

On the Aesthetics of Doctrine

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It will come as no surprise to the readers of the *Small Wars Journal* that there is a heated and vigorous debate ongoing over the future of the U.S. military – both in its structure and in the missions it will execute. Much like the counterinsurgency conflict it debates, this discussion has highly-opinionated small minorities at each pole with a large population in the center whose loyalty is yet to be won. This paper focuses on those poles, those groups who have been named many things: Crusaders, Conservatives, COINdinistas, and anti-COIN, as a few examples. Instead of yet another treatise on the merits and detractors for each argument, this paper will attempt to frame the rationale behind these disparate positions by considering the world view of these actors. Put another way, this is a discussion of aesthetics with regard to counterinsurgency doctrine.

Aesthetics¹ might seem an odd concept when contemplating any type of doctrine, but it should come as no surprise. Basic-level military science classes often discuss the balance of science and art in military operations, indicating that the intangibles are often as important as the measurable knowns. Doctrine, in and of itself, provides the science, but it is the master who exercises that doctrine in a maestro-like way who defeats his enemy and earns immortality in historic tomes. By defining military matters in terms of art, then the use of aesthetic ideals should not be entirely foreign as a descriptor for such matters. What student of military history does not see the beauty and sublime (as well as the horror) in the battles of yore?

While the appreciation for the beautiful and sublime in the military art is widespread and accepted, the polar elements of the COIN debate distort this appreciation and instead attempt to create the art form themselves through their influence on operational design, training, and force structure. This is not mere policy or decision making, it is the creation of art based on the creators' ideals of what they deem beautiful. The creators use governmental action as their canvas, their clay, and then create something which they can stand back and admire the beauty of and say they had done well. While not inherently devoid of reason or admirable characteristics, this method of doctrine and policy development is based on the biased influences of extreme and impassioned world views.

¹ For the purposes of this paper, the generic definition of the word is intended (of or concerning the appreciation of beauty) and not the branch of philosophy concerning the same issue. While said philosophical branch is not irrelevant to this discussion, it exceeds the scope and intent of this author. This generic definition provides a moderate alternative between centuries of political and philosophical thought on the ideals of beauty and the subjective idea of good taste.

The COIN-aesthete appreciates the beauty of government through its actions, valuing efficiency and effectiveness above all else. It is an appreciation of ways, often with disregard for means and ends. For the truly radical COIN-aesthete, methodology will dictate the resources required (means) and the desired end-state (ends). Contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine provides the perfect medium for this ways-focused world view. Multi-agency counterinsurgency doctrine provides a holistic government solution for socio-political-economic problems. It is government at its best – various agencies working together to solve hard problems previously considered unsolvable, with each agency and actor making necessary demands and concessions in the interest of the greater good.

Of course, who wouldn't want government to act as well as it has in Iraq recently? True COIN-aesthetics does not stop at the appreciation of the methodology, it allows that methodology to determine how government is organized and what types of missions it will undertake in the future because of the overwhelming perceived sublimity of ways. These aesthetes would weaken conventional forces in order to create stability operations forces.² They would engage in operations to exercise these operations for the sake of doing so without regard to the outcome – the ways will create the conditions to achieve the ends. Exercise of the ways is imperative.

Conventional-aesthetes proffer a different world view. For these individuals, beauty lies in the overwhelming conventional power of the U. S. military. They are interested in preserving the force as the only solution to maintaining world dominance. The application of this powerful force is irrelevant as long as the status quo is not changed. They present an opposite appreciation of beauty to the COIN-aesthete: an appreciation that values the means and ends above the ways. In fact, they generally do not find anything wrong with counterinsurgency doctrine and operations, lest the doctrine and operations begin to transform the force which would then inherently risk the United States' dominance. Conventional-aesthetes recoil at COIN-obsessive factions that are marring the beautiful work that has been continuously built since the Reagan administration and has been so dominant throughout the world.

These groups of aesthetes are very small minorities in this debate. But they are, by and large, the end points of a continuum in thought and application on the counterinsurgency issue. The remainder of the population engaged in this debate fall along this continuum. For the aesthete *in extremis*, considerations of COIN doctrine are not policy decisions, they are praise or criticism of what they consider most beautiful. An attack on their views is an attack on their very selves because of the personal nature of the subject. This is, of course, true of any polar faction in any debate, but the discussion of these poles in this debate seems imperative to understand this continuum better. Thus, engagement with either side requires an understanding of its world view in order to foster fruitful dialog that will truly strengthen the elements of U.S. power.

Policy is policy and doctrine is doctrine. Truly effective policy and doctrine ensures balance between ends, ways, and means as the only rational path to meet national strategic objectives. There is much beauty in the actions of government, but government action should not be molded to meet individual ideas of beauty. The end results of this debate will not affect merely one side

² As a side note, the creation of stabilization operations forces does not inherently weaken conventional forces in their ability to accomplish their missions. This references the case where stabilization operations forces could place conventional force structure at risk through radical transformation.

or the other, it affects our collective security. While passion for one's views is laudable, aesthetics should be left in the concert hall and museum, as decisions should be made with heads instead of hearts.

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