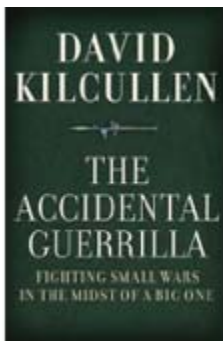


Winning Today's Hybrid Warfare

David Kilcullen, [*The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*](#), New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 346 pgs, \$27.95.

Reviewed by F. G. Hoffman



David Kilcullen's new book is a travelogue of his lengthy intellectual and foreign treks into the bowels of human conflict. These travels have taken him to the jungles of the Solomons to the slums and palaces of Baghdad and Kabul. While this Australian soldier-scholar has already firmly established his status as the age's top strategist and advisor in modern conflict in the field, he owed our community a summative product. *The Accidental Guerrilla* meets this obligation with first honors. Based upon a lifetime of study, coupled with his advisory work in the field in Iraq and

Afghanistan over the past few years, it is a jewel. While David modestly presents many innovative ideas as merely proposals, his composition is in reality ground breaking and comprehensive at all three levels of war.

Kilcullen's book has been described as a "counterinsurgency primer" by one favorable reviewer. Yes, the book depicts a solid grounding in the nature of insurgency, and the fundamental principles of countering one. Yet I think that assessment vastly underestimates the complexity of what the book offers, and narrowly constrains the mode of conflict *The Accidental Guerrilla* describes. Irregular warfare is considered graduate school level material to true students of war because of its unique cognitive demands. Since this book discusses no less than three ongoing complex or hybrid conflicts, which by definition are more than simply an insurgency, it is not simply a primer but doctoral level material. One of Dr. Kilcullen's many talents is his ability to pack theory, diagnosis, evidence, and prognosis in terms that the layman or junior military officer can understand. Be prepared to learn and think when you peruse this book, it will lure you into the growing world of what Dr. Kilcullen defines as *hybrid warfare*.

Dr. Kilcullen finds that our lexicon does not abet our thinking about modern warfare and he prefers the term "hybrid warfare" to better capture the mixed brew of simultaneous phenomena that we face today. His experience and field research led him "to conclude that while many classical counterinsurgency techniques apply to modern conflicts, in overall terms we face a transfigured form of hybrid warfare that renders many of our traditional ideas irrelevant." This mixture of insurgency, terrorism, criminality and civil

conflict is obviously inherent to the facts on the ground in numerous small wars today. Dr. Kilcullen also notes this is not a Muslim way of war but an emerging challenge seen in Latin America and Asia as well.

The book is organized around five chunks. His opening chapter explains his “accidental guerrilla” thesis, our inadvertent creation of numerous fighters among locals with fairly understandable if not legitimate desire to fight the occupier infidel. This is followed by three large chapters detailing ongoing conflicts today in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere ranging from Indonesia to Europe. His strategic way ahead wraps up this incisive treatise.

For someone like me belatedly seeking to understand the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, Kilcullen’s Chapter 2 is ideal. The author painstakingly explains the critical importance of Pashtun tribal dynamics, and the importance of what he calls integrated conflict management. He deftly criticizes the current fragmented campaign, and stresses that rather than solving the Afghan problem by itself, the international community should focus on creating an Afghanistan that can manage its own problems. Kilcullen’s argument for an integrated cross-border strategy reflects an essential point that the Obama Administration’s ongoing strategic reassessment should also embrace.

Kilcullen’s subsequent chapter on Iraq is unique. He gives appropriate credit to Gen. Petraeus for his tireless leadership, energy, and political savvy without being hagiographic or trying to score points with the many factions in the White House, various think tanks or Joint Staff involved in crafting the “surge.” His insights into the Sunni tribal revival in Al Anbar is detailed, and unlike most books of late, he goes into the potential downsides of building up that element of Iraqi society. This “bottom up” approach began independently (late 2006) but Petraeus and his team understood its potential as a catalyst. It was an accelerant, but Dr. Kilcullen also understands the risks taken and it remains to be seen how tens of thousands of Sunnis are eventually disarmed and employed productively.

The book’s best chapter is the penultimate one, titled “Turning the Elephant into a Mouse.” Having fallen for the cost imposing strategy of Bin Laden and turned the *takfiri* terrorists from a proverbial mouse into an elephant, Kilcullen frames a strategy for reversing the process. This chapter deals with the Big War and offers a broad strategic overview of how we need to refine our paradigm about what constitutes warfare. Kilcullen lucidly taps into the ideas of hybrid warfare which we have debated here at Small Wars Journal, drawing on Chinese literature from “Unrestricted Warfare,” and General Rupert Smith’s “wars amongst the people” from *The Utility of Force*. Taking a page from the Western front of WWI, Kilcullen is constructively critical of American military leaders who failed to realize the discontinuities of today’s conflict from their previous experience.

Like the chateau generals, today’s military leaders (especially those who have been engaged in the field since 9/11) know that the environment has changed and our existing concepts are inadequate. But we have yet to fully “crack the code” on the

breakthrough concepts and organizational and technological innovations that will allow us to fully adapt to the new hybrid form of warfare.

To succeed in the big war, he urges the building up non-military capacity for development, retaining our moral authority, disaggregating the hard core from the merely accidental guerrilla, gaining a larger consensus with an Acadia like conference, and understanding the limits of American power. The sparing use of military force is wisely advocated to avoid playing into the AQ strategy of exhausting the United States while inciting widespread resentment.

Kilcullen may believe in accidental guerrillas, but his insights are not the product of providence. The study of the anthropological side of human conflict has been his life's work. His language studies, doctoral work, travels in the Middle East, East Timor, Asia, and Cyprus, are all part of a long journey. He is quite a non-accidental genius, the product of scholarship, serious practice, and no small amount of sacrifice. I have yet to find someone who can produce such an admixture of academic theory, applied anthropology, constructive criticism, and a strong dose of military reality to today's complex challenges. He is unfailingly cautious about getting into protracted conflicts, but offers prudent counsel about the messy irregular wars that are all but unavoidable today.

The Accidental Guerrilla arrives when everyone's book shelves are straining under the load of a market chocked with new listings. Tom Ricks and Linda Robinson's fine efforts come to mind. While these books should grace your shelves, only Kilcullen captures the scope of our present challenge holistically and pragmatically. This is the only way to come to grips with the dangerously complex and forbiddingly dynamic aspects of hybrid warfare. All told, Kilcullen combines unparalleled scholarship in the social sciences with penetrating analyses of military history and operations. While he may be optimistic with his prognosis for events in Iraq, his assessment of how we mishandled the conflicts to date is hard to refute. More importantly his strategic recommendations for the future are soundly grounded in theory and are evidence-based. This book is essential reading for senior professionals and policy officials struggling to come to grips with today's wars—small and large.

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