaving their cities and fields desolate. Moreover, Gidgiddoni sent search-and-destroy missions to harass the rebels and prevent them from tilling the soil of the Nephites, which had been left desolate. Soon, in desperation, the rebels attacked the fortified settlement and “there never was known so great a slaughter among all the people of Lehi since he left Jerusalem” (3 Nephi 4:11). The mighty army of the rebel leader was beaten back and forced to retreat. Gidgiddoni’s forces pursued Giddianhi and his rebels to “the borders of the wilderness” and overtook and killed Giddianhi.

The Gadianton forces regrouped and appointed another leader, Zemnarihah, under whom they decided to encircle the protective settlement of the Nephites and Lamanites and to starve them into submission. But because of the disruption of their plans by continuous harassing missions and guerilla attacks by Gidgiddoni’s irregulars, the Gadianton forces themselves nearly perished from hunger. Finally, Zemnarihah broke off the engagement and retreated to the north. Gidgiddoni became aware of the rebels’ plans, cut them off, and encircled them. Many surrendered, but others were killed, including Zemnarihah. This brought an end to what was called the Gadianton wars.

Relevancy for Modern Times

There were several patterns of Gadianton insurgency during the approximately seventy years of active, and sometimes latent, Gadianton wars. The first was characterized by rebels disrupting the rule of the judges, promoting unrest, recruiting followers, developing an infrastructure and strategy for seizing political power. The countermeasure of Helaman II, however, proved successful when Gadianton and most of his followers were forced to retreat from their clandestine sanctuaries within the body politic and to seek safety in the wilderness. As long as the Nephite and Lamanite societies remained spiritually healthy, the presence of the rebels in the wilderness was of little consequence.

The second Gadianton insurgency began with the infiltration of both the Lamanite and Nephite societies by the rebels and their eventual control of the Nephite government. The Lamanites were successful in removing the rebels from their midst, but the Nephites succumbed to propaganda and the skillful tactics and strategies of the rebels. Only by a new insurgency led by Nephi, and years of war and famine, was the Gadianton government swept away.

The third Gadianton war had some of the characteristics of a regular war. There was less subversion and more confrontation on the battlefield. However, it was a more destructive, and larger war. The Gadianton forces

moved from being a small disaffected group of rebels seeking sanctuaries in the wilderness to a large conventional force able to confront the military might of both the Nephites and the Lamanites.

Those wars were necessarily protracted because it took time to develop the capability to compete with the constituted authorities. They lasted for approximately seventy years from the time of Kishkumen's murder of Pahoran II to the defeat of Zemnarihah by Gidgiddoni.

To the rebels the role of the sanctuary was important, as were flexible base areas from which to launch attacks or to retreat. They developed a network of base areas in the wilderness and tried to maintain a secret presence within the Lamanite and Nephite communities. Their movements were, in part, based on ideology—tied to issues and lists of grievances. For instance, Giddianhi claimed he sought to recover the rights of his followers, the rights of government and property.

The counterinsurgency and insurgency programs of the Nephites and Lamanites were very much tied to the God-fearing ideology of the day and to a particular political system and process of government. The Nephites placed much emphasis upon the voice of the people and sought men of righteousness to rule them. In Nephi's insurgency he relied heavily upon regenerating their faith to mobilize opposition to the Gadianton government. During the last war, Commander Gidgiddoni and the chief captains also relied upon the gospel and the spirit of revelation to unite and lead their society and armies against the enemy. It was not simply a contest of arms but of ideas. It was not a conflict that could be resolved on the battlefield alone.

The Gadiantons presumably had leaders who could whip their followers into the frenzy of battle, while Gidgiddoni had men of faith to motivate and lead. Even the chief captains, as well as the commander of the Nephite forces, were men who had the spirit of revelation. They were not only military leaders but spiritual leaders as well, all within the context of revealed truth.

Psychological warfare and propaganda were important then as they are today. The bold epistle of Giddianhi was a brilliant effort to persuade Lachoneus to capitulate. His praise of Lachoneus and his people, his speaking of the "unconquerable spirit" of his men who only desire to "recover their rights and government," his willingness to accept the Nephites and Lamanites as brethren and to share with them "secret works" that are good, and his alleged feelings for Lachoneus' welfare are impressive propaganda themes.

Perhaps more significant is the role propaganda played in the incipient phases of the Gadianton movements. The tactics in the first two patterns of insurgency presumably consisted not only of assassinations but also of persuasive techniques that would bring converts and a significant measure of public apathy.

Secrecy, ritual, and tradition were important variables in the Gadianton movements as they are in many contemporary insurgencies. The movements were clandestine, with the aura of secrecy appealing to the frustrated and alienated Nephite and Lamanite. Giddianhi boasted of the Gadianton society of “ancient date,” which implies legitimacy and the importance of tradition.

The secret organization or infrastructure, with Mafia-like captains and soldiers, was evident. For instance, the secret sub rosa sanctuary of the rebels, before they were forced to retreat to the wilderness, suggested the existence of an infrastructure of interrelated cells led by elites such as Kishkumen and Gadianton. Such an infrastructure was maintained within the Nephite and Lamanite societies while the armed units were of necessity forced to seek and maintain sanctuaries and base areas in the wilderness. This infrastructure was particularly apparent in the second pattern of insurgency, which relied almost entirely upon internal subversion and assassination.

The food-denial program—the scorched-earth policy—was important to the strategy of the Lachoneus government. The food-denial program reduced or eliminated the parasitical relationship of the insurgents with the agricultural economy of the Nephite and Lamanite societies. The insurgents were forced to raise their own crops, which then could be easily destroyed by their enemy. Guerrillas and soldiers with empty stomachs are easily demoralized. In fact, Giddianhi’s forces eventually became desperate and were forced to attack a defense citadel because of this program.

Search and destroy, seize and hold, protective sanctuaries for storage, and strategic settlements were important aspects of Lachoneus’ counter-insurgency effort. The gathering of the people into a protective area that could be easily defended was strategically important in Lachoneus’ struggle to defeat Giddianhi. This defensive measure, combined with the search-and-destroy mission forced the insurgents to fight on terms that were disadvantageous to them.

When the Lamanites found Gadianton robbers in their midst, their response was broader than the mere suppression and pursuit of the robbers. They sought the support of the people through promoting their faith and obedience. They also made an effort to convert their enemies. Later, after the fall of the Nephite government to the Gadianton robbers, Nephi pursued a broad program that produced a following of the faithful. A popular base seemed essential to Nephi’s mission of removing the corrupt and wicked rule of the Gadianton judges.

The roles of terror, hit and run, and assassination were integral parts of the Gadianton strategy. The symbolic impact of terror and assassination presumably paralyzed the government, so much so that panic, disorder, and fear struck the constituted authorities and the people. Terror, if skillfully

coordinated with the political and military effort, is an important and often effective instrument of the weak.

While there are a number of similarities between the insurgent movements of the Gadianton robbers and modern insurgencies, there are also some striking differences. First, Mormon, the compiler-abridger, tended to interpret Nephite history in a cyclical fashion. For example, Mormon sees the Nephites at peace and living in righteousness, then come pride and arrogance, evil and pestilence, war and suffering, repentance and peace, and the whole cycle begins again. Furthermore, these cycles occur over brief periods of time, usually within a few years.

Modern insurgencies cannot be so comfortably fitted into a cyclical model. Not only has the world changed into a nation-state system that makes an analysis of insurgency more complex, but our historians are not as gifted as Mormon in being able to impart a moral judgment to the process of history.

Mormon says that the Gadianton insurgency is immoral, for it deceptively leads the people away from truth and freedom. On the other hand, he praises Nephi's insurgency, which brought down the Gadianton judges, because Nephi was a righteous man who was guided by gospel principles. He viewed that insurgency to be morally legitimate, even though Nephi's act of opposing the judges was politically seditious, since these wicked judges enjoyed authority extended to them by a politically seduced sector of the Nephite society.

Unfortunately, present-day insurgencies and counterinsurgencies are more difficult to define as good or bad. Both insurgents and counterinsurgents are known to employ abhorrent tactics, such as terror, assassination, or the indiscriminate killing of the innocent. Often those in power and those not in power are equally bad—or perhaps equally good.

For those who tend to view all insurgent groups as bad, it should be remembered that the insurgency of Nephi was deemed to be good by a prophet, as it was directed against an evil government. During the Gadianton era, only one such insurgency is recorded. The other insurgencies were initiated by the forces of evil against legitimate political authority.

Insurgencies, ancient or modern, are spawned essentially in the environment in which they occur. In the case of the Gadianton robbers, the laxness and self-indulgence of the Nephites, coupled with the great wealth and material comfort, produced social decay and created the conditions for insurgency. In the case of Nephi's insurgency, the corruptness of the Gadianton judges and their overconcentration of power also produced the kind of social unrest that could be turned to Nephi's advantage.

Today's political leaders, insurgent or counterinsurgent, do not have the perceptions of a prophet. This is the most salient distinction that can be

made. Nevertheless, as one reads the accounts of insurgency and counterinsurgency in the Book of Mormon, one is impressed with its relevancy for modern times.

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