

BOOK REVIEWS

The New Counter-Insurgency Era in Critical Perspective

Edited by Celeste Ward Gventer, David Martin Jones, and
M.L.R. Smith

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The New Counter-Insurgency Era in Critical Perspective pulls together contributions from a range of authors with academic, policy, and military perspectives. Developed in the wake of the American-led invasion of Iraq, the current counterinsurgency (COIN) narrative—commonly referred to as “population centric” or “hearts-and-minds”—identifies civilians as the center of gravity in winning insurgencies. Under this rubric, counterinsurgency experts have advocated redressing popular grievances, providing public goods and services, representative governance, and limited use of force. Such actions, these experts claim, will woo civilians away from supporting insurgents and inspire loyalty to the incumbent regime. Scholars, military handbooks, and media reports have all articulated this paradigm. The book’s editors state that “it was the largely uncritical acceptance of this COIN narrative that forms the background to this edited volume.”

Broadly, all chapters question the efficacy of population-centric COIN. Many chapters focus (explicitly or implicitly) on Western-led interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the approaches, assumptions, and scholarship that underpin them. The chapters are almost universally critical of the current COIN paradigm, but the volume as a whole may be summarized by Paul Schulte’s contribution: Rather

than lining up to spurn large-scale interventionist COIN, “a more useful task is to . . . consider the grave, but not necessarily catastrophic, implications of 12 years of campaigning.” In this vein, several themes emerge from the collected chapters.

First, a recurrent theme throughout the volume is criticism of the current COIN narrative’s technocratic approach, emphasizing tactics over strategy and a conflict’s wider political context (the contributions by Colin Jackson, Douglas Porch, M.L.R. Smith, John Bew, Huw Bennett, and Paul Staniland). Indeed, Porch argues that David Galula’s account of French counterinsurgency in Algeria has been popular with American academics and practitioners who have worked to revive Galula’s work in part because he views COIN with a tactical focus, ignoring the fight’s strategic context. Galula’s account emphasizes the imperative of separating insurgents from the population, and the concomitant importance of not alienating the population from the incumbent while doing so. Delinking COIN from politics, the current narrative “exceptionalizes” insurgency as a phenomenon distinct from conventional war and Clausewitz’s edict that war is politics by other means.

Focusing on tactics, COIN experts lump different types of war into a single category, which risks a strategy/policy mismatch in interventions and prescribing a fixed tactical toolbox to address very different conflicts (as noted in the essays of Joshua Rovner, M.L.R. Smith, and Bing West). This “technocratic conceit,” as Jackson dubs it, may lead to short-term tactical success but longer-term failures in producing stable, post-conflict states. Conflating insurgencies into a single category also undermines efforts to draw generalizations, as theorizing based on tactics is, according to Smith, an “inadequate and unstable basis for analysis.”

Smith further argues that delinking war and politics risks “escalat[ing] war far and above what is feasible and proportional in either military or political terms” and a “perverse predilection for unrestrained grievance settlement.” Moreover, failure to appreciate the wider political context means that interventionist COIN or aid to allies facing rebellion may face difficulties because Western policymakers pursue a monopoly on violence and state-building goals that these states may not share.

Jeffrey Michaels suggests that an apolitical focus is self-perpetuating. Large-scale interventionist COIN entails a large

military presence whose bureaucracy tends to overwhelm all diplomatic cadres, leads to the exclusion of nonmilitary policies, and promotes a tendency to view conflict in military rather than political terms. Similarly, Huw Bennett holds that a technocratic focus on “lessons learned” from operations in Iraq and Afghanistan may miss larger weaknesses. In perhaps an extreme argument along these lines, Bennett proposes that British military policy in southern Iraq “suggests weak civilian control of the armed forces, and the triumph of military amateurism.”

Second, authors throughout the volume highlight contradictions and tensions embedded within contemporary COIN—suggesting that this narrative is intrinsically flawed or impracticable. Broadly, Michaels argues that large-scale interventionist COIN may be a destabilizing, rather than stabilizing, influence. Such interventions can produce local inflation and corruption, and present often-underplayed logistical challenges. Within this larger contradiction, Michaels notes that interventions can foster dependency—even as host regimes and their populations may come to resent foreign intervention, governments may come to depend on foreign aid, and civilians may find that foreign COIN operatives behave better than local troops. Bing West argues that several of COIN’s main efforts—democratization and implementing Western-style rule of law—are undermined by a simultaneous emphasis on host governments’ sovereignty. Thus empowered, such states have few incentives to constrain themselves as Western sponsors might prefer.

Third, the volume repeatedly underlines a larger tension: the ways in which the “liberal strain” in American policy simultaneously perpetuates and undermines COIN practice. The editors note that the hearts-and-minds COIN narrative plays well among the Western public, satisfying a broad constituency, offering a gratifying “story about triumph over adversity,” and a messianic effort to confer “liberty upon others.” This desire may underwrite future COIN efforts, even in the face of a war-weary public and a broader strategic pivot to Asia. According to Joshua Rovner, policymakers may support COIN efforts among allies in the Middle East and Asia, and pursue “future COIN adventures seeking to rebuild weak states.”

But even as this “liberal strain” underpins modern COIN interventions, it constrains historical interpretations and limits policy options, and its elements can undermine one another. Hearts-and-minds COIN restricts the use of force against civilians to the bounds

of liberal democracy. Yet David Galula, author of some of the paradigm's seminal texts, advocated withholding details of COIN operations from the home public in order to preserve support. Justifying COIN under a rubric of human security, the West's characterization of COIN as an "exceptional" form of war may make it easier for Western military operations to sacrifice human rights and professional restraint.

Moreover, for all of COIN's emphasis on civilian-led democratization and security sector reform, William Rosenau's discussion of the "military-police nexus" on the American home front strikes a particularly ironic chord. He notes the parallels in characterizing foreign insurgencies and domestic unrest, such as law enforcement's interest in COIN expertise and military operatives' interest in law enforcement approaches to gangs and organized crime.

Similarly, James Worrall and Matthew Ford note a tension between COIN's ends and means. Worrall argues that "if counterinsurgency is about shaping the desires of the population, then there are two ways to do this: firstly, through population persuasion; and, secondly, through population control." Unfortunately, "perhaps two of the most unpalatable aspects for Western states are the physical and psychological control of populations and the control of territory for long periods." Out of deference to the liberal paradigm, he argues, such issues of control are widely ignored or downplayed through vague language—risking unrealistic assessments of COIN operations and the possibility that governments will look to COIN as a panacea.

Many of the authors note inaccurate and selective use of historical cases to highlight elements of these campaigns that are consistent with the population-centric perspective, while glossing over evidence that counterinsurgents used force against civilian populations and may not have governed as benignly as claimed (for example, John Bew on Northern Ireland, and Joshua Rovner, among others, on Iraq and Afghanistan). Hampering historical analysis in this way constrains theory and practice, and limits policymakers' ability to "reconcile military means, however liberal, with more realistic political concerns."

Fourth, as Schulte notes, insurgency will likely continue, but the contributors to this volume argue that COIN policy and practice need to be re-examined, suggesting avenues for future research and thoughts for future policies. Authors question some of the assumptions underlying the current COIN paradigm or, like Ryan Evans,

argue that these are underexplored. Population-centric COIN is premised on the notion that civilians will abandon their support for insurgents, or forsake political indecision, if wooed with political compromise, good governance, and public goods and services. Yet, in their essay, Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Freidman, and Jacob Shapiro note that civilians' and local powerbrokers' realignment is largely understudied. Moreover, the two instruments frequently used to persuade the populace (cash and bureaucracy) rarely generate influence or change loyalties in ways envisioned. Other authors advocate reconsideration of COIN's assumption that states want to defeat insurgents and (re)establish a monopoly on the use of force within their borders. Emerging and future work has started to question these assumptions, and the demand for outright victory, in favor of a more flexible model of political management.

Several contributions to the volume suggest that American policymakers and academics should seek insight from a more diverse range of sources than those that inform the current paradigm. Several authors advocate study of non-Western counterinsurgency campaigns—in the words of West, the “various means—some compatible with current American societal values and some not—[that] have defeated insurgencies.” Yet, within the West's current paradigm, COIN is tightly tied to issues of governance and state building, and “a great many lessons to be learnt from studying both non-Western counter-insurgency operations and their attempts at state building, especially after decolonization.” Moreover, the current roster of historical writings and cases popularly used to study COIN (inaccuracies aside) are unnecessarily limited. Rovner suggests a turn to other political theorists, like Thomas Hobbes and Charles Tilly, to inform the collective understanding of COIN.

Finally, several authors emphasize that future policy would benefit from pursuing fewer COIN interventions and more limited goals. Porch and Michaels argue that much of the work on COIN underplays its risks. Michaels and Gentile note that a prolonged focus on COIN operations can come at a cost of military readiness and skills needed to fight other forms of war. Moreover, as Ford notes, “there are limits on what an interventionist power can achieve.” Faced with failure of what Jackson dubs the “government in a box” model (in which counterinsurgents' toolkit sets up stable, popularly supported governments), the policy “answer lies in decreased ambition and sanctimony, and an acceptance of increased complexity and

duration.” Large-scale interventionist and population-centric COIN is only one policy option. Many more limited alternatives may facilitate American security aims, argues Gian Gentile.

As a whole, this volume offers an interesting set of perspectives on U.S.-led counterinsurgency efforts since 9/11. Readers who have followed counterinsurgency primarily through evolving media reportage may find more in-depth, chapter-length analyses informative. Those concerned with the future of American foreign policy, and skeptical of interventionist COIN, will find this collection makes progress toward its ambitious goal of recognizing what the “straight-jacket of operational framework has done to strategic thought” and to “restore some subtlety to the debate.”

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A Nation Wholly Free: The Elimination of the National Debt in the Age of Jackson

Carl Lane

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In recent years, federal government debt has soared to the highest levels in our peacetime history. In other countries, rising debt has precipitated economic crises, but these foreign experiences have not yet prompted U.S. policymakers to focus on debt reduction. While policymakers often express concern about the debt, other fiscal priorities always seem to take precedence.

American leaders used to be more troubled by government debt, and during various periods they worked to reduce it. One of those periods was the 1820s and 1830s, as described by Carl Lane in *A Nation Wholly Free: The Elimination of the National Debt in the Age of Jackson*. Lane is a professor of history at Felician College in New Jersey, and he provides an engaging and detail-oriented account of fiscal policy in the early Republic. Debt reduction was a key policy focus at that time, and it influenced many other issues, including tariffs, internal improvements, and the Second Bank of the United States.

America was born with a substantial load of government debt, which had been issued to fund the Revolutionary War. Following Alexander Hamilton’s plan, Congress passed a law in 1790 that transferred state debts to the federal government, creating a total federal