



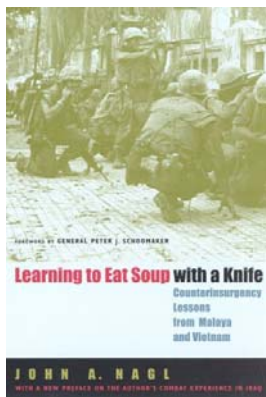
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## Interview with Dr. John Nagl

### Octavian Manea

*“Counterinsurgencies are after all learning competitions.”*



Interview with Dr. John Nagl (LTC, US Army retired) conducted by Octavian Manea (Editor of *FP Romania*, the Romanian edition of *Foreign Policy*).

#### **What is the legacy of David Galula for US Counterinsurgency doctrine? Is he an intellectual father?**

The most important thinker in the field is probably Mao whose doctrine of insurgency understood that insurgency is not a component or a precursor of conventional war but could by itself accomplish military objectives. The greatest thinker in my eyes in COIN remains David Galula who has the enormous advantage of having studied and seen the evolution of insurgency in France during WW2, then spending a great deal of time in Asia, and really having thought through the problem for more than a decade before he practiced COIN himself for a number of years. His book is probably the single biggest influence on FM 3-24, the COIN Field Manual. David Galula is the best COIN theoretician as Kennan was for containment.

#### **What are the lessons of Lawrence of Arabia for COIN doctrine?**

Lawrence is more important for insurgency than counterinsurgency. Lawrence was an insurgent himself. The lesson I drew from him is the extraordinary difficulty of conducting COIN, drawing upon on his own thinking about how hard it was for the Turkish army to confront him. Any good strategist is going to look at the battlefield from the enemy perspective and Lawrence did this. He understood the advantages the insurgents have and the disadvantages, and that is probably the greatest insight he provided to the study of COIN. The other significant understanding is when you are working with a host nation population, either leading them in an insurgency or counterinsurgency campaign; it is possible to do too much as the intervening power. Ultimately the host nation has to carry the majority of the weight.

#### **How important is the developing of the local troops for winning a COIN campaign?**

Ultimately foreign countries cannot defeat an insurgency. Only the host nation forces can do that. But the intervening powers bring enormous advantages to the fight and if you can properly

integrate the host nation forces and the intervening forces you can multiply the effects of both and the natural advantages of both. That is the objective, but we have struggled to do that as effectively as we could, both in Iraq and Afghanistan.

### **What does a Jominian organizational culture mean? And why did it fail in dealing with an insurgency?**

Jomini believed that to succeed in war you have to defeat the enemy army in a conventional battle. This mindset that the ultimate objective of all military operations is the destruction of the enemy's armed forces became the lead motif of the American Army both in the US Civil War and World War II. These were its most formative experiences; Tom Ricks says that the Civil War is the Old Testament and World War II is the New Testament of the US Army. However when you face an unconventional enemy who presents no tangible force to defeat on battlefield, it is much more difficult and the Jominian mindset with its emphasis on defeating the enemy army in the field is less helpful. An army that saw its *raison d'être* as winning wars through the application of firepower and maneuver to annihilate enemy forces simply could not conceive of another kind of war in which its weapons, technology and organization not only could not destroy the enemy, but could not even find or identify him. It is hard to get out of the mind of an army its foundational principles, its organizational culture or what Andrew Krepinevich calls "the army concept." It is possible to change the organizational culture, but enormously difficult. This is something that US Army has done to a reasonable degree in Iraq and Afghanistan, far more rapidly than it did in Vietnam.

The US Army turned away from counterinsurgency in the wake of the Vietnam War, focusing on preparing to fight a conventional war against the Warsaw Pact; this approach played to its strengths and its Jominian organizational culture. Unfortunately, after Desert Storm our enemies have chosen to fight us as terrorists and insurgents, and our Army has adapted to become more effective in those kinds of fights. General David Petraeus has led the process of adapting our military forces to win the wars we're in, and the organizational culture of the Army has changed a great deal over the past five years. There's still more work to be done, but we've come a long way--and we need to do so, as there is every chance that our future enemies will again choose to fight us as insurgents and terrorists until we develop as much proficiency in fighting that kind of war as we have in conventional combat.

### **Could you explain why insurgencies are governing competitors?**

It is often said that in a COIN campaign where the counterinsurgent is losing it is not being outfought, it is being out-governed. The counterinsurgent and insurgent are both competing to win the support of the population. The insurgent has some advantages in this fight; he can use violence, intimidation, and terror to coerce support from the population and he doesn't need to be everywhere all the time. He only has to present a credible threat once in order to coerce support. The counterinsurgent on the other hand has to be everywhere all the time and has to be able to continuously protect the population in order to win the loyalty and the support of the population and ultimately drain the sea in which the insurgents swim. This is why the number of the counterinsurgents required is so great - 50 for every 1000 in the population. These are enormous numbers of counterinsurgents that cannot be provided by an external power. And this is why the

creation of capable, competent well trained and equipped host nation security forces that understand the responsibility to protect population is of the utmost importance. It is not what Jominian thinking militaries see as their primary responsibility, but it is probably the single most important task in a counterinsurgency campaign.

### **How do insurgencies end?**

Insurgencies are rarely defeated militarily. Insurgencies end through political accommodation; some degree of political accommodation is essential in convincing the least committed insurgents that politics rather than force is a viable way to pursue their objectives. Insurgencies are composed of large numbers of individuals who have different motivations and different degrees of commitment to the cause. What happens is that the least committed fighters tend to be peeled away by fear of being captured or killed, by more effective security forces, by payments to join the security forces as happened in during Anbar Awakening in Iraq, by other economic opportunities or incentives. Historically, successful counterinsurgents have defeated their opponents by peeling off the less ideologically committed sub-elements with promises of political progress toward their ultimate goals. As the less committed insurgents are peeled away, insurgencies are boiled down to a hard core, people who have to be captured or killed. Insurgencies tend not to end with surrender ceremonies, they tend to fade away.

### **To what extent is the public opinion a center of gravity in a COIN campaign?**

When a great power loses a small war it does so because it runs out of one very important asset. It's not going to run out of tanks, it's not going to run out of fighter planes, the only thing it is going to run out of is national will. In Vietnam, the US ran out of national will at enormous cost. The maintenance of national support is incredibly important in today's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The primary responsibility of our national political leaders in these kinds of wars is building support and maintaining that degree of national support for these counterinsurgency campaigns that are inherently long and slow and prone to setbacks.

### **Which are the most important principles of the Counterinsurgency Field Manual?**

There are two main principles at the heart of FM 3-24; protect the population and counterinsurgent forces must be able to learn and adapt. In COIN, the side that learns faster and adapts more rapidly usually wins. Counterinsurgencies are after all learning competitions. As FM 3-24 put it: "Learning organizations defeat insurgencies; bureaucratic hierarchies do not". Those are the twin pillars of the COIN Field Manual.

### **How important is it for the counterinsurgent to develop local relationships?**

You win these kinds of wars by drinking tea, lots of tea. Ultimately, to earn the support of the population, you have to gain their trust and the way you gain their trust is by developing personal relationships. You must be more than a uniform and it is important for the leaders to take their helmets off, take their protective glasses off, body armor off and demonstrate that they trust people whose support they are trying to earn.

### **What is the strategic rationale for creating community defense initiatives?**

Community defense initiatives and tribal militias have in principle, many similarities. We have talked already about the extraordinary force ratios required to secure the population so that it feels able to take the risks to side with the counterinsurgent rather than with the insurgency. Acquiring those kinds of force ratios almost always requires the development of community defense initiatives or local militias who secure their own communities, towns and villages. Efforts to create and support those community defense initiatives are an essential component of building a comprehensive host nation security force - from truly national well equipped forces that can cover an entire country to local security forces that focus on securing their home territory.

### **Can an insurgency be defeated by an illegitimate government?**

The good news is that the government only has to be seen as more legitimate and better for the population than the insurgents. And in the case of Afghanistan this is a pretty low bar.

### **What is the future of COIN?**

The Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns are certainly not the model that we hope to follow in the future. In both cases we have overthrown the existing governments, disbanded the existing security forces and created ourselves enormous problems. A better example of the kind of campaign we prefer to wage in the future is Yemen, where there is an existing government affected by an insurgency, it is a weak government but it has security forces and does have a degree of popular legitimacy. Today, we are assisting that government with Special Operations Forces, training and equipment. This sort of small footprint model is the way I believe we should think about the future of COIN campaigns, while maintaining the ability to conduct large scale campaigns, but only as a last resort. In his book *The Accidental Guerrilla*, David Kilcullen argues that our COIN efforts, because of a failure of cultural understanding, have contributed to the creation of insurgents and guerillas. We have increased the number of insurgents rather than decreasing them. So Kilcullen argues that with a light footprint, the targeted use of military force, an increased focus on advisory role, and with a smarter use of economic support, we can conduct COIN using far less American resources while relying on local assets. That said, we must understand that this model might not always succeed.

### **Does NATO need a single, common, integrated COIN doctrine?**

In part what we did with the FM 3-24 was to collect the best practices of American units and spread this collective experience and learning across the US military (including the Navy and Air Force). It would be enormously beneficial for NATO to similarly produce a NATO COIN doctrine based upon a shared universally accepted understanding of the principles of COIN and the problems inherent in fighting this kind of wars. Although insurgencies are different, there are broad historical trends that underlie the factors motivating insurgents. History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes. Most insurgencies follow a similar course of development and the tactics used to successfully defeat them are likewise similar in most cases. This is a benefit that could be

gained when the international community pools together and follows the same set of general principles and works together to some degree of unity of action to defeat common insurgent enemies.

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