



## Counter-COIN: Counterinsurgency and the Preemption of Strategy

David Martin Jones , M. L.R. Smith & John Stone

To cite this article: David Martin Jones , M. L.R. Smith & John Stone (2012) Counter-COIN: Counterinsurgency and the Preemption of Strategy, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 35:9, 597-617, DOI: [10.1080/1057610X.2012.702668](https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2012.702668)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2012.702668>



Published online: 16 Aug 2012.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1578



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

## Counter-COIN: Counterinsurgency and the Preemption of Strategy

DAVID MARTIN JONES  
M.L.R. SMITH  
JOHN STONE

Department of War Studies  
King's College  
University of London  
London, United Kingdom

*The notion of “counterinsurgency” (COIN) has for some years been the central concept driving military operations in Afghanistan, and before that, in Iraq. It constitutes the dominant idea influencing much current military planning of the major Western powers. This study questions the assumptions and relevance of the thinking behind counterinsurgency doctrine. It suggests that the ultimate effect of its dominance is to reduce the highly contingent nature of war to a list of techniques, the application of which are regarded as a sufficient precondition whenever states deem that they are confronted by conflicts that can be described as an “insurgency.” Such assumptions are both arbitrary and risk crowding out necessary, although by their nature very difficult, political judgments that are required for the effective construction and implementation of strategies that seek to ensure that the ends sought are proportional to the means employed.*

After almost a decade of “War on Terror,” and the expenditure of much blood and treasure, Osama bin Laden was eventually, as the U.S. President put it, “brought to justice” in his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan in May 2011.<sup>1</sup> Bin Laden’s death marked a major step in the dismantlement of the core leadership of the original version of the Al Qaeda terror franchise.<sup>2</sup> The manner in which bin Laden was eliminated raises questions about both the methods used to prosecute the so-called War on Terror thus far,<sup>3</sup> and the purpose of the ongoing North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) commitment to Afghanistan. These questions are especially pertinent now that Al Qaeda is “in threads” in Afghanistan and one of the major reasons, if not the most important reason from the point of the view of the United States,<sup>4</sup> for the invasion of that troubled country has been achieved.<sup>5</sup> More particularly, given that bin Laden’s elimination involved an intelligence-led operation coupled with the precision assault of a U.S. special forces team, which tracked him down in his compound in Pakistan (rather than Afghanistan), what, it might be wondered, is it that the currently fashionable ideas of counterinsurgency have contributed to the prosecution of

Received 9 August 2011; accepted 20 November 2011.

Address correspondence to Professor M.L.R. Smith, Department of War Studies, King’s College, University of London, Strand, London, WC2R 2LS, UK. E-mail: mike.smith@kcl.ac.uk

an effective strategy for the defeat of Al Qaeda and the stabilization of countries that might harbor the movement and facilitate its goals?<sup>6</sup>

We shall attempt to address the question of the utility of modern-day understandings of counterinsurgency doctrine with reference to Clausewitz's political theory of war, which places strategy at the core of the relationship between political ends and military means. Military doctrine, of course, has a potentially valuable role to play in applying military means to political ends. There are, however, risks associated with the recourse to doctrine. In particular, it can encourage rigid patterns of thought and practice that are not necessarily relevant to the conflict at hand. This, we shall show, is the case with contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine, the formulations of which are now routinely viewed as a standard set of measures for military action under conditions in which the adversary has adopted "insurgent" techniques. The appearance of "insurgents," in other words, becomes a sufficient condition for the resort to counterinsurgency. In this regard, counterinsurgency doctrine, we shall argue, preempts a properly strategic response to current threats. Instead, it applies predetermined military techniques at the expense of action based on judgments about the prevailing political context and the appropriate and proportional response to it.

What follows, then, is a critique of much of the current enthusiasm for so-called counterinsurgency in military and policy circles, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom. We do, however, wish to make three points at the outset about the direction and intention of our assessment. First, our analysis is trenchant but it is not intended to be academically high handed. It is no part of our argument to ascribe bad faith or ignoble motives to those who currently advocate counterinsurgency. We recognize the seriousness of their contribution and, indeed, seek to add to a debate about the validity of counterinsurgency that we believe has already started to evolve.<sup>7</sup> Nor is our aim to denigrate the armed forces of those nations that have to deal with manifold challenges in exceptionally difficult operational circumstances. The development of effective operational techniques is essential, we fully accept, to deal with theater-specific conflicts like that which currently confronts the NATO mission in Afghanistan. Our intention, to be clear, is to illustrate the dangers for policymakers and armed forces alike, when the "lessons" derived from theater-specific environments begin to be elevated to the status of doctrine.

Secondly, as British writers we are conscious that we may be perceived to be directing criticism towards an advocacy that in its contemporary manifestation is essentially American in character and orientation. With extensive experience of colonial policing and administration Britain has often been credited with having a tradition of counterinsurgency to be admired and emulated. We appreciate that critical commentary may appear jarring if it seems to be delivered from a position of Olympian detachment derived from a presumption of superior historical wisdom. As will be evident in the following discussion, this does not represent our view. Our analysis is informed by the precepts of strategic theory, and it is only from that perspective that we offer critical assessment.<sup>8</sup>

While we reject any notion that, either singularly or collectively, we personify national characteristics, or in any other way bring a distinctively British outlook to bear, for the record we acknowledge the impressive additions to learning and understanding of counterinsurgency methodologies that have taken place within the American armed forces since 2005, especially at the tactical and operational levels.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, whatever a discrete "British approach" to counterinsurgency may once have proffered to the development of current counterinsurgency understandings in the United States,<sup>10</sup> it certainly has little to offer now,<sup>11</sup> and we would echo the thoughts of the former Commandant of the Royal Marines,

Lieutenant General Sir Robert Fry, who as Deputy Commander of the Multinational Force in Iraq stated in 2006:

...we have absolutely nothing to teach the American Army whatsoever. The American Army that I see today is highly competent both in counterinsurgency techniques and also the slightly separate military discipline of counterterrorist techniques. I think there maybe would have been a time when we could have given ... some advice about procedures, about doctrines and about specific technologies, but I think those days are gone.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, by way of clarification, we draw attention to Lt. Gen. Fry's observation of the "slightly separate" division between counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. By adhering to the precepts of strategic theory, we treat all acts of violence, regardless of their character, as intending to fulfill a political purpose.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, contrary to much prevailing academic and military commentary, which draws sharp distinctions between counterterrorism and counterinsurgency in theory and practice,<sup>14</sup> we would contend that they engage the same phenomenon, namely, political actors that use asymmetrically violent means to attain their ideological ends. Moreover, to the extent that any meaningful distinction can be made it is that self-proclaimed practitioners of counterterror—for example, some senior antiterrorist law enforcement officers—more readily accept the ideological drivers that stimulate groups to utilize terror tactics,<sup>15</sup> while counterinsurgency thinkers, as we shall demonstrate, tend to de-ideologize the "insurgent" recourse to violence. Thus, as Lt. Gen. Fry appears to suggest, the separation between counterterrorism and counterinsurgency is an insignificant one. It is a distinction without a difference.

With these considerations in mind, let us proceed to analyze the theory and practice of counterinsurgency in the framework that we deem to be the most intellectually coherent, namely—war and the formulation of strategy in war.

### **War, Strategy, and Doctrine**

"War," Carl von Clausewitz stated, is "more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case."<sup>16</sup> By this he meant that all wars are unique in their origins, shape, and practice; they are sculpted by their particular time and place. What governs any given instance of war, along with the way observers perceive it, is always different in some degree, reflecting the contingent circumstances of each case.<sup>17</sup> For Clausewitz, the foremost influence in this regard was politics. When he described war as a continuation of politics by violent means, he meant not only that politics gives rise to war, but that it also exerts a fundamental influence over the manner in which war is conducted.<sup>18</sup> Warfare is not, in other words, a self-contained set of technical practices, but an activity that must be shaped in accordance with the ulterior purposes for which it is undertaken.

All this creates difficulties for *strategy*—defined for present purposes as the process by which armed force is translated into political ends. This translation process is always a challenging one, subject as it is to the frequently competing demands imposed by two very different worlds. Strategy acts, in Colin Gray's words, as the "bridge" between tactical actions on the ground—the violent act of combat—and the higher purpose to which those acts are directed.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, strategy must be capable of providing timely direction for military activity in the thick of war. For while peacetime militaries spend a great deal of time planning for war, any such preparations are likely to be overtaken by events once

the shooting starts. As Chief of the Prussian General Staff, Helmut von Moltke famously observed: “no plan survives first contact with the enemy.”<sup>20</sup> And once this has happened it becomes necessary to formulate an alternative course of action as quickly as possible. On the other hand, strategy must remain sensitive to the broader political context within which a war is conducted if it is to be capable of producing military outcomes that are not disproportionately costly in relation to the value attached to victory. In short, the imperative to do something quickly must not be permitted to obscure the need to do something that is also in harmony with the political context in which one is operating.<sup>21</sup>

One important way in which strategists have sought to address the problems associated with the need to plan, and indeed re-plan, in rapid fashion is to develop *doctrine* as a source of guidance for action. This may be the informal sort based, ad hoc, on past experience or, increasingly in the modern bureaucratic polity, codified and presented in manuals. Over time, doctrine has come to encompass all facets of operational activity—maritime doctrine, air power doctrine, land warfare doctrine and, in this current era, counterinsurgency doctrine. In 2006 the United States Army and Marine Corps introduced a new *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, FM3–24;<sup>22</sup> and in late 2009 the British Army followed suit with a new counterinsurgency manual of its own.<sup>23</sup> The goal of such manuals is to provide a set of directional propositions for action that have been distilled from past experience, and that can subsequently be used to inform decision making in the context of current contingencies. In this manner, doctrine is intended to replace the requirement for deriving courses of action from first principles. Geoffrey Till has aptly described doctrine “as something designed to provide military people with a vocabulary of ideas and a common sense of purpose about how they should conduct themselves before, during and after the action.” Thus, if “strategy is about the art of cookery, doctrine is concerned with today’s menus.” In the absence of doctrine, “commanders would have either to rely on luck and blind instinct or to convene a seminar to decide what to do when the enemy appears on the horizon.”<sup>24</sup>

But if doctrine is to be valuable as a guide to strategic decision making its “vocabulary of ideas” and “common sense of purpose” must nevertheless be subordinated to political considerations. The successful resort to doctrine, in other words, involves the application of judgment in the light of the wider prevailing circumstances. As the British Army currently puts it, doctrine is about “how to think; not what to think.”<sup>25</sup> This is an important distinction because, without the application of judgment, doctrine readily degenerates into dogma—which is to say, a list of rules that will be of questionable relevance to any given instance of war. This is likely to result in disastrous consequences, as the history of warfare can readily relate.

Before 1914, for example, the British Admiralty was obsessed with “Mahanian” thought—a doctrine in all but name—that stressed big battleships (dreadnoughts), fleet concentration, and the search for decisive battle.<sup>26</sup> Historians of World War I debate whether a decisive encounter took place at Jutland in 1916, and it is true that the German surface fleet was driven back into port where it stayed for the rest of the war. Strategically, however, the Battle of Jutland was merely a precursor to the far more potent U-boat threat to British commerce.<sup>27</sup> Yet the Royal Navy’s rigid adherence to its received concept of operations made it highly resistant to doing anything effective to preserve merchant shipping in this context. Only after immense losses of merchant vessels did the Royal Navy reluctantly adopt the convoy system in May 1917, which led to a dramatic reduction in sinkings. In this instance, therefore, the stubborn clinging to doctrine produced a near-fatal national catastrophe.<sup>28</sup> The challenge of total war against a predominantly continental power, determined on defeating Britain by whatever means it could conceive of, demanded a more

flexible and responsive approach than the Admirals could readily comprehend, given their doctrinal “blinkers.”<sup>29</sup> In this regard, they would have done well to pay closer attention to the Clausewitzian theorist, Julian Corbett, who never lost sight of the fact that maritime strategy should be a continuation of politics by other means and that navies could serve strategic goals in numerous ways other than through the search for big battles.<sup>30</sup>

A later, and perhaps even more apposite, example for present purposes is provided by Hans Morgenthau’s famous critique of U.S. attempts to conduct counterinsurgency operations in South Vietnam. By 1965 the results had not proved encouraging and this, maintained Morgenthau, was because counterinsurgency doctrine was inappropriate to the political context in which it was being employed. This, in turn, was in Morgenthau’s view the consequence of an American tendency to treat war as a:

...self-sufficient, technical enterprise, to be won as quickly, as cheaply, as thoroughly as possible and divorced from the foreign policy that preceded and is to follow it. Thus our military theoreticians and practitioners conceive of counterinsurgency as though it were just another branch of warfare, to be taught in special schools and applied with technical proficiency wherever the occasion arises.<sup>31</sup>

Once, therefore, the problems in South Vietnam had acquired the perceived form of an insurgency, the techniques of counterinsurgency (as codified in the doctrinal manuals of the 1960s) were assumed to represent a “self-sufficient” solution. What had been overlooked, Morgenthau continued, was the influence played by nationalism on the character of the struggle in Vietnam. The desire for self-determination among the Vietnamese people meant that any countervailing efforts—no matter how sophisticated the techniques involved—would sooner or later be swept away by contrary, and much more powerful, political forces. The doctrine of counterinsurgency had been permitted to preempt the formulation of a real strategy by substituting technique for judgment based on a sound appreciation of the political context.

Arguably, it is exactly this kind of mistake that is being made in respect of contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine today. Such doctrines are being applied to the wars in which Western nations are fighting on the basis that they can be framed as “insurgencies,” rather than because the political context necessarily recommends such a form of action. Politics, thereby, is being crowded out, and with it is going strategy. Before developing this argument, it is worth being clear about what is meant by the term “counterinsurgency,” and how closely such a meaning *ought* to bind its practitioners to more fundamental ideas about war along with the need to shape its conduct in accordance with political considerations.

### Defining Counterinsurgency

Counterinsurgency, or COIN to its aficionados, is a vague term. Since 2005, and in particular after the “Surge” in Iraq, it has become the defining orthodoxy governing the Western military response to so-called low-intensity conflicts, small wars, and global asymmetric threats. But what exactly is “COIN” all about? Fundamentally, COIN constitutes an attempt to confound a challenge to established authority. This is a reasonable, if rather vague, formulation. It understands, broadly, that an insurgency (from the Latin *insurgo*, *insurgere* to swell or rise up) is a challenge to the legally constituted government.

It is not clear though, from such a broad definition, whether an insurgency has to be an armed challenge to authority. Can it be an unarmed challenge as well as an armed

rebellion? The breadth of the definition connotes that any potential opposition, peaceful or violent, could be regarded as insurgent. The terms insurgency and counterinsurgency are therefore generously wide and fuzzy in their scope.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, from this perspective any government, irrespective of its ideological and political composition, could be said to engage in permanent COIN to ensure the continuation of established authority.

Fortunately, the definition afforded by FM3–24 is somewhat more specific. Here an insurgency is defined as “an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict.” Consequently, counterinsurgency is the “military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat an insurgency.”<sup>33</sup> On the surface this sounds plausible enough. However, if the less euphemistic word “combatant” is inserted in place of the term “insurgency,” and “war” in place of the term “counterinsurgency,” the following statement is derived: “War involves military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat a combatant.”

In other words, a definition is quickly achieved, if these changes are made, that could easily be considered to apply to *all* war, insurgent or otherwise. As such, this exercise provides a ready illustration of Clausewitz’s point that all war is essentially the same thing, even though specific manifestations are unique to time and place. It follows from this that counterinsurgency doctrine must be remarkably flexible if it is to justify its currently central role in shaping the understanding of the major threats Western states face and the most suitable ways of responding to them.

So how well does contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine manage the job of providing general guidance for action under conditions that can be expected to differ from one to the other in important ways? On the face of things, there is what appears to be a strong commitment in counterinsurgency thinking to “talking diversity.” Emphasis is placed on the requirement for armed forces to be flexible in their mode of operation, to learn what does and does not work in a particular context, and to adapt accordingly. Thus, FM3–24 argues that the “historical principles underlying success in COIN” can be seen in organizational approaches that have:

- Developed COIN doctrine and practices locally.
- Established local training centers during COIN operations.
- Regularly challenged their assumptions, both formally and informally.
- Learned about the broader world outside the military and requested outside assistance in understanding foreign, political, cultural, social, and other situations beyond their experience.
- Promoted suggestions from the field.
- Fostered open communication between officers and their subordinates.
- Established rapid avenues of disseminating lessons learned.
- Coordinated closely with governmental and nongovernmental partners at all command levels
- Proved open to soliciting and evaluating advice from the local people in the conflict zone.<sup>34</sup>

All this looks reasonable. The problem with lists such as this one, however, is that they are so vague and broadly drawn as to be applicable to a great many complex activities, warlike or otherwise. What is really being stated here is that people should be encouraged to talk to each other, to share information and ideas, and to be as receptive as possible to the new and the unusual.<sup>35</sup> As such, it is good advice for businesses and for other bureaucratic organizations, as well as for armed forces. Who could possibly disagree with any of it? Regardless of

the virtue of such concise, commonsense epithets, in the end, it has very little to do with war—and practices in war such as counterinsurgency—in their relationship with politics. On the contrary, what such advice appears to be all about is inculcating the most receptive possible environment for forms of “good practice” that are derived from other sources.

This contention is evident in relation to the *substantive* practices associated with doing counterinsurgency, which are held to be more or less uniform across time and space. Thus we find FM3–24 confidently asserting that: “Most insurgencies follow a similar course of development. The tactics used to successfully defeat them are likewise similar in most cases.”<sup>36</sup> These sentiments are likewise echoed by two important voices in the COIN world, John Nagl and Brian Burton, according to whom: “Insurgencies, like other forms of armed conflict, are better defined by methodologies than by ideologies. While causes change regularly, the fundamentals of insurgent strategy remain relatively constant . . . So too do the fundamentals of counterinsurgency.”<sup>37</sup>

In other words, FM3–24, while ostensibly providing *principles* for action, all too readily slips into providing *rules* for action; and in doing so it both ignores and obscures the importance that Clausewitz attached to shaping one’s actions in regard to the wider political context in which they are to occur.<sup>38</sup> For their part, Nagl and Burton appear to subscribe to the view that focusing on how—as opposed to why—an adversary is fighting provides the best basis for formulating an effective response.<sup>39</sup> The over-concentration in COIN thinking on the means a combatant employs, in contrast with understanding the broader political reasons that motivate any adversary to fight, therefore risks preempting effective strategic judgment because, as the following section elucidates, it produces a tendency to fall into the trap of instrumental rationality.

### COIN and Instrumental Rationality

The tendency toward focusing on technique as the ordering principle for military action is symptomatic of a dominant mode of thinking within the counterinsurgency community that Michael Oakeshott elsewhere characterized as “rationalism in politics.” It is an approach that leads to a particular apolitical style of decision making that is bureaucratic and managerial—a technology of government. Consequently, it attempts to eschew anything that seemingly compromises the status of the objective manager, the neutral-observer, or the disinterested problem fixer. As Oakeshott explains, it is an approach that sees “rationality in conduct as the product of a determinate instrument, and asserts that the ‘rational’ way of going about things is to go about them under the sole guidance of the instrument.”<sup>40</sup> The instrument in this case is COIN doctrine, which is used to disaggregate situations “into a series of problems to be solved, purposes to be achieved and a series of individual actions performed in pursuit of these ends.” The seemingly unprejudiced consideration of every project takes place from this perspective. As Oakeshott shows, however, the rationalist’s craving for this sort of “mistake proof certainty” and the “instrumental mind it reflects may be regarded in some respects as the relic of a belief in magic.”<sup>41</sup>

Evidence abounds for the prevalence of this form of antipolitical instrumentalism within the world of COIN. It comes through, for example, in the COIN community’s concern to marginalize the Clausewitzian view of war. For instance, an important consultative group that met in London to discuss British Army counterinsurgency doctrine counseled its members to “Be wary of Clausewitz . . . some of his theories complicate rather than inform an effort to explain the complexity of the current version of insurgency.”<sup>42</sup> Nowhere was it explained why Clausewitz’s thought was problematic in this regard. On a similar note, Montgomery McFate, the anthropologist who assisted the U.S. military in formulating



its COIN field manual, maintained that: “Neither Al-Qa’eda nor insurgents in Iraq are fighting a Clausewitzian war, where armed conflict is a rational extension of politics by other means.”<sup>43</sup>

Why is Clausewitz rejected in this manner? On one level, of course, disavowals of this kind might simply reflect a lack of knowledge of Clausewitz’s engagement with war. His writings and theorizations can be dense, and a widespread assumption persists that the Prussian General was only concerned with “third-generation” or nation-state warfare. This is a common error that has been made by several well-known scholars in the past.<sup>44</sup> There is, nonetheless, lurking behind this nescience a more compelling reason for COIN enthusiasts to reject Clausewitz: and this is because Clausewitz emphasizes, above all, the centrality of politics in war. It is politics and the contingent circumstances that go with it that makes war uncertain, and ensures that war manifests itself in different guises on each and every occasion. Clausewitz is thus clearly at odds with the view that there can be a single determinate instrument for the conduct of war.

On the surface, the British COIN manual appears somewhat more attuned to the centrality of politics than is FM3–24. It acknowledges, albeit cursorily, the Clausewitzian primacy of political purpose in counterinsurgency. Even so, the manual misconceives the notion of political purpose, evidently believing that it simply denotes the de-emphasizing of military operations in favor of social and development actions designed to drain away local sympathy for insurgents, rather than representing a core principle of strategic thought. This is evident in the manual’s recourse to David Galula’s epithet that counterinsurgency is 80 percent political action and only 20 percent military.<sup>45</sup> Here, Galula mistakenly suggests that forceful military acts are non-political, while nonviolent acts are inherently political. The sense of ambiguity, if not outright confusion, over such matters is also reinforced by the manual’s inclusion of a related statement by the then British Foreign Secretary, David Miliband: “People like quoting Clausewitz that warfare is the continuation of politics by other means. But in Afghanistan we need politics to become the continuation of warfare by other means.”<sup>46</sup>

What Milliband appeared to be suggesting is that non-military operations can be considered acts of war within the context of a counterinsurgency. Comments like this are reasonable enough, if they mean that building schools and hospitals, and inculcating democratic values and practices, may be a way of undermining the Taliban in Afghanistan. On the other hand, they risk obscuring Clausewitz’s appreciation of the relationship between warfare and politics, which firmly subordinates the former to the latter.

For Clausewitz, this subordination to political considerations was intended to ensure that the resort to war would produce better conditions than those that preceded it. Accordingly, in the context of somewhere like Afghanistan, this political outcome should not entail a limitless commitment of troops and material to a weak state that, absent Al Qaeda, possesses little importance for either the U.S. or Western interests more generally. Here COIN’s focus on winning hearts-and-minds has run up against the principle of proportionality. Consequently, the political results a decade after 9/11 is a mission mired in the Pashtun tribal areas where the enemy that NATO seeks to pacify receives covert support from Pakistan, an ally once considered crucial to the balance of power in South and Central Asia.<sup>47</sup> The United States considers the stability of Pakistan, locked as it is between the rising powers of China and India and a reinvigorated Russia, crucial to the regional stability of South Asia.<sup>48</sup> Yet, the ultimate effect of the continuing campaign against the Taliban, not only exhausts financial and material resources, it paradoxically produces an outcome that destabilizes Pakistan, which is an outcome of little real political value.

Additional evidence for the COIN community's antipolitical brand of rationalism emerges from its relationship with the history of the practices it seeks to promote. More specifically, COIN advocates have in the recent past displayed a marked tendency to derive their "universal" approach from a single successful case, namely the British counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya between 1948 and 1960. Indeed, the Malayan Emergency, which saw British forces successfully extinguish a Communist revolt via an interlocking program of military, economic, and social measures, constitutes the *locus classicus* on how a democratic state can win against a seemingly intractable insurgency. As a result, it became for a number of years after 2005 the paramount example of successful counterinsurgency practice.<sup>49</sup>

The use of the Malayan case is only possible because contemporary COIN analysis does not engage with this historical example as a conventional historian might. More precisely, COIN analysis rarely examines the causes of the insurgency and the plausible reasons for the insurgents' failure in what Richard Clutterbuck termed *The Long Long War*.<sup>50</sup> Instead, contemporary COIN advocates have treated the campaign as a repository of methods and tactics that can be dusted down, and adapted to the more recent "long wars" in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>51</sup> From this perspective, British success reflected the fact that programs like the Briggs plan that built new villages and expelled squatters from plantations eventually captured "hearts-and-minds." Moreover, the tactic of securing "white areas" and then concentrating on the more troublesome "black areas" after 1955 finds resonances today, in COIN parlance, with clearing, holding, and building.<sup>52</sup> In the ongoing campaign in Afghanistan, this practice finds its operational embodiment in Provincial Reconstruction Teams composed, among other things, of social scientists who attempt to ascertain the levels of social need among the frontier peoples.<sup>53</sup>

Efforts to abstract a model for COIN from British activities in Malaya are no doubt understandable. Not only were the British successful, but they also developed social and democratically palatable methods for dealing with the problems they faced. Unfortunately, however, this account rests on a somewhat selective engagement with the historical record. It ignores critical aspects of the campaign that were crucial to British success but which do not chime with current practices. Firstly, it is not without significance that Emergency measures were conducted under conditions of colonial governorship. The United Kingdom might have been a democracy but it conducted the "long war" as a colonial power, under political conditions that were far more permissive of draconian measures than is the case today. As Karl Hack argued in his revisionist account of Emergency historiography, the prelude to "hearts-and-minds" required forcefully "screwing down" the communists and their supporters.<sup>54</sup> That is to say, coercive military power preceded the socioeconomic reforms that gave rise to the later hearts-and-minds program.

It was also the case that British-administered rule of law required recourse to a highly repressive Internal Security Act (ISA). The postcolonial nations of Singapore and Malaysia after 1965 have never repealed the ISA. Indeed, in these single party dominant states, the political elites maintain that the ISA constitutes the basis for social cohesion, internal resilience, and political stability.<sup>55</sup> Yet little or no acknowledgment is made in current COIN advocacy, either of the utility of repressive legislation to curtail the activity of insurrectionary forces or of the hard-power underpinnings of classic colonial-era counterinsurgency success.<sup>56</sup> Contemporary COIN thinkers rarely advocate the "robust" application of armed force, and do not call for the introduction of far-reaching internal security acts in places such as the United States or the United Kingdom in their own struggles against domestic threats. But these were just as much features of the Malayan case as the more acceptable

hearts-and-minds campaigns that are evident today. This important theme is explored in further detail below.

### **Counterinsurgency Success in Perspective—The Principle of Going in Hard**

In recent years a number of historians have argued that British approaches to their postcolonial insurgencies were invariably characterized by a degree of brutality. In the case of the Mau Mau war in Kenya in the 1950s, sufficient evidence is present to suggest torture and atrocity was systemic, and that the British Army was deeply implicated in such activities.<sup>57</sup> Such revelations have led scholars like Douglas Porch to assert that consequently the British Army “did not have a particularly exemplary record at COIN or at any warfare, for that matter, at the time of Malaya” and that its “brutal COIN tactics” were largely an unremitting failure.<sup>58</sup> To the extent, moreover, that the British Army demonstrated an aptitude for organizational learning of the type extolled by COIN adherents it was one of “kinetic methods” re-branded as hearts-and-minds, which were “every bit as repressive—even dirty as those [employed] by the French.”<sup>59</sup>

Accusations of repressive failure and military ineptitude are, however, wide of the mark. Pointing out the coercive aspects of the British campaign in Malaya and elsewhere does not, ipso facto, lead to any logical conclusion that these methods—and the wars of which they were a part—were necessarily failures on the part of the British, or even that some of the “lessons” of British conduct are inapplicable to future contexts. As historians of the Malaya and Kenya wars like Huw Bennett have indicated, the lessons drawn from these campaigns by contemporary COIN commentators are selective, and in other respects often overlook the conditions of strategic success in a number of so-called small wars fought by the British.<sup>60</sup> Admirers of COIN who accentuate minimum force and winning hearts-and-minds,<sup>61</sup> thus marginalize the British Army’s own evaluation of its effectiveness in such conflicts, which was the purposeful exercise of exemplary and punitive force at the outset.<sup>62</sup> It was the principle of “going in hard” at the beginning that the British concluded would determine the success of any campaign and most importantly establish the conditions for security in which later “hearts-and-minds” efforts could take place.

Indeed, it might be argued that “going in hard” lay behind the U.S. Surge in Iraq. The idea was not, of course, to employ force punitively, but it did involve an increased number of troops tasked with providing “hard” security intended to stabilize the situation on the ground.<sup>63</sup> In this context, hearts-and-minds operations were less important than the provision of security, which led to a reconfiguration of political conditions that permitted new alliances to be forged, notably with respect to the Sunni tribal awakening.<sup>64</sup> This helped marginalize Al Qaeda in Iraq, which among other things, facilitated an increase in intelligence that enabled special forces to take out many of the remaining insurgents.

Furthermore, even when “going in hard” can be shown to have failed in other contexts, it does not necessarily follow that the attempt to provide “hard” security as the prerequisite of long-term success is negated. Undoubtedly, in the early years of the Northern Ireland Troubles, for example, the British Army’s colonially derived tradition of using exemplary force resulted in horrendous mistakes, which almost certainly prolonged the crisis.<sup>65</sup> Yet, the turning point of that conflict was the result not of any turn toward hearts-and-minds or minimum force, but the exercise of demonstrative military power: Operation Motorman, launched on 31 July 1972. This huge operation, involving over 30,000 British troops—one of the biggest British military deployments since World War II—swept away the Irish Republican Army’s (IRA) “no-go” areas in Northern Ireland’s cities.<sup>66</sup> In one stroke, the IRA’s military position was devastated. After Motorman, its violence was on a demonstrable

downward trend.<sup>67</sup> The Irish republican movement's armed campaign never recovered from this blow: a British Surge.

Moreover, to the extent that Motorman stabilized Northern Ireland from its violent peak, and provided the longer term conditions of greater security, the subsequent ending of the IRA campaign over twenty years later was less a consequence of hearts-and-minds or any other precepts of "humane" counterinsurgency practices. It was a more consequence of those "dirty," "kinetic" methods that some scholars now condemn as indicative of failed COIN. Over the years, an increasing set of revelations suggests that it was the operation of special forces counterambushes, and in particular penetrations by informers and intelligence agents, that by the early 1990s had caused the IRA almost certainly to lose control of large parts of its organization.<sup>68</sup> Ground down by years of rising losses stemming from security force arrests, and special forces interceptions, along with failed missions, and endemic paranoia arising from a (probably well-founded) fear of informers in the ranks, the IRA's internal will to prosecute its armed struggle collapsed.

Therefore, it may be surmised that the determinants for strategic success arising from the American and British experiences actually rest on more hard-headed appreciations. Yet, in relation to much current advocacy, especially with respect to the continuing commitment to Afghanistan, it is the less hard-headed aspects of COIN that are accentuated. Rather than the provision of basic security on the ground as the precursor to the attainment of long-term objectives, as was evident in campaigns from Malaya, Northern Ireland and Iraq, it is the more benevolent and woolly ideas of "clear, hold and build" and "grievance reduction" that are routinely promoted. Such an emphasis not only misreads the principal requirements that have sustained some noted anti-insurgent operations of the past, but as will be discussed below, stresses the technical "how" over the more important political "why," which is the ultimate referent that determines success in so-called COIN campaigns.

### **Clear, Hold, and Build . . . What, Where, and for How Long?**

The doctrinal imperative to "Clear, Hold, and Build" is an important element of COIN technique.<sup>69</sup> And yet, despite its current vogue status, this widely employed slogan does not always explain what requires clearing, holding, or building. As such, it is of questionable relevance to current security threats associated, say, with globalized *jihadism* and its promulgation by home-grown activists in places such as Washington, New York, London, or Sydney. How should clearing, holding, and building proceed within the U.K. cityscape, for example, whence many *jihadist* conspiracies emanate?<sup>70</sup> Here the employment of the precepts of clear, hold, and build would seem, if not exactly meaningless, then somewhat surreal. Would, for instance, the tactics of clearing enemy fighters from the urban downtown apply to jihadist insurgents in British cities, like Birmingham? Moreover, how would COIN practice subsequently hold these urban areas once "free of enemy control"? And what, in the homegrown context, would "building" entail?<sup>71</sup>

In the Afghan context it is easier to identify a course of action intended to clear an enemy from Helmand province, for example, to hold the ground that has been "conquered," and then to build infrastructure and new forms of governance—in "politics as the continuation of war [sic]" fashion. The problem here, however, is that the rhetorical formula "Clear, Hold and Build" never offers a means of verbally framing why this should be done, at what cost, and for how long. Consequently, it preempts consideration of the feasibility of such techniques in light of the wider political context in which they are to be applied. Are efforts to clear, hold and build likely to discommode the insurgents, or (as Morgenthau warned in relation to Vietnam) are the effects produced by such techniques likely to be swamped by

countervailing political energies? And for how long should such efforts continue, incurring costs in the process?

Somewhat disturbingly in this regard, a term for insurgency that is gaining currency in public discourse is “forever” war.<sup>72</sup> This is a phrase that appears to imply the need to continue fighting for as long as it takes—whatever “it” might be. Used in this way it is a term that needs to be challenged because a commitment to engage in permanent low intensity conflict is politically unrealistic, not to mention dangerous. It would consume valuable personnel and resources, and generally violate the proportionality principle—especially in the context of wars of choice that are not understood to involve the defense of vital interests.

### Grievance Reduction

As previously mentioned, another technique that is central to COIN thinking is “grievance reduction.” The importance attached to this technique stems from the “hearts-and-minds” approach that has been abstracted out of the Malayan case, and supports a technical preference for accommodation over confrontation. Remedy the underlying grievance, it is contended, and the insurgency will lose a great deal of its force. An eloquent proponent of this approach is David Kilcullen, according to whom a “key counterinsurgency technique is to counter the grievances on which insurgent systems feed . . . ultimately marginalizing them as irrelevant to the population’s aspirations.”<sup>73</sup> In this circumstance he cites the Malayan case with approval, though he is careful to qualify himself that “traditional counterinsurgency techniques . . . cannot simply be applied to today’s problems in a simplistic or mechanistic fashion,” which is wise advice but still carries the assumption that “traditional techniques” should provide the basis for action.<sup>74</sup> Kilcullen does indeed view the basic approach as being important for preventing the mobilization of local grievances in support of a global insurgency. The same philosophy is also evident behind his more recent advocacy of what he terms “military assistance” to embattled states. This, he suggests, may involve aid to indigenous military and security forces, but it may also involve tackling “corruption, bad policies, poor governance and lack of development.”<sup>75</sup>

In a similar vein, Nagl and Burton argue with respect to the application of COIN technique inside Western states themselves that combating the impulse towards violent jihadist activities within Muslim communities involves tackling grievances:

Political disenfranchisement, lack of economic opportunity, and social alienation at the personal level are more widespread within these [Western Muslim] communities. For many of the young men who end up joining militant groups, the commitment to jihad is less important than the feeling of belonging and chance to avenge perceived indignities of the past. The militant “cause” may be couched in Islamist terms, but it is not simply bred into individual would-be jihadists with tabula rasa minds. They have pasts, grievances, and personal justifications for their actions that run deeper than the veneer of extremist religion.<sup>76</sup>

Likewise, another COIN advocate, John Mackinlay, asserts that a

dangerous insurgency . . . usually has a legitimate grievance or cause. A successful counter-strategy requires a government that is politically strong enough to change direction in order to remove the pressure of the grievance, and at the

same time hopefully remove a substantial element of popular support from the insurgent.<sup>77</sup>

The problem here is not that grievance reduction is necessarily irrelevant outside a specific context, but that too much appears to be expected of it under all circumstances. A focus on grievance reduction appears to assume, for example, that local grievances are a precondition for receptiveness to Islamist ideology, which does not everywhere seem to be the case. Britain's home-grown bombers, who attacked the London transport system in July 2005, were moved to violence not because they perceived their local community as put upon by the state, but because they viewed parts of the *umma*, the global Muslim community, as subject to British aggression elsewhere in the world. According to the group's leader, Mohammed Siddique Kahn: "Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters."<sup>78</sup>

Similarly, Kahn's fellow bomber, Shehzad Tanweer, threatened the British public with further attacks "until you pull your forces out of Afghanistan and Iraq."<sup>79</sup> Islam, after all, preaches concern for fellow Muslims that is not delimited by state boundaries: it is universal in scope, and therefore necessarily sensitive to the currents of global politics, in which regard it can act as something akin to a lightning rod for almost all feelings and perceptions of grievance. In fact, this explains why Islamist propaganda is routinely extensive in the charges it mounts against the West. When Al Qaeda spokesman Suleiman Abu Gheith described the deaths consequent on 9/11 as "fair exchange for the ones killed in the Al-'Amiriya shelter in Iraq, and . . . but a tiny part of the exchange for those killed in Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, the Philippines, Bosnia, Kashmir, Chechnya, and Afghanistan," he could be confident of being understood by his Muslim audience.<sup>80</sup>

It follows from this that any meaningful program of grievance reduction would itself need to be framed in global, as well as local, terms. The difficulty here is that it would immediately run up against Western vital interests. Energy security features importantly in this regard, as does a concern over the fate of Israel. It is sometimes suggested that a satisfactory resolution to the plight of the Palestinian people would remove a key grievance without compromising Western interests. But as Lawrence Freedman has observed, if such an agreement involved the continued existence of Israel, it would hardly appease Islamist sentiment.<sup>81</sup> All in all, therefore, there is little real room for maneuver in the matter of global grievance reduction. Western states might—and arguably should—seek to navigate a better path between the competing demands of interest and justice as they pertain to the Middle East, but this is a long-term project of incremental change. If sweeping changes are to be realized in the short term, it will be due to events consequent on the "Arab Spring" rather than on Western initiatives. And if this is the case, if a key element of a global COIN effort can gain no traction, it is necessary to return to more fundamental questions of strategy—beginning from the political context within which it must be formulated.

### **The Power of the COIN Narrative**

To recapitulate the central argument, doctrine has an important role to play in facilitating military decisions under pressure of time, by providing ready-to-hand generalizations from first principles. Doctrine is not, however, a reliable substitute for the application of judgment in relation to strategic matters. It cannot be so because strategy, as Gian Gentile has argued,<sup>82</sup> must be made with reference to war's political dimension, which is to say the dimension

that confers on war so many of its chameleon-like qualities. Yet, as the historical record attests, doctrine has a habit of muscling out wider considerations, of descending into dogma, and thereby preempting the formulation of rigorously worked out strategy. No doubt some of this is due to the fact that it is mentally easier to rely on checklists—or “cookbook” answers<sup>83</sup>—than to venture into the ambiguous and contingent domain of politics. The exercise of judgment is, after all, something that can provoke deep misgivings, especially when a great deal rests on the resulting decisions. What everybody would really prefer is a formula (or a recipe) for success that can be followed under all circumstances. There is comfort to be drawn from the “magic” of instrumental rationalism.<sup>84</sup>

COIN doctrine is no exception in this respect—except perhaps in the degree to which it has penetrated the discourse and practice of contemporary warfare. In fact, COIN and related concepts are today virtually synonymous with current ideas of what war is all about.<sup>85</sup> Consequently, strategy has been bundled off stage and war has become a continuation of technique, as opposed to politics. What is the reason for COIN’s particular success in this regard?

Part of the answer probably lies in the culturally attractive narrative it provides for post-imperial powers, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, about triumph over adversity. In the U.S. context, this narrative follows the form of the Western movie genre, that itself reflects the core myth of American foundation, and its associated notions of manifest destiny that involve taming both nature and hostile natives in order to achieve a teleologically determined goal. Thus, whereas the results produced by the U.S. “Surge” in Iraq need to be understood against a complex and shifting backdrop of local politics, the received wisdom celebrates the triumph of a new sheriff, applying new and more empathetic ways that overcome previous problems and reversals.

What we have here is something akin to a John Ford horse opera in which the old timers do not talk to the natives, and things are going from bad to worse on the frontier. Fortunately, a new sheriff (Marshall Petraeus) strides into town with a moral purpose and clear ideas. He revitalizes the local saloon (CENTCOM) and metaphorically rides out on his white horse with his trusty advisers to treat with the tribal leaders and smoke the pipe of peace. This achieved, a new bond is forged, the border is settled and the bad ones (Al Qaeda in Iraq) are put to flight.<sup>85</sup> The COIN plot line uncannily resembles that of *Rio Grande*, *Horse Soldiers*, or that later John Wayne epic, *The Green Berets*, adapted to the needs of a new frontier.<sup>86</sup>

Somewhat differently in the U.K. context, the teleological element is lacking from a narrative that nevertheless plays to a British sense of romantic colonial adventure. Here the exploits of Lawrence of Arabia are evoked, which celebrates the imagery of sympathetic British advisers gone native.<sup>87</sup> In this vein, it is no surprise, perhaps, that the front cover photograph of the British Army’s *Countering Insurgency* manual features a rugged British Army officer conversing with a group of tribal elders in a local village somewhere, presumably, in the Afghan hinterland.

## Conclusion

The suggestion that COIN provides a powerful storyline that supports past and present operations in places like Iraq and Afghanistan is not intended to disparage counterinsurgency advocacy. After all, “information management” is an important facet of modern war. It may well be necessary to keep public opinion onside with respect to external interventions where national interests are engaged. In concluding this assessment of the strategic deficit inherent in the COIN advocacy, we therefore wish to be fair to the most recent generation of counterinsurgency theorists. This crop of thinkers has, undoubtedly, risen to a position of

prominence that can be said to constitute a “COIN lobby.” As such, this lobby deserves analytical scrutiny, and can be critiqued for its questionable presentation of historical analogies and its potentially distorting influence on foreign and defense policy.<sup>88</sup>

The growing intellectual assault on the COIN lobby in recent times has, however, brought with it an equally questionable agenda. It is difficult to agree with criticism, for example, that alleges that counterinsurgency functions as the handmaiden for the continuation of a neo-colonialist “Reconquista” project that, via a species of naïve and “reckless” liberal interventionism, seeks to foist a new “civilizing mission” on benighted areas of the world.<sup>89</sup> Original COIN doctrines did, indeed, develop as an outgrowth of imperial policing, and contemporary theorists clearly, erroneously or otherwise, draw on historical examples from that tradition.<sup>90</sup> It does not follow, though, that neo-COIN thinking represents a continuation of that tradition. If anything, as this analysis maintains, neo-COIN is a post-imperial manifestation. The militarily “light footprint” invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan evidently refute any contention that the United States had an interest in staying for any length of time,<sup>91</sup> let alone ruling these countries as a neo-imperialist power.<sup>92</sup>

The regeneration of counterinsurgency thought in military circles arose largely in the aftermath of the failed post-invasion policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, when it became clear that getting out quickly was not a viable option.<sup>93</sup> It is in this respect that neo-COIN thinkers have recourse to their most potent defense, namely, that they were trying to develop ideas to rescue policymakers from the mess into which they had got themselves. It was in these contingent conditions that neo-COIN theory was invoked as a mechanism to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan. The new counterinsurgency theorists were endeavoring to put forward strategies that were intended to help the United States and its allies prevail in the wars they found themselves in, not because they necessarily wanted to be in them in the first place.<sup>94</sup>

The problem with COIN thinking is, however, that having had some resonance in the stabilization of Iraq, it acquired the flavor of a timeless set of techniques, and now functions as a narrative accompaniment to broader foreign and defense policy debates. To the extent that COIN provides the consoling narrative, finding a receptive home in the post-imperial consciousness, then this remains a troubling development; for it is likely to continue preempting the formulation of strategy for some time to come. Important decisions about war will be shaped by a doctrine that never wholly chimed with the political complexities of the past. Moreover, to the degree that it chimes in the present, it is relevant primarily only to the stabilization of Iraq, rather than being generically relevant to all future interventions. It is necessary, therefore, by one means or another for Western decision makers to shrug off the obsession with COIN as a prelude to fostering genuine strategic connections between military means and a more realistic set of political concerns. If Western powers do not succeed in doing so, then they risk the prospect of “clearing, holding and building,” and of conducting “grievance reduction,” into an indefinite future, spending disproportionate human and financial resources as they go. If they do not succeed in defeating themselves in such an enterprise, then they risk the prospect of somebody else teaching them the error of their ways with painful consequences because, in the end, Clausewitz’s chameleon is always liable to strike where it is least expected.

## Notes

1. Leslie Gelb, “Mission Accomplished in Afghanistan,” *The Australian*, 21 May 2011, p. 8.
2. Official U.S. policy explicitly maintains the commitment to “Disrupt, Dismantle, and Defeat Al-Qa’ida and its Violent Extremist Affiliates in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Around the World.” See



*National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: Office of the President of the United States, 2010), p. 19.

3. The elimination of Osama bin Laden as a principal goal of U.S. foreign policy was implicit in early Presidential statements after 9/11, notably in George W. Bush's address to Congress of 20 September 2001, in which he declared: "Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated." See Transcript of President George Bush's Address, CNN U.S., 21 September. Available at [http://articles.cnn.com/2001-09-20/us/gen.bush.transcript.1\\_joint-session-national-anthem-citizens/4?\\_s=PM:US](http://articles.cnn.com/2001-09-20/us/gen.bush.transcript.1_joint-session-national-anthem-citizens/4?_s=PM:US) (accessed 30 October 2011). The explicit targeting of bin Laden in theory, however, transgressed Executive Orders 11905 (18 February 1976) and 12333 (4 December 1981), which outlawed any engagement or conspiracy to engage in assassination. As a number of commentators have since argued, "E.O. 12333 does not apply to the application of military force directed against legitimate targets, whether they constitute individual terrorists or heads of state." See Maj. Matthew J. Machon, *Targeted Killing as an Element of U.S. Foreign Policy in the War on Terror* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies United States Army Command and General Staff College, 2006), p. 53. Available at <http://www.fas.org/irp/eprint/machon.pdf> (accessed 3 November 2011).

4. President Barack Obama justified the killing of Osama bin Laden under the rubric of legitimate targeting of an enemy combatant and with clear reference to the May 2010 *National Security Strategy*, in his televised address following bin Laden's death on 2 May 2011 in which he stated that "shortly after taking office, I directed Leon Panetta, the director of the CIA, to make the killing or capture of bin Laden the top priority of our war against al Qaeda, even as we continued our broader efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat his network." Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/05/02/osama-bin-laden-dead> (accessed 4 November 2011).

5. Gelb, "Mission Accomplished."

6. In addition to the targeting of bin Laden and the Al Qaeda network, the broader goals of U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) policy with respect to Afghanistan are encapsulated in the formal mission statement of the UN-mandated Afghanistan International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which declares the NATO commitment to act: "In support of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, ISAF conducts operations in Afghanistan to reduce the capability and will of the insurgency, support the growth in capacity and capability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and facilitate improvements in governance and socio-economic development in order to provide a secure environment for sustainable stability that is observable to the population." See <http://www.isaf.nato.int/mission.html> (accessed 5 November 2011).

7. A debate over the validity of contemporary COIN thinking can be said to originate in early-mid 2009 in two sets of exchanges, one between Gian Gentile and John Nagl over the extent to which the U.S. Army should embrace COIN doctrines, and the other between Andrew Bacevich and David Kilcullen following the former's review of latter's book, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). For the contending positions see: Gian Gentile "Let's Build an Army to Win All Wars," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 52/1st Quarter (2009), pp. 27–33 and John Nagl, "Let's Win the Wars We're In," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 52/1st Quarter (2009), pp. 20–26; Andrew Bacevich, "Raising Jihad," *The National Interest* (March/April 2009), pp. 91–98; Dave Kilcullen, "Accidental Guerrilla: Read Before Burning," *Small Wars Journal* (6 March 2009). Available at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/accidental-guerrilla-read-before-burning> (accessed 7 June 2009).

8. For an analysis see M.L.R. Smith and John Stone, "Explaining Strategic Theory," *Infinity Journal*, 4 (Fall 2011), pp. 27–30.

9. See David H. Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the U.S. Military for Modern Wars* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009).

10. A number of commentaries emanating from British Army perspectives were instrumental in providing a stimulus that facilitated greater appreciation of the precepts of counterinsurgency in American military thought. See for example, Brig. Nigel Aylwin-Foster, "Changing the Army for Counter-Insurgency Operations," *Military Review* (November–December 2005), pp. 2–15; Lt. Gen.

Sir John Kiszely, "Learning About Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* (March–April 2007), pp. 5–11.

11. Indeed, widely perceived inadequacies in the British military performance in Iraq and Afghanistan were held to have damaged its reputation for counterinsurgency. While we are skeptical toward the somewhat one dimensional accounts of such deficiencies as purveyed in works like Frank Ledwidge's *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), we would certainly recognize the potency of many criticisms. We tend to share the measured observations of Theo Farrell, who argues that severe shortcomings there undoubtedly were, but like their American counterparts, the British were embarked on a learning process that has resulted in improved operational effectiveness, at least in Afghanistan from 2009 onward, notably with the offensive into the Chah-e-Anjir Triangle in northern Nad-e-Ali in February 2010. See Theo Farrell, "A Good War Gone Wrong?" *RUSI Journal*, 156(5) (October–November 2011), pp. 60–64.

12. U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), News Transcript, DoD News Briefing with Lt. Gen. Sir Robert Fry, 12 May 2006. Available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2006/05/mil-060512-dod01.htm> (accessed 5 November 2010).

13. Smith and Stone, "Explaining Strategic Theory," pp. 28–29.

14. For example, Gary Anderson, "Counterinsurgency vs. Counterterrorism," *Small Wars Journal*, 24 February 2010. Available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/counterinsurgency-vs-counterterrorism> (accessed October 10, 2011); Anthony H. Cordesman, "US Strategy in Afghanistan: The Debate We Should be Having," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 7 October 2009. Available at <http://csis.org/publication/us-strategy-afghanistan> (accessed 2 May 2011).

15. See for example Peter Clarke, *Learning from Experience: Counter-terrorism in the UK Since 9/11*, Colin Cramphorn Memorial Lecture (London: Policy Exchange, 2007), p. 18. Clarke was formerly Deputy Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and Head of the Counter-Terrorism Command.

16. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 89.

17. For Clausewitz, the unique character of war was the result of a "paradoxical trinity" arising from the interplay of passion, chance and reason: "primordial violence, hatred and enmity . . . the play of chance and probability with which the creative spirit is free to roam: and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone." *Ibid.*, p. 89.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

19. Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 29.

20. Quoted in Daniel J. Hughes, ed., *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings* (New York: Presidio, 1993), pp. 45–47.

21. See John Stone, *Military Strategy: The Politics and Technique of War* (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 4–13.

22. See U.S. Army/Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

23. FM3–24/MCWP 3–33.5 *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2006); British Army Field Manual, Vol. 1, Part 10, *Countering Insurgency* (Warminster: Ministry of Defence, 2009).

24. Geoffrey Till, "The Evolution of Strategy and the New World Order," in Craig A. Snyder, ed., *Contemporary Security and Strategy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 97.

25. *Army Doctrine Publication, Operations*. Available at <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=subjects&Area=jihad&ID=SP38802> (accessed 21 July 2011), pp. 2–4.

26. Mahanian thought refers to the writings of the highly influential nineteenth century naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan. His key work was *The Influence of Seapower Upon History, 1660–1783* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co 1890).

27. See Jon Robb-Webb, "Convoy," in Richard Holmes, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Military History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

28. Norman F. Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), pp. 210–211.

29. Losses of merchant vessels were running up to 25 percent for most of the war, which fell back to little more than 0.25 percent following the introduction of the convoy system. There is historical dispute about the circumstances of its resumption. The British Prime Minister David Lloyd George claimed credit for forcing convoying on a pig-headed Admiralty, although in all likelihood it was the Cabinet Secretary Maurice Hankey who persuaded Lloyd George to overrule the Admiralty. Alternative historical readings argue that the Royal Navy had used the convoy system all the way up to the 1880s before abandoning the practice when it concluded that the threat from surface ships was too small to warrant the extra cost and dislocation but voluntarily resumed convoying after full-scale tests as the best answer to what, at that time, was the entirely new problem of U-boats. Whatever the exact truth, it is fair to conclude that the Royal Navy was dilatory and reluctant to change its tactics in the face of U-boat threat. The authors are grateful to Andrew Lambert, Laughton Professor of Naval History, King's College London for providing the historical background to this debate.

30. Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911).

31. Hans Morgenthau, "Vietnam and the National Interest," in Marvin E. Gettleman, ed., *Vietnam: History, Documents and Opinion on a Major Crisis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 391.

32. See M.L.R. Smith, "Guerrillas in the Mist: Reassessing Strategy and Low Intensity Warfare," *Review of International Studies* 29(1) (2003), pp. 19–37.

33. FM3–24, p. 2.

34. *Ibid.*, p. liii.

35. For its part, the British manual *Countering Insurgency* stipulates a set of principles that are more focused on COIN practice and seek to relate this to politics (although some important caveats in this regards are discussed later in this article) "1. Primacy of political purpose. 2. Unity of effort. 3. Understand the human terrain. 4. Secure the population. 5. Neutralise the insurgent. 6. Gain and maintain popular support. 7. Operate in accordance with the law. 8. Integrate intelligence. 9. Prepare for the long term. 10. Learn and adapt." See 1–2, and 3–2.

36. FM3–24, p. ii.

37. John A. Nagl and Brian M. Burton, "Thinking Globally and Acting Locally: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Modern Wars," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33(1) (2010), p. 126.

38. For its part, the British Army affirms the role of ideology only in instrumental terms as a "Mechanism of Motivation" employed by the insurgent leadership to mobilize followers. *Countering Insurgency*, pp. 2–5.

39. John Nagl is an interesting case in this regard. His early work demonstrates great sensitivity to context. "Soldiers—and most statesmen—are uncomfortable with ambiguity, with Clausewitzian 'it depends' answers," he observed in *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), p. 18. The key contention that Nagl conveys in *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* is that for armed forces to be of utility in the post–Cold War era they should be flexible, adapt quickly to the context, and be ready to challenge or overturn established ways of doing things. By arguing in his later writings that counterinsurgency establishes a constant, fundamental, set of timeless techniques he comes close to contradiction by asserting the very thing he once claimed to be against—organizational and doctrinal rigidity.

40. Michael Oakshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 88.

41. *Ibid.*

42. KCL Insurgency Group, Notes from "Reviewing UK Army Countering Insurgency Meeting," 20 June 2007.

43. Montgomery McFate, "The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 38/3rd Quarter (2005), p. 43.

44. See, inter alia: Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991), pp. 33–62; K. J. Holsti, *The State, War and the State of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 1–18; Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in the Global Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 20–23; John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Vintage, 1993), pp. 13–30. See also: John Mueller, “The Banality of Ethnic War,” *International Security*, 25(1) (2000), pp. 42–70; Ralph Peters, “The New Strategic Trinity,” *Parameters* 28 (1998–99), pp. 73–79.

45. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1964), p. 63; British Army Field Manual, *Countering Insurgency*, 3–3.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

47. See Tim Bird and Alex Marshall, *Afghanistan: How the West Lost Its Way* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

48. See *National Security Strategy*, p. 21.

49. David Martin Jones and M.L.R. Smith, “Whose Hearts and Whose Minds: The Curious Case of Global Counter-insurgency,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33(1) (2010), pp. 81–121.

50. Richard Clutterbuck, *The Long Long War: The Emergency in Malaya, 1948–60* (Singapore: Cultured Locus, 2003).

51. See for example: Wade Markel, “Draining the Swamp: The British Strategy of Population Control,” *Parameters* 36(1) (Spring 2006), pp. 35–48; Walter C. Ladwig, “Managing Counterinsurgency: Lessons from Malaya,” *Military Review* (May–June 2007), pp. 56–66; Michael D. Sullivan, “Leadership in Counterinsurgency: A Tale of Two Leaders,” *Military Review* (September–October), pp. 119–123.

52. Clutterbuck, *The Long Long War*, p. 131.

53. See U.S. Army, *PRT Playbook: Tactics, Techniques and Procedures* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2007). For an assessment see James Pritchard and M.L.R. Smith, “Thompson in Helmand: Comparing Theory to Practice in British Counter-insurgency Operations in Afghanistan,” *Civil Wars* 12(1–2) (2010), pp. 65–90.

54. See Karl Hack, “‘Iron Claws on Malaya’: The Historiography of the Malayan Emergency,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 30(1) (1999), p. 102.

55. David Martin Jones and M.L.R. Smith, “The Perils of Hyper-Vigilance: The War on Terrorism and the Surveillance State in South-East Asia,” *Intelligence and National Security* 17(4) (2002), pp. 31–54.

56. The example of Malaya is referenced at various points in U.S. Army/Marine Corps’ *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* and the British Army’s *Countering Insurgency*. No mention is made of the broader legal and military context in which British operations were conducted. In the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* the main allusion to the Emergency is to the effectiveness of the British in developing a civilian police force to function alongside the military, pp. 234–235.

57. Huw Bennett, “Soldiers in the Court Room: The British Army’s Part in the Kenya Emergency Under the Legal Spotlight,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39(5) (2011), pp. 717–730.

58. Douglas Porch, “The Dangerous Myths and Dubious Promise of COIN,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 22(2) (2011), p. 249.

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 249–250.

60. Huw Bennett, “Minimum Force in British Counterinsurgency,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 31(3) (2010), pp. 459–475.

61. See Thomas Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency, 1919–1960* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1990); Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 202.

62. Huw Bennett, “‘A Very Salutory Effect’: The Counter-Terror Strategy in the Early Malayan Emergency, June 1948 to December 1949,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32(3) (2009), pp. 415–444.

63. The formal rationale for the “Surge” was, in President George W. Bush’s words, “to help Iraqis clear and secure neighborhoods, to help them protect the local population, and to help ensure that the Iraqi forces left behind are capable of providing the security,” The White House, Office of the

Press Secretary, President's Address to the Nation, 10 January 2007. Available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-7.html> (accessed 10 November 2011).

64. See Michael Duffy, "The Surge at Year One," *Time Magazine*, 31 January 2008. Available at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1708843,00.html> (accessed 11 November 2011).

65. Aaron Edwards, "Misapplying Lessons Learned? Analysing the Utility of British Counterinsurgency Strategy in Northern Ireland, 1971–76," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 21(2) (2010), pp. 303–330.

66. M.L.R. Smith and Peter Neumann, "Motorman's Long Journey: Changing the Strategic Setting in Northern Ireland," *Contemporary British History* 19(4) (2005), pp. 413–435.

67. See Table 1 in W. D. Flackes and Sydney Elliott, *Northern Ireland: A Political Directory* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1989), p. 411.

68. Early revelations were contained in works like Jack Holland and Susan Phoenix, *Phoenix Policing the Shadows: The Secret War Against Terrorism in Northern Ireland* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996) and Sean O'Callaghan, *The Informer* (London: Corgi, 1998). More recent assessments of such matters can be found in Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (London: Penguin, 2002) and most notably Henry McDonald, *Gunsmoke and Mirrors: How Sinn Féin Dressed Up Defeat as Victory* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2008).

69. See, inter alia, Anthony H. Cordesman, "Shape, Clear, Hold, Build, and Transfer:" *The Full Metrics of the Afghan War* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 18 February 2010).

70. See Mohamed Sifaoui, *Inside al Qaeda: How I Infiltrated the World's Deadliest Terror Organization* (London: Granta 2003), pp. 129–131; Michael Gove, *Celsius 7/7* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 2006), pp. 84–113; Jamie Campbell, "Why Terrorists Love Britain," *New Statesman*, 9 August 2005; Richard Woods and David Leppard, "How Liberal Britain Let Hate Flourish," *Sunday Times*, 12 February 2006; John F. Burns, "Terror Inquiry Looks at Suspect's Time in Britain," *New York Times*, 30 December 2009; Con Coughlin, "Al-Qaeda Threat: Britain Worst in Western World," *Daily Telegraph*, 15 January 2010.

71. "Shape-Secure-Develop" is the British Army's current version of the American "Clear, Hold, and Build" concept. See *Countering Insurgency*, 4–5/4–10. The same objections would seem to apply here too, however.

72. This is a term that has been gaining ground within COIN thought for a number of years. It has been given particular force by Dexter Filkins, *The Forever War: Dispatches from the War on Terror* (New York: Knopf, 2008), and has also been a notable feature of blogosphere discussions. See for example: LithiumCola (pseudonym), "Robert Gates' New Rhetoric and The Forever War," *Daily Kos*, 14 May 2008. Available at <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2008/05/14/515847/-Robert-Gates-New-Rhetoric-and-The-Forever-War> (accessed 25 March 2011; Kenneth Payne, "The Forever War Continues," *Kings of War*, 15 October 2009. Available at <http://kingsofwar.org.uk/2009/10/the-forever-war-continues/> (accessed 25 March 2011).

73. David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 218.

74. Lt. Col. David Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency," Version 2.2, 30 November 2004, *Small Wars Journal*. Available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/kilcullen.pdf>, 19 (accessed 29 July 2011); See also, David Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28(4) (2005), pp. 611–612.

75. David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 288–289.

76. Nagl and Burton, "Thinking Globally and Acting Locally," pp. 135–136.

77. John Mackinlay, "Globalisation and Insurgency," *Adelphi Paper* 352 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies/OUP, 2002), p. 32.

78. BBC News, "London Bomber: Text in Full." Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4206800.stm> (accessed 28 January 2011).

79. BBC News, "Video of 7 July Bomber Released." Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/5154714.stm> (accessed 28 January 2011).

80. "'Why We Fight America': Al-Qaeda Spokesman Explains September 11 and Declares Intentions to Kill 4 Million Americans with Weapons of Mass Destruction," *MEMRI Special Dispatch*

No. 388, 12 June 2002. Available at <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=subjects&Area=jihad&ID=SP38802> (accessed 30 March 2010).

81. Lawrence Freedman, "Globalization and the War against Terrorism," in Christopher Anker-son, ed., *Understanding Global Terror* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 226.

82. Gian Gentile, "The Strategy of Tactics: Population-centric COIN and the Army," *Parameters* (Autumn 2009), pp. 5–7.

83. Celeste Ward Gventer, "Interventionism Run Amok," *Foreign Policy*, 10 August 2011.

84. It is notable in this respect that in his memoirs, former British Ambassador to Afghanistan, Sherard Cowper-Coles refers repeatedly to COIN has having "acquired some of the characteristics of a cult." Sherard Copwer-Coles, *Cables from Kabul: The Inside Story of the West's Afghanistan Campaign* (London: Harper Press, 2011), Kindle Edition, location 4586. See also 4621.

85. Gentile, "A Strategy of Tactics," pp. 5–9.

86. See Tom Englehardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), pp. 234–241.

87. "The Legacy of Lawrence of Arabia," Episode 1, Broadcast on BBC2, 16 January 2010; Episode 2, 23 January 2010.

88. See Jeffrey H. Michaels and Matthew Ford, "Bandwagonistas: Rhetorical Re-description, Strategic Choice and the Politics of Counter-insurgency," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 22(2) (2011), pp. 352–384.

89. Porch, "The Dangerous Myths and Dubious Myths of COIN," p. 241.

90. The classic examples are texts like C. E. Callwell, *Lessons to be Learnt from Small Wars Since 1870* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden, 1895); Charles W. Gwynn, *Imperial Policing* (London: Macmillan, 1936).

91. See Stephen Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute); Max Boot, "The Struggle to Transform the Military," *Foreign Affairs* 84 (2005), pp. 103–104; Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (London: Atlantic, 2006), p. 103.

92. Rajiv Chandrasekaran recounts that a request from a State Department official for up to 5,000 law enforcement officers to train the Iraqi police was rejected because "It'll look like we're taking over the country." Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 93.

93. In the case of Iraq the assumption was that the Iraqi police would remain in post and enforce order in the aftermath of the invasion. In reality, "they fled their stations" as U.S. forces closed in on Baghdad and some "even joined in the orgy of looting." *Ibid.*, p. 93.

94. David Kilcullen for example is on record as having opposed the invasion of Iraq. See Geoff Elliott, "Iraq War Stupid, Aussie David Kilcullen Tells US," *The Australian*, 2 August 2008.