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## Thinking Critically about COIN and Creatively about Strategy and War: An Interview with Colonel Gian Gentile

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Interview with Colonel Gian Gentile conducted by Octavian Manea (Editor of *FP Romania*, the Romanian edition of *Foreign Policy*).

**I've carefully read your commentary concerning David Galula's work on counterinsurgency and its applicability for today's COIN campaigns and you seem to identify a special kind of lesson or warning than the ones that influenced the development of FM 3-24: "its tactical brilliance was divorced from a strategic purpose. So don't repeat the same mistake. After all, France lost Algeria". So, why do you think that by embracing Galula's tactical brilliance, we tend to lose sight of the art of strategy?**

That has been the whole problem with the COIN narrative that developed at least in US Army circles since the end of the Vietnam War. It was, and is, premised on the idea that the Vietnam War could have been won by better counterinsurgency tactics and operations. This is the basic nugget of an idea that had a snowball effect; in the 1980s with Andrew Krepinevich' *The Army and Vietnam*, then in the 1990s with John Nagl's *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* and Lewis Sorley's *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and the Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*, and more currently many of the writings of Colonel Robert Cassidy and others.

The idea of a better war through improved counterinsurgency tactics has come to define causation in the Iraq war too. Recent books like Tom Ricks's duo of *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* and *The Gamble: General Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq* and Linda Robinson's *Tell Me How this Ends: General Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* offers the notion of a bumbling, fumbling conventional army that is doing counterinsurgency incorrectly, but because a better and enlightened general comes onto the scene combined with a few innovative new officers at the lower levels who figure out how to do counterinsurgency by the classic rule and voila the operational Army is reinvented and starts doing the things differently. And it is because the Army does things differently on the ground that it produces a transformed situation, as the narrative states. It's the idea that better tactics can rescue a failed policy and strategy. And we see this narrative playing itself out in how contemporary memory has been created toward the Iraq War and it shapes action and the creation of the perception of progress today in Afghanistan. When General David Petraeus talks of the "right inputs finally being in place" he betrays a deep seated adherence to the COIN narrative that better generals and reinvented armies can rescue failed strategy and policy. Unfortunately, upon inspection history demolishes this myth. So my critique of this overwhelming focus on Galula is not that we shouldn't read Galula. Of course we should. We should read C.E. Callwell, Frank Kitson, Robert Thompson, and many others. But what happened in the American Army over the last three years is that certain COIN experts have used the

text of Galula to give seeming historical weight and credibility to the American Army's counterinsurgency doctrine, FM 3-24. It is as if Galula's text offers the secret to success of counterinsurgency if only its practitioners would "get it". Again, remember, that the French ultimately lost in Algeria regardless of the better tactics of counterinsurgency practiced by David Galula.

### **To what extent should Algeria be a warning for present?**

The warning it should provide is that you should never think that improved tactics, whether it is a conventional or a counterinsurgency war, can rescue a failed strategy or policy. Sun Tzu offers one of the most profound statements on the relationship between tactics and strategy: *Strategy without tactics is the slow road to victory, but tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.* Another historical example comes to mind. The German army up to a certain point in WWII was arguably one of the finest tactically fighting armies in history. But it lost. The warning is to be careful how much faith you place in the idea that better tactics can save a failed strategy or policy (or in the case of the Vietnam War - better tactics rescuing a war that was unwinnable in the first place).

By the way, have we lost Clausewitz in Afghanistan? Because it seems to me that General Petraeus designed a highly integrated comprehensive approach in Afghanistan, one in which economical, civil and military resources are all put in the service of a unified political purpose. All of these things were put together in a sophisticated integrated operational approach which essentially is boiling down to a nation building at the barrel of the gun. Can it work? Sure. But it is not going to take a few years, but multiple years, decades. If one looks to history in the modern world when has a foreign occupying country been successful in this kind of nation building endeavor or operation in a similar context that you have in Afghanistan? I keep using the metaphor of a box - the methods, tactics and techniques of nation building that have come to eclipse consideration of strategy and policy. But if you step out of the box of the tactics and operations of counterinsurgency (which it seems that many folks are locked into) and view things from the level of strategy and say, ok maybe COIN can work in Afghanistan, but it is going to take a very long time that will require a huge commitment of American blood and treasure. Then strategy demands to ask the question of this war relative to what the policy objective given to the military by President Obama is for Afghanistan. And the policy objective, the political objective that was given to the American military by President Obama is actually quite limited. Disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda from using Afghanistan as a base for attacks. Our strategy seems to me out of sorts because we have a maximalist tactical approach to achieve a rather minimalist political objective.

### **Galula, Thompson and Kitson defined the center of gravity in a COIN campaign as being "the people". Protecting and controlling the people became also the main emphasis of FM 3-24. Could we find an alternative center of gravity in a COIN campaign?**

Absolutely. Let's go back to Clausewitz. He said that the center of gravity is something to be discovered. The problem with FM 3-24 is that it has taken a center of gravity which could; in theory, looking at the strategy, based on the political objective, and judging the alternatives; be the population. But it doesn't have to be. Let me repeat, *IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE.* When we make by rule the population as the center of gravity for any counterinsurgency, well, we have just allowed the tactics of population centric COIN to eclipse strategy. We are trapped therefore in the tactics of population centric counterinsurgency. To prove how much the American Army has become locked down by this rule just peruse the issues of the journal *Military Review* for 2010 and see how much we have accepted the rule that in ANY counterinsurgency the population is the prize, or the center of gravity. This supreme dogmatism seems to me to preside over the death of strategy. When you say that the population is the center of gravity then you derive a certain set of operational methods. And that is Galula: dispersion of troops, as many troops you can get, live out amongst population, do clear hold and build, protect them, inject energy and resources thus trying to win the population over to your side. The problem is that when you make by rule

that the population is the center of gravity in any COIN then you have no more strategy since you have excluded other options or alternatives for dealing with the instability or insurgency. So our way in these matters is pretty much predetermined. Next stop where? Yemen, Somalia, and sending in the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> to live amongst the population and win their hearts and minds? This is the problem; what if strategy demands otherwise, what do we as an army have in our operational level toolkit in terms of doctrine for countering and insurgency to chose from?

**Why are the core principles of the population-centric technology contestable? After all, they are grounded in historical experiences and validated by the history of COIN campaigns-as the best practices in field. They passed the empirical test in Algeria and Malaya.**

They didn't pass Algeria because the French lost. It's not that you want to devalue the point of not studying them at all - the tactical and operational activity. No. But one must be careful about how far you go with elevating the importance of tactics and operations when France loses a war like in Algeria. And then with Malaya? No. This has been the construction of the counterinsurgency narrative that is premised in a key way on what people think that British did in Malaya and the notion that the British, once they put a better General, Gerald Templer, in command in February 1952, and then he turned his army on a dime and starting doing population centric counterinsurgency correctly (hearts and minds), they focused on population protection, injecting energy and resources and persuasion to bring people over to the government side which in the end, as this story goes, broke the back of the communist insurgents. No. It is wrong. It is not supported by current scholarship or supported by the historical record. In fact the Malayan communist insurgency was broken before even General Templer took command. And it was broken by large scale resettlement of the Malayan Chinese population that severed their physical link with the communist insurgents. So yes the British did win at counterinsurgency in Malaya, but they didn't win through a population centric hearts and minds counterinsurgency.

**You said “the British did win at the counterinsurgency in Malaya, but they didn't win through a population centric hearts and minds counterinsurgency”, but using “the large scale resettlement of the Malayan Chinese population”. But isn't this large scale resettlement in the “New Villages”, a process of trying to control effectively the population, but also one in which at the end of the day, you provide indirectly protection through what today we call “gated communities”? Aren't those “New Villages” an equivalent of what today we name gated communities? And after all what Harold Briggs did with the massive resettlement was not just to cut physically the link between the “fish and the water”, but also to connect the government with its people because the 500,000 Chinese squatters were living isolated outside any daily touch of the government authority. Moreover as Riley Sunderland has highlighted in his excellent 1964 RAND series - “in their new settlements, the former squatters, accustomed to sub standard living conditions, were able to experience for the first time the benefits of government subsidy, protection and welfare services”. Isn't this hearts and minds?**

If you read studies of the actual populations in these resettlement villages (e.g., Loh, *Beyond the Villages*) it becomes clear that the idea of the British using persuasion like building schools, roads and other forms of infrastructure, establishing local governance, etc did not win their hearts and minds. What worked was the “control” of the population produced by the resettlement and the subsequent severing of food links through military operations between the resettled population and the insurgents living in the jungle. If you read any of the well known histories that argue the British won because Templer put into place a classic hearts and minds campaign (Stubbs, Nagl, Barber, Clutterbuck) then it becomes clear that their arguments are that up to the point that Templer took over the British had either lost the war, were close to losing it, or it was stalemated. But then, the better general comes on board, reorients his army and security forces toward population protection, uses elements of persuasion to win the allegiance of the population over to the government and because of these things the insurgency was defeated. As I said,

those things were not the primary cause for defeating the insurgency. To be sure, Templer's arrival did bring about better rationalization of certain British programs and his supremo position did make unity of effort easier, but folks have interpreted the improved efficiency of the British Army after Templer arrives to be the cause of the insurgency's defeat, which it was not. As to Sunderland's excellent RAND study, which of course his focus and thrust was not on the Malayan Chinese population but the military operations that severed the link between the ethnic Chinese and the population, it becomes clear that the British Army did not turn around on a dime once Temper took command but instead had developed the operational framework that would defeat the insurgency, the severing of the food links with the insurgents through military operations, well before his arrival.

The idea that hearts and minds have been won by foreign occupying powers in modern counterinsurgency war is just simply hokum. Yet sadly the winning of hearts and minds is the essential theory that FM 3-24 is based on and it has become the intellectual framework for the American Army. Again for proof just listen to what Army officers say and write; it has become all about building relationships with local populations, gaining influence with them, winning their trust and allegiance. These are all synonyms for hearts and minds. The American approach in Afghanistan is nothing if it is not hearts and minds counterinsurgency. To say otherwise is to not understand the American Army's current and dominant doctrine for countering insurgencies, nor is to understand the intellectual framework of the American Army today.

#### **How would you describe the "BC" (Before COIN) US military culture?**

Clearly, on the ground in Iraq between 2003 and 2006 the American Army was adapting to the conditions and the enemy that it faced almost as soon as the occupation began in Spring of 2003 (Don Wright's book *On Point II* demonstrates this pretty persuasively). So I don't buy at all the whole surge triumph narrative, based on a flawed understanding of Vietnam and an equal misunderstanding of Malaya, that the American Army fumbled in Iraq from 2003-2006 but was rescued in 2007 by a better General who armed his army with a new method of COIN (codified in FM 3-24), the American Army was thus reinvented and because of what it did differently that is what produced a lowering of violence in the summer of 2007. No. To be sure the American Army prior to the 2003 was not focused on counterinsurgency, small wars, nation building or irregular war. That is correct. It came out of the 1980s with a very conventional minded focus and at least at the time that focus made good sense with the threat of the Soviet Union. I acknowledge that. What, I don't acknowledge is that because the American Army didn't focus on the counterinsurgency prior to 2003 that's why things turned out so badly from 2003 to 2007. Again all of this is premised on this idea that better tactics, a reinvented army by applying better techniques and methods in COIN can overpower other conditions on the ground and overpower a failed or flawed strategy. Along these flawed lines there is the notion that the American Army throughout its history has been focused only on big wars and fighting big decisive battles through strategies of annihilation - Civil War, WW1, WWII, using overwhelming firepower. To be sure this has been a critical aspect of American military history. But the COIN narrative has gone too far with this aspect and constructed a caricature of the American Army that it can do only these kinds of wars and has been almost pathologically predisposed to fail at small wars.

History again does not support this caricature. Indeed, as leading American military history Brian Linn has argued, the American Army's way of war is really better defined by flexibility and adaptation. Yet the COIN narrative and the bevy of experts and writers who proliferate it love the caricature of the big stupid conventional American Army only wanting to stay in its "comfort zone" because it offers to them a bogey man to slay through the learning and adapting template. You've heard it, "learning counterinsurgency." The interesting thing though is that counterinsurgency has become the organizational and intellectual framework for the American Army. The American Army is no longer anything close to the caricature of a conventional minded army. It is COIN. But the Coin experts, because their narrative tells them that

they must be the underdog and innovator seeking to break the US Army out of its conventional comfort zone refuse to accept this essential fact.

**To what extent the success of the surge changed the US military culture? What were the consequences of the FM 3-24 on Army culture? David Brooks said in a recent op-ed in *New York Times*: “Five years ago, the United States Army was one sort of organization, with a certain mentality. Today, it is a different organization, with a different mentality”.**

To be sure FM 3-24 has become transcendent within the American Army and beyond to other parts of the American defense establishment. The intellectual framework that underpins FM 3-24 is the notion that local populations are critical aspects and conditions in modern war. You see the same kind of thinking in the American Army’s doctrine of stability operations or in its overall operational doctrine. You see its affects there, but also in the intellectual framework of the American Army, how people talk and think out loud about war and conflict. The American Army has become light infantry. You put all these together and the transcendent effect of the FM 3-24 on the American Army is self-evident.

Is it correct to say that today the US military is a full spectrum army prepared to deal with both irregular and conventional conflicts? A combination between Rambo, Jack Bauer and Lawrence of Arabia - a highly lethal conventional force, but also soldiers that master the skills of diplomacy and politics?

To build on your metaphor, it is pretty much concentrated on Lawrence and Jack Bauer and the critical part that Rambo or Patton should be playing, those skills and core competencies. I think there is clear evidence that they have atrophied significantly. I think that in the last nine years, because of the deployments and the operational demands, its doctrinal framework is grounded on the principles and the themes brought out in FM 3-24. To be sure, the purpose of the American Army is to do whatever it is told to do by its civilian masters. But you can’t organize and optimize an Army to deal with everything. So you have to make choices. Personally, I think that it should be organized and optimized around the principles of firepower, protection and mobility and not around the principles of nation building, stability operations and counterinsurgency. If you have an army optimized for combined arms warfare it still can do other kinds of missions. However, if you optimize an army to do nation building and small wars it becomes much more problematic to step into the direction of doing fighting at the high end of the spectrum. History shows that this tends to be the case: look at the Israelis in Lebanon in 2006, South Vietnamese Army between 1973 and 1975, and the British Army in the second Boer War. These were all armies that became predominantly focused on counterinsurgencies and small wars and when confronted with a foe that fought them in a sophisticated way they had problems and they paid a heavy price.

### **What are the lessons NATO should learn from Afghanistan?**

We should absolutely retain the lessons, the experience, the institutional knowledge that we have gained in the last eight or nine years of operations. But we should be aware of one key lesson: we should get beyond tactics and not place our faith in the idea that improvements in techniques and methods will somehow make the problem of strategy go away. It’s just doesn’t work that way. Nor should we think that Iraq and Afghanistan define the face of future war. Consider the recent artillery exchange between the two Koreas and the potential for violent conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Unfortunately the American Army (by direction) has come to equate stability operations as being equal with offense and defense. So with Korea in mind it is equally important for an artillery lieutenant to be able to drink tea and kibitz with sheiks as it is for him to coordinate artillery fires. At least in part, we have the Army’s consummation with FM 3-24 to thank for that.

**In terms of the lessons learned from today’s wars, to what extent should the science or the art of putting a COIN campaign together become a part of the core skills and competencies of every US**

**soldier? Including the understanding that COIN is not primarily a military activity and as a consequence, as General Frank Kitson said “politics and force, backed up by economic measures will have to be harnessed together for the purpose of restoring the peaceful conditions”. To what extent should this science of harnessing or operating together become part of the US Army core skills? Again, as Kitson said “a key aspect of training and education which is relevant to insurgency, concerns the way in which officers are taught how to put a campaign together using a combination of civil and military measures to achieve a single government aim”.**

To be sure the United States Army and military need to be able to plan and execute a COIN campaign. But it also should have the intellectual rigor and creativity to be able to recognize that some countering of insurgencies or dealing with instability might not involve trying to establish trusting relationships with local populations and winning their hearts and minds. Again, as I said above, alternatives - beyond FM 3-24 - for countering insurgencies must be in the US Army’s operational toolkit so that it can effectively contribute to strategy. Does the American Army today know how to plan and execute a population centric coin (nation building) campaign? Of course it does. But does it have the capability to plan and execute a movement to contact into Pakistan to secure lose nuclear weapons, or to conduct a strategic raid with ground forces into Yemen to punish tribes associated with al Qaeda, or to conduct an extensive occupation of North Korea after it collapses which will require a good deal of fighting recalcitrant North Korean infantry dug in along the way? We cannot organize and optimize for everything; but if we can do the basics of combined arms warfare right at all organizational levels then we can plan and execute the kinds of COIN campaigns that Kitson describes. But if we become too centered on that kind of discrete nation building campaign to the point where our more important skills have atrophied, then we have serious problems.

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