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The Gadianton Robbers as Guerrilla Warriors

Daniel C. Peterson

D. Michael Quinn, who rejects the equation of the Gadianton robbers with the Masons of nineteenth-century New York, offers an alternative explanation of them in his flawed but brilliant book entitled *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*.¹ As befits his general thesis, he argues that the Book of Mormon views the Gadianton robbers as a confederacy of murderous black magicians and sorcerers whose oaths and secret works were less Masonic than occultic. His arguments are intriguing, although at certain crucial points they seem to me to rest upon a highly arbitrary reinterpretation of the text of the Book of Mormon. Still, there may be some truth in his discussion of the robbers and considerable value in the parallels he has adduced to them in occultic and Indian lore. Certainly, as I mention in my "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonry,'" the prevalent interpretation of the Gadianton robbers (among Latter-day Saints) as merely secular criminals is anachronistic and incorrect.

An examination of the Gadianton robbers as representing an alternative religious option within Nephite society is overdue. However, for the purposes of this paper, it is yet another facet of the Gadianton phenomenon that demands our attention. Ray C. Hillam, a Mormon political scientist who has studied modern insurgency and counterinsurgency methods in China and Vietnam, found them "strikingly similar to those in the Gadianton era."² "As

one reads the accounts of insurgency and counterinsurgency in the Book of Mormon," he says, "one is impressed with its relevancy for modern times."³

Is such a comparison anachronistic? In the view of Roger Hilsman, an eminent authority on the subject of irregular war, it would probably not be. In his "Foreword" to the English translation of Vo Nguyen Giap's *People's War, People's Army*, Hilsman points out that "Guerrilla warfare goes much further back in history than what we call conventional warfare."⁴ (And that, sadly, goes back a very long way indeed.) For instance, the guerrillas who harassed Napoleon's army in Spain after his 1808 invasion of that country helped at least partially to set him up for his disastrous defeat in Russia in 1812.⁵ But they were late arrivals on the scene. One thinks of the ninth-century 'Alawī rebels fleeing to the mountains of the Iranian plateau, as Babak had done some years earlier.⁶ Or there are the revolutionary Shī'ite groups who operated in rural areas in the days of the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Mu'tadīd (who reigned from A.D. 892 to 902).⁷ Prior to them one might think of the Khawārij rebels against 'Alī and the Umayyad caliphate. And yet earlier still are the Jewish Maccabean guerrillas whose revolt between 167 and 164 B.C. antedates the proto-Gadiantons of Helaman 1–2 by better than a century.⁸ And these are only a representative handful from perhaps hundreds of similar groups that may be found in virtually any region at virtually any point in history.

Old as guerrilla warfare practices are, however, only in our century have they been systematized in formal theoretical terms. But, despite recent factors such as industrialization, improved communications and transportation, and air power, they remain essentially the same, and this is the key to the mode of analysis I shall employ for the remainder of this paper. The scope of this paper, of course, does not permit a full and exhaustive review of the contemporary literature on guerrilla conflict; neither does it

allow a full justification of the claim that modern guerrilla practice necessarily resembles that of ancient guerrillas. Both tasks await a more comprehensive study of this subject. Nonetheless, I hope that the following analysis will exhibit the basic plausibility of the latter claim.

Certainly the recent interest in Sun-Tzu's *Ping-fa* ("The Art of War"), written around 400 B.C. in China, and the continuing interest among military strategists in the early nineteenth-century *Vom Kriege* ("On War") of the Prussian theorist Karl von Clausewitz indicate widespread recognition that the fundamental rules of strategy do not change. "The reason for reading Clausewitz today," wrote Colonel Edward M. Collins in the "Introduction" to his 1962 anthology, "is quite simple: he has something to say which is important, timely, and relevant to our situation."⁹ As Che Guevara, one of the leading practitioners and theoreticians of guerrilla warfare in our century wrote, "It is obvious . . . that war responds to a certain series of scientific laws; whoever ignores them will go down to defeat. . . . Though geographical and social conditions in each country determine the mode and particular forms that guerrilla warfare will take, there are general laws that hold for all fighting of this type."¹⁰ North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap, another authority on the subject, agrees. "Revolutionary armed struggle in any country," he writes, "has common fundamental laws."¹¹

This being the case, I think it not inappropriate to try to shed some light upon the behavior of the Gadianton robbers of the Book of Mormon by referring to some of the sad experience of our own dismal century. I do so by borrowing freely from the works of three men who are arguably the greatest authorities on guerrilla warfare of our time—Mao Tsetung,¹² Vo Nguyen Giap, and Ernesto "Che" Guevara. I do not mean to imply by my choice of three Marxist-Leninist strategists that the Gadianton robbers were somehow communist, or proto-Bolshevik. It is

simply the fact that, in modern times and at least until the days of Jonas Savimbi in Angola, the most spectacularly successful practitioners of guerrilla warfare have been Marxists. (I would also like to have it clearly understood that, while I cite them on military theory, on which they are demonstrably expert, I do not endorse their political, economic, or moral positions. Nothing, in fact, could be further from the truth.) Rather, I try primarily to apply their theories and experience to an analysis of the behavior of the Gadianton robbers during one period of their history, recorded in the book of Helaman and in the first portion of 3 Nephi.¹³

In 52 B.C., a band of disgruntled politicians had successfully employed a certain Kishkumen to assassinate the chief judge. However, following their success the conspirators did not simply disband. Instead, "one Gadianton, who was exceedingly expert in many words" (Helaman 2:4) managed to insinuate himself into the leadership of an ongoing group. Who Gadianton was, we are not really told. Perhaps he was one of Kishkumen's original backers, a socially prominent supporter of Paanchi, who was now able to fill the void left by that would-be judge's execution. Or perhaps he was a mere adventurer or demagogic ideologue who, like Hitler and the National Socialist movement, was able to step in and, by superior force of personality, take over a preexisting organization and turn it to his own purposes. In any event, Gadianton was ready to move by about 50 B.C., and Kishkumen, in the service of his new master, set out to assassinate Helaman. Instead, he was discovered by a servant of the chief judge who, under cover, had penetrated the proto-Gadianton movement, and who, in one of the Book of Mormon's more dramatic scenes, stabbed him to the heart. When Gadianton began to worry about Kishkumen's delay in returning, "he caused that his band should follow him. And they took their flight out of the land, by a secret way, into the

wilderness" (Helaman 2:11). In this, they anticipated Mao's dictum, "Fight when you can win, move away when you can't win."¹⁴

By 43 B.C., they had established secret cells "in the more settled parts of the land." However, so deep was their cover – they were not wearing Mr. Persuitt's telltale lambskins¹⁵ – that the authorities failed to destroy them, having no idea that they were even there (see Helaman 3:23 – Mormon writes with the insight of hindsight). The followers of Gadianton were attempting to maintain their urban strategy and base, and this policy was, at the first, spectacularly successful – though less so among the Lamanites than among the Nephites. By 24 B.C., they were in complete control of the government (see Helaman 6:18–41). However, by 16 B.C., they were thoroughly discredited and, in the words of Nephi, "extinct" (Helaman 11:10).

But not quite. Only four years later, in 12 B.C., we read that a group of "dissenters" from the Nephites – note the ideological description – had resurrected "the secret plans of Gadianton." "And they did commit murder and plunder; and then they would retreat back into the mountains, and into the wilderness and secret places, hiding themselves that they could not be discovered, receiving daily an addition to their numbers, inasmuch as there were dissenters that went forth unto them. . . . Now behold, these robbers did make great havoc, yea, even great destruction among the people of Nephi, and also among the people of the Lamanites" (Helaman 11:24–27).

This withdrawal to the mountains seems to have been a conscious retreat to wilderness warfare on the part of the Gadianton movement, perhaps occasioned by the fact that their popular base of support had virtually disappeared. One thinks of the analogous cases of Che Guevara, the physician; Mao Tsetung, the teacher; and Vo Nguyen Giap, the lawyer and professor – all of whom gave up their natural, more-or-less urban locations and deliberately

withdrew into rugged rural areas because popular support was not yet sufficient to sustain an alternative plan of action. "In view of the extreme weakness of its forces at the beginning," writes General Giap of the early Viet Minh, "people's power had to withdraw to the countryside after waging heroic street fights in Saigon and in the large towns."¹⁶ "At the outset, the essential task of the guerrilla fighter is to keep himself from being destroyed."¹⁷ Generalizing from the Cuban experience, Che Guevara summarizes the first phase of a guerrilla warfare as follows, in terms that certainly fit this era of Gadiantonism: "At the outset there is a more or less homogeneous group, with some arms, that devotes itself almost exclusively to hiding in the wildest and most inaccessible places."¹⁸

Historically, it has in fact been so. Guevara and Fidel Castro operated out of the Sierra Maestra mountains of eastern Cuba, and the Chinese communist revolution began as a guerrilla campaign based in the Chingkiang mountains.¹⁹ One thinks naturally, too, of Vo Nguyen Giap, organizing his 1946–47 base camps in the caves around Thai-Nguyen and Hoa-Binh, in the mountainous region of Viet Bac—" 'redoubts' from which the French were never again able to dislodge him," although attempts to do so led to serious French losses.²⁰ This was the same mountainous area that he had already chosen in 1939 as the ideal region from which to commence his fight against both the French and the Japanese.²¹ In the campaign of 1953, too, it was the mountainous regions of North Vietnam that were the guerrillas' best operating territory and that were "liberated" first.²² "When we analyze more fully the tactic of guerrilla warfare," Guevara says, "we will see that the guerrilla fighter needs to have a good knowledge of the surrounding countryside, the paths of entry and escape, the possibilities of speedy maneuver, good hiding places; naturally also, he must count on the support of the people.

All this indicates that the guerrilla fighter will carry out his action in wild places of small population."²³

"The advantage of setting up base areas in mountainous regions is obvious," reports Mao Tsetung. Plains areas are less suitable, and perhaps not tenable in the long term. When the going gets rough, Mao says, plains-based guerrillas will have to go into the mountains in order to come back later.²⁴ "Fighting on favorable ground and particularly in the mountains presents many advantages," agrees Guevara. "Much more rapidly than in unfavorable ground the guerrilla band will here be able to 'dig in,' that is, to form a base capable of engaging in a war of positions."²⁵ "As soon as the survival of the guerrilla band has been assured," Guevara writes, "it should fight; it must constantly go out from its refuge to fight."²⁶ "The Cuban Revolution contributed three fundamental lessons" to the theory of guerrilla warfare, he says, and the third of those was that "in underdeveloped [Latin] America the countryside is the basic area for armed fighting."²⁷ Presumably, the America of two millennia ago was at least as "underdeveloped" as the America of the twentieth century. Guevara's Marxist perspective on rural war may not, I would argue, have been altogether different from that of a committed Gadianton: "There, in places beyond the reach of the repressive forces, the inhabitants can be supported by the armed guerrillas."²⁸

Like those who later faced Marxist insurgencies in Cuba, China, and Vietnam, the Nephite and Lamanite authorities had to do something. They could not simply sit back and tolerate the depredations their Gadianton enemies practiced upon them. But they would learn, as would the French, the Americans, Batista y Zaldívar, Chiang Kai-shek, and General Westmoreland, that guerrilla forces are extraordinarily difficult to defeat and virtually impossible to dislodge from their chosen territory. "The French colonialists used every scheme to raze our [mountain] re-

sistance bases," boasts Vo Nguyen Giap, "but they suffered defeat after defeat and finally collapsed."²⁹

A passage from the Book of Mormon will be seen to fit perfectly into this model of guerrilla theory and practice:

It was expedient that there should be a stop put to this work of destruction; therefore they sent an army of strong men into the wilderness and upon the mountains to search out this band of robbers, and to destroy them. [Note the almost eery verbal echo of the "search and destroy" tactics so familiar from accounts of the war in Vietnam.] But behold, it came to pass that in that same year they were driven back even into their own lands. And thus ended the eightieth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi. And it came to pass in the commencement of the eighty and first year they did go forth again against this band of robbers, and did destroy many; and they were also visited with much destruction. And they were again obliged to return out of the wilderness and out of the mountains unto their own lands, because of the exceeding greatness of the numbers of those robbers who infested the mountains and the wilderness. ["Exceeding greatness"? Perhaps. But it sounds suspiciously like a defeated commander's excuse.] And it came to pass that thus ended this year. And the robbers did still increase and wax strong, in-somuch that they did defy the whole armies of the Nephites, and also of the Lamanites; and they did cause great fear to come unto the people upon all the face of the land. Yea, for they did visit many parts of the land, and did do great destruction unto them; yea, did kill many, and did carry away others captive into the wilderness, yea, and more especially their women and their children. (Helaman 11:28–33.)

The picture of the successful guerrilla band in the early stages of its activity is here perfect and complete. With quick raiding strikes from the mountains, they weaken their enemy with minimum risk, while at the same time,

they plunder and gain supplies—perhaps even seizing forced conscripts, and children to indoctrinate for the long term. (“Successes in many small fights added together gradually wear out the enemy manpower,” General Giap observes, “while little by little fostering our forces.”)³⁰ They do not yet venture pitched battles on the plains, but rather, and almost tauntingly, challenge the regular armies of their opponents to come up after them. “The guerrilla,” writes Che Guevara, “having taken up inaccessible positions out of reach of the enemy . . . ought to proceed to the gradual weakening of the enemy.”³¹

To do so, since their numbers are probably smaller than those of the opposing regular troops, the guerrillas must be sure that their raids are quick and successful, “battles of quick decision within protracted war.”³² This is imperative, says Guevara, on unfavorable ground. “The action cannot endure for long, but must be rapid; it must be of a high degree of effectiveness, last a few minutes, and be followed by an immediate withdrawal. . . . And the guerrilla fighter on the plain must be fundamentally a runner. Here the practice of hitting and running acquires its maximum use.”³³

“Hit and run” some call this scornfully, and this is accurate. Hit and run, wait, lie in ambush, again hit and run, and thus repeatedly, without giving any rest to the enemy. There is in all this, it would appear, a negative quality, an attitude of retreat, of avoiding frontal fights. However, this is consequent upon the general strategy of guerrilla warfare, which is the same in its ultimate end as of [*sic*] any warfare: to win, to annihilate the enemy.³⁴

After all, notes Mao, “The principle of preserving oneself and destroying the enemy is the basis of all military principles.”³⁵ “Therefore,” says Guevara, “the fundamental principle is that no battle, combat, or skirmish is to be fought unless it will be won,” that “an attack should be

carried out in such a way as to give a guarantee of victory."³⁶ This is the counsel of Vo Nguyen Giap, as well: "Is the enemy strong? One avoids him. Is he weak? One attacks him."³⁷ General Giap summarizes the patient strategy of his guerrilla campaigns as "contenting ourselves with attacking when success was certain, refusing to give battle likely to incur losses to us or to engage in hazardous actions."³⁸ "The numerical inferiority of the guerrilla makes it necessary," observes Guevara, "that attacks always be carried out by surprise; this great advantage is what permits the guerrilla fighter to inflict losses on the enemy without suffering losses. In a fight between a hundred men on one side and ten on the other, losses are not equal where there is one casualty on each side."³⁹ Mao Tsetung noted in December of 1936 that the Red Army generally operated by means of surprise attacks.⁴⁰

To follow such a policy of avoiding risky battles and demanding that the enemy fight on his terms, the guerrilla will frequently be obliged to yield territory to his enemy. "Losses must be avoided," declares Vo Nguyen Giap, "even at the cost of losing ground."⁴¹ "The main goal of the fighting must be destruction of enemy manpower, and ours should not be exhausted from trying to keep or occupy land."⁴² He must avoid pitched battles at this phase of his struggle in any event.⁴³ Mao Tsetung is perhaps the foremost modern theoretician and practitioner of the tactic he called "strategic retreat." "A strategic retreat," he writes, "is a planned strategic step taken by an inferior force for the purpose of conserving its strength and biding its time to defeat the enemy, when it finds itself confronted with a superior force whose offensive it is unable to smash quickly."⁴⁴ Of course, to retreat constantly would be equivalent to defeat. "It is only when there is a wide disparity between the enemy's strength and ours that, acting on the principle of conserving our strength and biding our time to defeat the enemy, we advocate retreating to the base

area and luring him in deep, for only by so doing can we create or find conditions favorable for our counter-offensive."⁴⁵ While a fully planned strategic retreat may appear to be made under compulsion, it is in reality an active and not a passive military operation, and one designed to lure the enemy into an ambush that will launch the guerrilla's devastating counterattack.⁴⁶ (For a Vietnamese example of strategic retreat, consider the response of the Viet Minh to the French attack on Hanoi in 1946–47.)⁴⁷

Not all in the Red Army approved of Mao's notion of strategic retreat. "It is easy," says Mao,

to give an answer to such views, and our history has already done so. As for loss of territory, it often happens that only by loss can loss be avoided; this is the principle of "Give in order to take." If what we lose is territory and what we gain is victory over the enemy, plus recovery and also expansion of our territory, then it is a paying proposition. In a business transaction, if a buyer does not "lose" some money, he cannot obtain goods; if a seller does not "lose" some goods, he cannot obtain money. . . . Sleep and rest involve loss of time, but energy is gained for tomorrow's work. If any fool does not understand this and refuses to sleep, he will have no energy the next day, and that is a losing proposition. We lost out in the fifth counter-campaign for precisely such reasons. Reluctance to give up part of our territory resulted in the loss of it all. Abyssinia, too, lost all her territory when she fought the enemy head-on, though that was not the sole cause of her defeat.⁴⁸

Mao uses oddly capitalistic imagery here. He uses imagery of quite another kind in a vivid related passage:

"Is it not self-contradictory to fight heroically first and then abandon territory? Will not our heroic fighters have shed their blood in vain? That is not at all the way questions should be posed. To eat and then to empty your bowels—is this not to eat in vain? To sleep and

then to get up—is this not to sleep in vain? . . . Territory has been given up in order to preserve our military forces and indeed to preserve territory, because if we do not abandon part of our territory when conditions are unfavourable but blindly fight decisive engagements without the least assurance of winning, we shall lose our military forces.⁴⁹

The other view, which we call the desperate recklessness of “only advance, never retreat,” is . . . wrong. . . . On the positive side, in order to draw the enemy into a fight unfavourable to him but favourable to us, it is usually necessary that he should be on the move and that we should have a number of advantages, such as favourable terrain [and] a vulnerable enemy . . . and the enemy’s fatigue and unpreparedness. This requires that the enemy should advance, and we should not grudge a temporary loss of part of our territory. . . . On the negative side, whenever we are forced into a disadvantageous position which fundamentally endangers the preservation of our forces, we should have the courage to retreat, so as to preserve our forces and hit the enemy when new opportunities arise. In their ignorance of this principle, the advocates of desperate action will contest a city or a piece of ground even when the position is obviously and definitely unfavourable; as a result, they not only lose the city or ground but fail to preserve their forces. We have always advocated the policy of “luring the enemy in deep,” precisely because it is the most effective military policy for a weak army strategically on the defensive to employ against a strong army.⁵⁰

“The fundamental characteristic of a guerrilla band is mobility,” writes Che Guevara. “This . . . permits it constantly to change front and avoid any type of encirclement. As the circumstances of the war require, the guerrilla band can dedicate itself exclusively to fleeing from an encirclement which is the enemy’s only way of forcing the band

into a decisive fight that could be unfavorable."⁵¹ The ultimate purpose of this flight is to allow "the retreating army to choose terrain favourable to itself and force the attacking army to fight on its terms. In order to defeat a strong army, a weak army must carefully choose favourable terrain as a battleground."⁵²

Ideally, this favorable terrain will be a place where, "pitting local superiority and initiative against the enemy's local inferiority and passivity," the guerrilla can control the situation and attain a guaranteed victory.⁵³ Following the principle of strategic retreat, says Mao, "we advocate retreating to the base area and luring him in deep."⁵⁴ "When the enemy launches a large-scale 'encirclement and suppression' campaign, our general principle is to lure him in deep, withdraw into the base area and fight him there, because this is our surest method of smashing his offensive."⁵⁵ Mountainous areas are, it is obvious, marvelously suited to be such "base areas" and to serve as venues for such maneuvers, as the armies that went up after the Gadianon irregulars learned to their great sorrow. Che Guevara, veteran of many such encounters, describes the playing out of a typical scene from this stage of the conflict, as the first elements of the regular army's "search and destroy" units arrive at the carefully chosen ambush site: "At the moment when the vanguard appears at the selected place – the steepest possible – a deadly fire is let loose on them, after a convenient number of men have been allowed to penetrate."⁵⁶

At a certain point, the repeated application of such tactics as the above will put the guerrilla forces on the ascent to the point that they will want to transform themselves into something closer to a regular army, fighting a "war of positions" that involves sieges and the like. This has always been their goal, and, indeed, they must accomplish it in order to achieve the final victory they seek.⁵⁷ Speaking in December of 1936, Mao Tsetung announced

that, "in our civil war, when the strength of the Red Army surpasses that of the enemy, we shall, in general, no longer need the strategic defensive. Our policy then will be the strategic offensive alone."⁵⁸

The crucial problem for the guerrilla commander is to determine when the time for such a transformation of his forces into a conventional army has come. "Premature regularization," as Mao calls it, can be – and, historically, has been – disastrous.⁵⁹ Mao points to the January 1932 abandonment by the Red Army of what he calls, on the basis of its appearance in Chinese, "the sixteen-character formula" – "The enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue" – as an object lesson in how to squander the advantages of a guerrilla campaign.

From then on, the old principles were no longer to be considered as regular but were to be rejected as "guerrilla-ism." The opposition to "guerrilla-ism" reigned for three whole years. Its first stage was military adventurism, in the second it turned into military conservatism and, finally, in the third stage it became flightism. It was not until the Central Committee held the enlarged meeting of the Political Bureau at Tsunyi, Kweichow Province, in January 1935 that this wrong line was declared bankrupt and the correctness of the old line reaffirmed. But at what a cost! Those comrades who vigorously opposed "guerrilla-ism" argued along the following lines. It was wrong to lure the enemy in deep because we had to abandon so much territory. Although battles had been won in this way, was not the situation different now? Moreover, was it not better to defeat the enemy without abandoning territory? And was it not better still to defeat the enemy in his own areas, or on the borders between his areas and ours? The old practices had had nothing "regular" about them and were methods used only by guerrillas. Now our own state had been established and our Red Army had become a regular army. Our fight

against Chiang Kai-shek had become a war between two states, between two great armies. History should not repeat itself, and everything pertaining to "guerrillism" should be totally discarded. The new principles were "completely Marxist," while the old had been created by guerrilla units in the mountains, and there was no Marxism in the mountains. The new principles were the antithesis of the old. They were: "Pit one against ten, pit ten against a hundred, fight bravely and determinedly, and exploit victories by hot pursuit"; "Attack on all fronts"; "Seize key cities."⁶⁰

Without a doubt these theories and practices were all wrong. They were nothing but subjectivism. Under favourable circumstances this subjectivism manifested itself in petty-bourgeois revolutionary fanaticism and impetuosity, but in times of adversity, as the situation worsened, it changed successively into desperate recklessness, conservatism, and flightism. . . . They were the theories and practices of hotheads and ignoramuses. They did not have the slightest flavour of Marxism about them; indeed they were anti-Marxist.⁶¹

By subjectivism, Mao understood an attitude that took insufficient account of objective reality. A major problem in the early Chinese communist revolution, he says, had been the Marxist forces' tendency to underestimate their enemy's strength and to overestimate their own. Some, he complained, "talked only of attack but never of defence or retreat." He condemns in strong terms "the military adventurism of attacking the key cities in 1932," when they were not yet ready to do so.⁶²

"If guidance in struggle and organization was not precise . . . knowing how to estimate the subjective conditions and compare the revolutionary forces with the counter-revolutionary forces," writes Vo Nguyen Giap of the experience of the Viet Minh in the 1950s, "we would certainly have met with difficulty and failure."⁶³ In the context of the Vietnamese "Resistance War," he describes

virtually the same attitude and the same mistakes as Mao had, condemning, in language reminiscent of Mao, "subjectivism, loss of patience, eagerness to win swiftly."⁶⁴ If irregular warfare can be composed of forms ranging from pure guerrilla tactics all the way to conventional techniques, it is nonetheless crucial that "the conduct of the war . . . maintain a correct ratio between the fighting forms."⁶⁵

But just how difficult it is to make such determinations and to maintain such balance in real life is illustrated by a fact that General Giap conveniently omits from his own writings: In his profile of the North Vietnamese commander, Bernard B. Fall remarks that Giap

[made] a grievous error in believing his troops ready for a set-piece battle with seasoned French troops in the plains of the Red River Delta. In the spring of 1951, he launched three offensives, involving several of his newly created full-fledged divisions, against Marshal Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's paratroops, Moroccans and Foreign Legionnaires, and was bloodily beaten back after losing thousands of his men in "human wave" attacks.⁶⁶

The Book of Mormon offers a textbook illustration of "premature regularization," in the Gadianton fiasco of 3 Nephi 4. Apparently feeling ready to begin a "war of positions," the Gadianton chief Giddianhi sent his famous letter of A.D. 16 to the Nephite governor Lachoneus. In that letter, he demanded total Nephite surrender, threatening, otherwise, that "on the morrow month I will command that my armies shall come down against you" (3 Nephi 3:8). The Nephites did not surrender. Instead, Lachoneus prepared to fight a scorched earth campaign by drawing all of his people and their flocks and provisions together into one defensibly sound place. If, as Mao Tse-tung used to say, guerrillas are to the people as fish are to the water, it would seem that Lachoneus's intent was to leave the fish flopping on dry ground.⁶⁷ Che Guevara

tells us: "The guerrilla fighter needs full help from the people of the area. This is an indispensable condition. This is clearly seen by considering the case of bandit gangs that operate in a region. They have all the characteristics of a guerrilla army, homogeneity, respect for the leader, valor, knowledge of the ground, and, often, even good understanding of the tactics to be employed. The only thing missing is the support of the people; and, inevitably, these gangs are captured and exterminated by the public force."⁶⁸

Lachoneus by his preparations perhaps intended to deprive the Gadianton movement of even the pretence of widespread popular support, to expose its claims of legitimacy as false in full view of the public. Certainly he intended to deny them the means of subsistence in Nephite lands. Further, he erected large and elaborate fortifications and reorganized the leadership of the Nephite armies (see 3 Nephi 3:13–17, 22–25). As chief general of the armies, he appointed a man by the name of Gidgiddoni who, the record tells us, was not only a fine soldier but a prophet as well. Gidgiddoni launched a weapons build-up among the Nephites to correspond to their fortification program (see 3 Nephi 3:26), but his greatest service to the Nephites in the impending conflict was probably in another area:

Now the people said unto Gidgiddoni: Pray unto the Lord, and let us go up upon the mountains and into the wilderness, that we may fall upon the robbers and destroy them in their own lands. But Gidgiddoni saith unto them: The Lord forbid; for if we should go up against them the Lord would deliver us into their hands; therefore we will prepare ourselves in the center of our lands, and we will gather all our armies together, and we will not go against them, but we will wait till they shall come against us; therefore as the Lord liveth, if we do this he will deliver them into our hands. (3 Nephi 3:20–21.)

In rejecting the calls of his people for a preemptive strike against the guerrillas' mountain bases, Gidgiddoni

was in harmony with the rules of war revealed by the Lord to his prophets in both ancient and modern times (see D&C 98:23–48, especially verses 32–33). God, he declared, would not uphold the Nephites if they violated those rules. However, Gidgiddoni also showed that he had learned from earlier disastrous attempts to dislodge the Gadiantons from their wilderness redoubts. The war was now to be fought on Nephite terms, and not on terms dictated by their enemies.⁶⁹ Indeed, Gidgiddoni would force the Gadianton armies to attack the Nephites in the Nephites' own strongholds. Nephite fortified cities would effectively take the place of mountain base camps. Gidgiddoni was neatly reversing the situation. By yielding up territory in a classic "strategic retreat," he was, to borrow Mao's phrase, "luring the enemy in deep."

In the latter end of the eighteenth year those armies of robbers had prepared for battle, and began to come down and to sally forth from the hills, and out of the mountains, and the wilderness, and their strongholds, and their secret places, and began to take possession of the lands, both which were in the land south and which were in the land north, and began to take possession of all the lands which had been deserted by the Nephites, and the cities which had been left desolate. (3 Nephi 4:1.)

So far, so good. However, Che Guevara and other theoreticians of irregular warfare have insisted that careful planning for food and supplies must accompany guerrilla expeditions from mountain strongholds into the plains.⁷⁰ Apparently, Gadianton planning was not careful enough.

There were no wild beasts nor game in those lands which had been deserted by the Nephites, and there was no game for the robbers save it were in the wilderness. And the robbers could not exist save it were in the wilderness, for the want of food; for the Nephites had left their lands desolate, and had gathered their flocks and

their herds and all their substance, and they were in one body. Therefore, there was no chance for the robbers to plunder and to obtain food, save it were to come up in open battle against the Nephites [who had seven years' worth of food and supplies]. (3 Nephi 4:2–4.)

(This recalls to mind the rebel stronghold of Masada in the first Jewish revolt against Rome. The well-provisioned Zealots frequently opened up their cisterns and let water gush down the slope in full view of their besiegers. The water, of course, was absorbed by the thirsty ground long before it did Flavius Silva's troops any good, and they continued to swelter in the abominable heat of the Dead Sea wilderness at the foot of Masada. The siege walls are still visible today, but it must surely have made the Roman soldiers wonder just who was besieging whom.)

This is a situation which, two millennia later, was quite familiar to Mao Tsetung. "Any army," Mao wrote, "which, losing the initiative, is forced into a passive position and ceases to have freedom of action, faces the danger of defeat or extermination."⁷¹ And such was precisely the threat that hung over the Gadiantons at this stage. They were now passive, had lost the initiative. They must either retreat to fight again another day, or go to battle on terms dictated by the Nephites. Mao's advice in such a predicament is clear: "When forced into a passive position through some incorrect appraisal and disposition or through overwhelming pressure, a guerrilla unit must strive to extricate itself. . . . In many cases it is necessary to 'move away.' The ability to move is the distinctive feature of a guerrilla unit. To move away is the principal method for getting out of a passive position and regaining the initiative."⁷²

The proper decision for the Gadianton forces in this case would almost certainly have been to shift into the mode of what Mao terms "strategic defensive." But, as Mao points out, this leads inevitably to loss of territory, which is highly unpalatable to some strategists. Obviously

it was unpalatable to Giddianhi and his staff, for they unwisely opted to continue on the offensive. (After all, they had taken possession of most of the Nephite lands and had the Nephite forces contained in a single relatively small area. Were they supposed to just walk away and give up this marvelously favorable position?)

In the nineteenth year Giddianhi found that it was expedient that he should go up to battle against the Nephites, for there was no way that they could subsist save it were to plunder and rob and murder. And they durst not spread themselves upon the face of the land insomuch that they could raise grain, lest the Nephites should come upon them and slay them; therefore Giddianhi gave commandment unto his armies that in this year they should go up to battle against the Nephites. (3 Nephi 4:5–6.)

But this was a reactive and desperate expedient, rather than a coherent and carefully crafted strategy, and it definitely violated one of the central canons of guerrilla strategy and tactics – to fight only when assured of victory. “Ho Chi Minh,” writes Paul Kennedy in his 1987 best-seller *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, “had declared that his forces were willing to lose men at the rate of ten to one – and when they were rash enough to emerge from the jungles to attack the cities, as in the 1968 Tet offensive, they often did.”⁷³ Ho had apparently not learned the lesson that Mao had already mastered by the 1930s – or, perhaps, he did not care. (“Every minute,” Ho’s military commander, General Giap, is said to have remarked, “hundreds of thousands of people die all over the world. The life or death of a hundred, a thousand, or of tens of thousands of human beings, even if they are our own compatriots, represents really very little.”)⁷⁴ Perhaps Giddianhi did not care, either. But his mistake would cost him dearly. The Gadianton assault was a disaster. Nephite patrols chased the remnants of the erstwhile guerrilla army

back to the borders of the wilderness, killing all (including Giddianhi himself) who fell into their hands.

Astonishingly, Giddianhi's successor in the Gadianton leadership, a man named Zemnarihah, launched a repeat of this disastrous siege only two years later. (We recall that it took the Chinese communists three catastrophic years to abandon *their* "premature regularization.") Again, the result was Gadianton near-starvation. In the earlier siege, under Giddianhi, we are told that the Gadianton forces "durst not spread themselves upon the face of the land insomuch that they could raise grain, lest the Nephites should come upon them and slay them" (3 Nephi 4:6). (Dispersal of their forces, resisted but successfully imposed upon them by the Viet Minh, was a major factor in the French defeat in Indochina in the early 1950s.)⁷⁵ In this second Gadianton attempt, however, the situation grew so desperate that Zemnarihah evidently allowed his troops to split up into smaller agricultural or even foraging units, and the result was entirely predictable. The Nephites made quick and damaging sorties from their strongholds—effectively reversing the roles of the two sides by themselves functioning as guerrillas—which weakened and demoralized the would-be conquerors. Finally, prevailed upon by what remained of his troops, Zemnarihah gave up his siege and led his men in a retreat to the north. But it was a wise step taken much too late. The Nephite armies intercepted their retreat, and the Gadiantons were no match for the fresh, well-rested, and well-fed troops of Gidgidoni. Those of the Gadianton forces who did not surrender were killed, and Zemnarihah was hanged.

In my "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonry' " in this volume, I attempt to show that the parallels commonly adduced between the Masons of nineteenth-century America and the Gadianton robbers are anything but conclusive proof that the Book of Mormon is a product of Joseph Smith's mind and milieu. I also hope to call into question

the easy assumption that Joseph and the early Latter-day Saints were immersed in an atmosphere of compelling anti-Masonic hysteria from which they could hardly have been expected to – and did not – emerge unaffected. In the present essay, I have tried to depict an aspect of Gadiantonism that, as plausible historiographical material, goes considerably beyond anything Joseph Smith would have been likely to create out of his own imagination. (It is not simply the Book of Mormon's precise portrayal of irregular warfare that is foreign to Joseph and his environment. Its realistic and wholly unromantic military narratives do not, it seems clear to me, come from the mind of that Joseph Smith, who, while he abhorred actual battle, loved parades and military pageantry, relished his commission as Lieutenant-General of the Nauvoo Legion, and, uniformed in elegant blue and gold, liked nothing better than to review the troops while mounted on his black stallion, Charlie.)⁷⁶ This military aspect of Book of Mormon Gadiantonism is one for which the old Masonic theory is utterly powerless to account.

I certainly do not claim to reduce the Gadianton phenomena to a mere scriptural analogue of familiar contemporary irregular military organizations. To do so would be only slightly less misleading than the Masonic theory itself. "For purposes of analysis, we must, of course, call forth one thread, one theme, one idea at a time, but we must also bear in mind the existence of this larger world [portrayed by the Book of Mormon] and relate individual passages to greater structures if we are to find their broadest meaning."⁷⁷ In an article currently underway, I hope to place the Gadiantons within a larger context of not only military but also religious history. Nevertheless, a totally believable and coherent complex of military behaviors and responses forms an undeniable facet of Gadiantonism in the Book of Mormon, which oversimplified references to the anti-Masonic controversies of New York in the late

1820s cannot explain away. To me, the most likely and safest explanation lies in Joseph Smith's own account of the origin of the Book of Mormon, and in the understanding that it is, indeed, a record of authentic historical events.

Notes

1. I base my summary here upon D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 160, 164–67, and my criticism of his thesis in this article suggests one of the many reasons why, while acknowledging its brilliance, I term his book “flawed.” See the review of that work by Stephen D. Ricks and Daniel C. Peterson, “The Mormon as Magus,” *Sunstone* 12 (January 1988): 38–39, as well as Quinn's response on the following page (to which I will resist the temptation to reply here). Another review of the book with which I largely agree is that of Stephen E. Robinson in *BYU Studies* 27 (Fall 1987): 88–95, which on pp. 92–93 questions precisely the kind of arbitrary reinterpretation of the Book of Mormon text that at least partially underlies Quinn's alternative model discussed in this paper. I feel it necessary to make my position on Quinn's book clear, since certain anti-Mormons have chided me for my alleged inconsistency elsewhere in citing as authorities people whose works I had otherwise criticized (e.g., Quinn) or whose worldview is radically incompatible with my own (e.g., Morton Smith). Such chiding seems to me quintessentially reflective of a fundamentalist's mindset—my “chiders” in this case were Protestant fundamentalists—as well as of a misunderstanding of the nature of argument and evidence. I use good evidence and good arguments wherever I find them (and when I can recognize them). I do not believe in biblical inerrancy—much less in the inerrancy of myself or my colleagues.

2. Ray C. Hillam, “Gadiantons and Protracted War,” *BYU Studies* 15 (Winter 1975): 215. The entire article, 215–24, by Professor Hillam is of interest in illustrating his contention.

3. *Ibid.*, 224.

4. Roger Hilsman, “Foreword,” in Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), xii.

5. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), 134–36.

6. See, for the two groups respectively, M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History: A New Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 2:88 and 66–67.

7. *Ibid.*, 2:116.

8. They are characterized as guerrillas by, among others, John Bright's standard *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 422–27.

9. In Karl von Clausewitz, *War, Politics, and Power* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1962), 1.

10. Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Monthly Review, 1961), 16.

11. Giap, *People's War, People's Army*, 68.

12. I am aware that there are various methods of transliterating this name. I choose this (currently less fashionable) version merely for the sake of consistency within this article, since it is that of the English translation of his writings that I use here – an official translation produced and distributed by the Chinese government under Mao.

13. Fairly straightforward narrative accounts of these chapters, dealing partially with the Gadianton robbers, may be found in Daniel C. Peterson, "Their Own Worst Enemies," in Kent P. Jackson, ed., *Studies in Scripture: Volume Eight, Alma 30 to Moroni* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 92–106, and Terrence L. Szink, "A Just and True Record (3 Nephi 1–5)," in *ibid.*, 125–38.

14. Mao Tsetung, "Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War," in *Six Essays on Military Affairs* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1971), 111.

15. For the lambskins, see the discussion in my "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonry,'" in this volume.

16. Giap, *People's War, People's Army*, 15; see 46, 94. Compare Bernard B. Fall's profile of Giap, printed in the same volume, on xxxiii–xxxiv.

17. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 21.

18. *Ibid.*, 73–74.

19. See, on the early days of the Chinese revolution, Mao Tsetung, "China's Revolutionary War," 112, 113, 134 n. 33.

20. See Giap, *People's War, People's Army*, 19; also Fall, in the same volume, xxxvi–xxxvii.

21. Giap, *People's War, People's Army*, 12, 114, 140.

22. *Ibid.*, 23–24; see 78, 134, 191.

23. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 17; see 18, where the examples given include Mao in China, Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam against the French, and Algeria.

24. Mao Tsetung, "Problems of Strategy in Guerrilla War against Japan," in *Six Essays on Military Affairs*, 163–64; see 166, 171, 181;

cf. Hilsman, in *Giap, People's War, People's Army*, xix. For lists of such mountainous areas in use by the communist forces as of the writing of the article in May 1938, see 163, 193.

25. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 30; see 29.

26. *Ibid.*, 29. He makes it clear that he is talking particularly about mountain-based guerrilla forces.

27. *Ibid.*, 15.

28. *Ibid.*, 16.

29. *Giap, People's War, People's Army*, 145.

30. *Ibid.*, 104.

31. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 29.

32. The phrase is from Mao Tsetung, "Guerrilla War against Japan," 155. See also *Giap, People's War, People's Army*, 79.

33. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 33, 34. Compare Mao Tsetung, "Guerrilla War against Japan," 144–45.

34. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 19–20.

35. Mao Tsetung, "Guerrilla War against Japan," 141; see Mao Tsetung, "On Protracted War," in *Six Essays on Military Affairs*, 271, 273.

36. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 19 and 63. Compare Mao Tsetung, "On Protracted War," 316–318, 321; "China's Revolutionary War," 93.

37. *Giap, People's War, People's Army*, 48; see 104.

38. *Ibid.*, 29.

39. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 24–25.

40. See Mao Tsetung, "China's Revolutionary War," 108.

41. *Giap, People's War, People's Army*, 48.

42. *Ibid.*, 104.

43. See, for instance, *ibid.*, 49.

44. Mao Tsetung, "China's Revolutionary War," 57.

45. *Ibid.*, 71–72; see 93.

46. *Ibid.*, 98.

47. See *Giap, People's War, People's Army*, 19.

48. Mao Tsetung, "China's Revolutionary War," 74–75; see "On Protracted War," 206. Indirect evidence of criticisms is to be found in Mao Tsetung's own writings, as in "China's Revolutionary War," 57, 64–65.

49. Mao Tsetung, "On Protracted War," 319–20.

50. *Ibid.*, 300–301; see 317; also his "China's Revolutionary War," 64–65.

51. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 24.

52. Mao Tsetung, "China's Revolutionary War," 66.

53. The phrase is Mao Tsetung's, from his essay "On Protracted War," 288.

54. Mao Tsetung, "China's Revolutionary War," 71.

55. *Ibid.*, 74.

56. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 63–64. "The guerrilla fighter knows the places where he fights, the invading column does not."

57. *Ibid.*, 19, 20, 23; Mao Tsetung, "On Protracted War," 302; Mao Tsetung, "China's Revolutionary War," 110–11, 114, 115. On how to effect the transformation of guerrilla units into conventional units, see Mao's "Guerrilla War against Japan," 184–88, as well as "On Protracted War," 207, 243–44.

58. Mao Tsetung, "China's Revolutionary War," 52.

59. *Ibid.*, 115.

60. *Ibid.*, 61–63. See p. 108 of the same essay for a dismissal of what he calls "positional warfare" at that particular time of the communist insurrection.

61. *Ibid.*, 64.

62. *Ibid.*, 47–49.

63. Giap, *People's War, People's Army*, 76–77.

64. *Ibid.*, 101.

65. *Ibid.*, 109.

66. Fall, in *ibid.*, xxxvii–xxxviii.

67. Giap, *People's War, People's Army*, 56, 124, uses this figure of speech without attribution. However, Mao seems to have originated it. See Mao Tsetung, "Yu Chi Chan (Guerrilla Warfare)," as quoted in Samuel B. Griffith, tr., *Mao Tse-tung on Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Praeger, 1961), 92–93. Mao's essay was written in 1937. I thank my former student, Bryan Taylor, for locating this passage for me.

68. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 17. The resemblance of guerrilla fighters to bandits is noted also by Roger Hilsman, in Giap, *People's War, People's Army*, xiv. Giap himself, clearly revealing the subjective nature of the distinction in cases like this, describes as "bandits" the guerrilla units the French left behind after their withdrawal from Na San to the North Vietnamese delta region (see *ibid.*, 196). Interestingly, some of the glitter having worn off since his death, Mao Tsetung is now called by some Chinese *Mao Fei*, or "robber Mao." (I am grateful to my colleague, Professor Grant Hardy, for bringing this fact to my attention.)

69. In a later but similar Book of Mormon scenario, Mormon temporarily refused to lead the Nephite armies because of a dual issue related to that of Gidgiddoni (see Mormon 3–4). Mormon stepped down as commander when his people demanded that he

leave off defensive warfare and launch an invasion into Lamanite territory. Their demand was both immoral and strategically mad, given the vast discrepancy between Lamanite and Nephite numbers. Mormon's selection of the city of Desolation, near the narrow neck of land, had been strategically wise because it gave the comparatively small Nephite armies a small and focused area to defend. (Analogous considerations led in the 120s A.D. to the building of Hadrian's Wall in England, from the mouth of the Tyne River to the Solway Firth, as well as to the construction, largely in the ninth century, of the lesser known Danevirke. The latter structure—at the base of the Danish peninsula near modern German Schleswig and discussed by Gwyn Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 99–105—“served to defend against invasion the vulnerable part of the frontier of Jutland, i.e., the narrow neck [!] between Hollingstedt on the river Treene in the west and the head of the Sliefjord in the east.”) For the Nephites to leave their excellent defensive position for a penetration deep into Lamanite territory was extreme folly.

Seeing spiritual significance in things that the less faithful would probably explain naturalistically was characteristic of the religious minds in the Book of Mormon. Besides Gidgiddoni and Mormon, who both saw wise generalship and the laws of God as virtual flipsides of the same phenomenon, there are the contrasting explanations Moroni and Zerahemnah gave of the latter's defeat by the Nephites (see Alma 44:3–5, 9). Certainly nobody appreciated better than Moroni the importance of fortifications, weapons, and armor. He had led his people in war preparations. But, since he was a genuinely religious man, I believe he recognized the hand of God as both transcending these things and also, in a sense, working through them. Compare, too, the religious explanation given by “the servants of the king of Syria” at 1 Kings 20:23 of the success the Israelites enjoyed in the hills, which contrasted with their problems in the plains. A naturalistic explanation might rather say that the Israelites, with their nomadic heritage, did well in the hills because their style of warfare was not heavily dependent upon chariots—which were in any event far less useful in such territory. However, the matter was quite different when they went up against the charioteers of the plains. (This was one of the reasons they were long unable to dislodge the Philistines from the coastal flat country of the Gaza strip.)

70. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 35.

71. Mao Tsetung, “Guerrilla War against Japan,” 147.

72. *Ibid.*, 150.

73. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 406.

74. Fall, in Giap, *People's War, People's Army*, xxxvii.

75. See Giap, *People's War, People's Army*, 159–63, 193–94, 201, 204–5.

76. Fawn M. Brodie so characterized him in *No Man Knows My History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 148, 271, 283. On p. 148, she suggests that his supposed passion for military lore “perhaps accounted for the innumerable battles in the Book of Mormon.” Why, then, do those battles so conspicuously lack any pomp and pageantry, colorful uniforms, romantic exploits—any of the things, that is, which formed the content of Joseph’s alleged passion according to Brodie’s own testimony?

77. Richard L. Bushman, “The Book of Mormon in Early Mormon History,” in Davis Bitton and Maureen U. Beecher, eds., *New Views of Mormon History: Essays in Honor of Leonard J. Arrington* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1987), 5.