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A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq

SWJ Book Review by Matthew Caris



A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq by Mark Moyar, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2009, 368 pp., \$30.

Critics claim American counterinsurgency theory has become dogmatic, too fixated on making major political, economic, or even societal changes in order to combat insurgencies. Ralph Peters, Bing West, and others have written that proponents pay too much attention to the “truisms” that pervade FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, and not enough to killing insurgents. This is how Mark Moyar frames the COIN debate in the first chapter of his book *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq*. Dr.

Moyar, a professor at the Marine Corps University, argues that both sides in this debate miss the real determinant in success or failure in COIN: leadership. Contending that insurgency is at its core a power struggle between competing elites, Moyar makes the case that the side that marshals better leadership, as defined by ten essential traits of commanders for COIN, will emerge victorious. He argues the particular tactics employed do not necessarily matter, though he tends to favor kinetic methods over the kinds of nonmilitary means often prescribed by COIN theorists. The book examines nine historical cases: the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Philippine Insurrection, the Huk Rebellion, Malaya, Vietnam, El Salvador, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In each, Moyar examines the performance of counterinsurgent leaders, and how their leadership values (or lack thereof) affected the outcome.

With a few notable exceptions, Moyar’s case studies are well-trodden ground to even a relative newcomer to COIN literature. Yet by worrying more about the performance of various leaders than evaluating particular tactics or approaches, Moyar keeps the reader’s interest nonetheless. One thing immediately apparent is how critical winning over existing elites is to the counterinsurgent cause; Union attempts to overturn the traditional Southern elite during and after the Civil War greatly inflamed insurrection; so did the marginalization of Sunnis in post-Saddam Iraq. Indeed, one sobering lesson the reader takes from the book is a strong word of caution to those like John Nagl, who has said that COIN may require U.S. forces to “change entire societies.” Attempts to supplant existing societal power structures and elites with new, unfamiliar

ones have generally failed. The insistence upon overturning traditional white Southern leaders crippled Reconstruction, and efforts to create a ruling elite in South Vietnam proved intensely difficult as well. The creation of an alternative and viable source of political authority within a society wracked by insurgency has proven to be practically impossible for a foreign counterinsurgent to achieve. Improved indigenous leadership can, however, revitalize a country's ruling class against an insurgency, as happened when Ramon Magsaysay took over as Philippine Defense Minister in 1950, and here Moyer is absolutely right about the importance of leadership. Despite a surprisingly short chapter on Afghanistan, the importance of this lesson in that case is obvious.

Moyer describes successful counterinsurgents as good leaders, and does an effective job of showing how they were successful. Yet it soon becomes apparent that he uses "leadership" as a catch-all term for good decision-making. Making the right decision is chalked up to good leadership; a bad decision, poor leadership. Sir Harold Briggs, despite having many of the same ideas as Sir Gerald Templer in Malaya, was not nearly so successful. Why? Not poor leadership, but rather Templer was given full authority from London while Briggs was not. While technically this qualifies as better political leadership, it seems simplistic to suggest that decisions that facilitate effective COIN constitute excellent leadership while decisions that hamper do not. For instance, Moyer describes how in 1983 El Salvadoran leaders and their American advisers plotted a textbook oil-spot operational plan, yet were foiled by pre-emptive insurgent activity in other regions. Many factors contributed to this defeat, including relative slowness in implementation, over-deliberation, and superior intelligence on the part of insurgents who sniffed out the plan and struck first. It is an excellent example of the many problems counterinsurgents have to overcome to be successful, yet Moyer chalks it all up to inferior leadership. While in the most general sense this is accurate enough, it fails to convince the reader that the specific virtues Moyer advocates are the root cause of COIN success or failure.

A Question of Command is a useful book. The case studies – particularly the first two about the American experience in the South, and the El Salvador chapter – are interesting, thoughtful, and worthwhile. They provide vivid illustration of the many pitfalls that imperil counterinsurgency efforts, and an excellent warning about the dangers of trying to restructure the power dynamics in a society, rather than empowering existing elites. It is Moyer's overall purpose and connecting argument that are flawed. He characterizes the two sides of the COIN debate, and then tries to prove they are both wrong. But presenting the question as one of FM 3-24 proponents advocating primarily non-military means versus the kill-and-coerce "enemy-centric" crowd is an oversimplification. His own argument ("leader-centric warfare") does not seem so groundbreaking an idea. Leadership is recognized as key in all forms of warfare, and while this certainly warrants reinforcement, arguing that leadership is the determinant factor in unconventional warfare in particular is not a novel idea. Much of what Moyer advocates is present, even prominent in FM 3-24, including the elements of leadership he discusses. Moreover, the manual does not present a standardized operational plan for dealing with an insurgency – at least, it should not be taken as such. Written with the purpose of providing much-needed context and a method for understanding the problems leaders encounter in insurgencies, it does just that. Indeed, it encourages the initiative and innovativeness that Moyer describes as the kinds of good leadership the manual does not discuss. This is not accurate, and as a result, A

Question of Command ends up somewhat less than the sum of its detailed and interesting case study parts.

Matthew Caris is a Research Intern with the American Strategy Program at the New America Foundation, where he works primarily on the Af/Pak Channel, a collaboration with ForeignPolicy.com

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