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## An Interview with Peter Godwin by John Noonan

Sometimes the most effective COIN lessons are found in the strangest of places. Some time ago, while researching Zimbabwe's staggering collapse under the Robert Mugabe regime, I stumbled upon When a Crocodile Eats the Sun – a deeply moving memoir of Zimbabwe's corrosive rot, told by native Zimbabwean reporter, Mr. Peter Godwin. Godwin spun his tale with an enviably smooth narration, blending microcosmic personal tragedies with macrocosmic political and economic failures into a sad, powerful account of a functional nation-state's collapse. When I finished reading, I wanted more. Digging into Godwin's Amazon.com author history, I came across Mukiwa, the fascinating autobiography of a white boy growing up in colonial Africa (and winner of the Orwell Prize for political writing).

Mukiwa spans multiple governments in a single country, as Godwin's wonderfully interesting experiences stretch from Rhodesia as a British Crown Colony, to an international pariah, to an undeclared Republic, an unrecognized hybrid state in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, and finally to Mugabe's Zimbabwe. While Mukiwa isn't necessarily a war memoir (though Godwin did spend much of his career as a war correspondent), several chapters are dedicated to his time serving with the British South Africa Police during the Rhodesian Bush War. So poignant were the stories from Godwin's tour, I sent a copy to a close friend serving in Afghanistan. He too was taken with how simply and effectively Godwin laid out basic COIN principles, so much so that he had his NCOs read the chapters that I had bookmarked.

I reached out to Mr. Godwin, now a professor at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, who generously agreed to sit down for an interview. Many thanks to both Peter Godwin and Small Wars Journal for publishing his thoughts in a most-appropriate forum.

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**Q: During the Bush War, you served with the British South Africa Police -- a hybrid unit that was charged with an amalgamation of military and police functions. Given that the Rhodesian Tribal Trust Lands were similar to today's Afghanistan --in that the laws of local chiefs and warlords often trumped those of the national government-- would it be useful for NATO forces to adopt a similar hybrid force?**

I think the key is continuity of intelligent presence. If you have one force that provides 'ground coverage,' starts to build relationships with locals, develops an understanding of the 'human terrain,' they inevitably end up in a quasi policing function, rather than in a purely military one - and that's what you need to win (or even hold) an insurgency war. All this can be jeopardized if

you then send in a fire force that doesn't really know what's what on the ground, and is interested only in a specific mission, and may easily end up causing co-lateral damage that sets back the whole hearts and minds effort.

Part of the problem is choosing the personnel for the task, an 19 year old may make a perfectly good GI, but often isn't yet ready to play the policing function, which is usually better done by someone with a little more maturity, experience, age. But the 'policing' function may very suddenly have to be supplemented by real military know how if things turn nasty, so these guys on the ground have to be able to look after themselves too.

There is inevitably a certain amount of anthropology to all this - but the local people are making also a very basic calculation, one that they are auditing constantly, and that's the balance of fear. However much they like you, however much you're helping out, providing transport, fixing stuff, being respectful of their customs, giving candy to the kids, whatever - they are also deciding who will punish them more if they don't cooperate - and by and large (in both Rhodesia and Afghanistan) it's the insurgents. The Taliban will wreak much worse vengeance on 'sell-outs' among their own people, than NATO will.

Of course, all this begs the main question. What is the relationship between NATO and Afghan forces? The more closely these are integrated, and the better their relationship and comms, then the more efficient you'll be. But there are all sorts of dangers here - for example if the Afghan forces you are working with in a particular location, are from somewhere else, a rival tribe perhaps, that can actually exacerbate tensions on the ground. NATO people need to know enough about the local politics to be able to navigate around it, and sometimes to exploit it to advantage. During colonialism, the British used to arrive in a place and seek out 'the second strongest chief' and offer to recognize him as paramount if he would work with them. (After all what motivation would the most powerful leader have to cooperate with interlopers?!)

**Q: The dichotomy between the employment (and degrees) of violence wielded by insurgents and constituted authorities is a point well taken. Though in *Mukiwa*, you noted that an area in Matabeleland --one in which you spent considerable time and sweat building friendly relationships and sound human intelligence sources--essentially turned "red" after a violent incursion by the Rhodesian Light Infantry. Why do terrorization tactics work to the insurgents' advantage, but backfire so spectacularly when used by government forces?**

Because on a balance of terror, they will always tend to win. We arrest people and put them in jail, the insurgents take much more ferocious action. It's the western paradox, but also it's inherent in asymmetrical conflict. If you are going to lose in the balance of terror, then you have to be able to promise protection in return for support. If you don't have the continuity of presence on the ground to provide civilian population consistent protection then they will feel too exposed and afraid to support you, or be seen to support you. For that you need to stay out among the people, not pull back into secure fire bases, in which you are essentially isolated from the population, and which help to characterize you as an 'invading' force. To some extent the problem can be ameliorated by having Afghan forces, with NATO advisors, provide the

continuous presence, but you still need the muscle to protect them because obviously, the danger of that continuous presence is that your forces (Afghan or NATO) are more exposed and vulnerable. And we've seen that with the increase of suicide bombing, which aims to counter exactly that mixing. In a counter-intuitive way, the use of suicide bombing is often actually a sign that the balance of conflict is against the insurgents. It's an attempt to drive a wedge between the people and the COIN forces, to change the balance of fear audit I spoke about, by making civilians scared to be near govt or NATO forces or institutions.

The situation I described in *Mukiwa* that you refer to is one where we had been pursuing the strategy of cooperation etc, and then a fire force unit of our own side had swung in and carried out a scorched earth patrol against civilians who had, up until then, been cooperating. After that those people no longer trusted us to keep our word and no longer cooperated.

It is wrong to think of the population as being monolithic. Different elements of society cooperate or not for differing reasons, some might be politically motivated but most are swayed by fear or by promises of help and betterment.

**Q: In *Mukiwa*, you describe an intensely personal encounter in which you half choked and threatened a young African boy in order to obtain actionable intelligence on a small gang of terrorists who had burned a white Rhodesian family alive. Though you later seemed to regret your aggressiveness, the interrogation worked, and your stick located and engaged the insurgents. Many soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan face a similar paradox. Specifically, how does one prosecute the enemy aggressively without compromising the trust of the indigenous population?**

Well, good intel seldom comes as a result of force. And even on the occasion that it does, provides only a very short term fix, while leaving behind a toxic residue of resentment that does much more damage in the long term, and helps insurgent recruiting.

Also I believe that the main argument against 'torture' however construed (even before one gets to the moral dimension about compromising our value system etc) is that it doesn't work - the quality of the intel harvested is unreliable at best.

Intel is a patient game. You need locals to do it mostly: tribal militias, 'turned' insurgents, etc. I think the single most important new arrow in the COIN quiver in this regard is the UAV (I have done a lot of work on them - spent time out at Creech, interviewing the personnel there, watching them in action.) They have the patience, persistence, invisibility, continuity of presence, that make them a COIN game changer.

**Q: Putting aside politics, the Smith Government, and opinions on European v. African rule in Zimbabwe -- was the Rhodesian Bush War (from a purely military standpoint) a COIN fight that simply lacked the right strategic calculus, or was it a lost cause from the beginning?**

Well in a sense you can never put aside the politics in a COIN equation - because there is never a purely military solution. The most the military can do is to hold the line to make room for a political solution. Tactically, the Rhodesians had some good ideas, for example they responded to the biggest killer in the war- the land mine - with improvised mine protection to standard vehicles, that included something that armies subsequently seemed to forget - the V shaped hull - duh, (with wheels designed to sheer off at a certain blast rather than deflect the blast back towards the hull) and it pretty much stopped military deaths by land mine (if you followed the specs: speed limit, no loose objects etc.) And they didn't cost millions, a la MRAP.

Rhodesians also had an advantage in that they were highly motivated, as they lived there and weren't military sojourners, just there for tour of duty - in that regard they were more like the Israelis or the South Africans. 'Turning' insurgents was also a fairly successful tactic [see the Selous Scouts].

Rhodesians also faced their own 'Pakistan problem' in so far as insurgents had secure rear bases in neighboring Mozambique and Zambia, so the Rhodesian forces carried out 'external ops' to hit these rear bases. But the solution was always political and we were always behind the curve on this - the 'power-sharing' compromise with Bishop Muzorewa and the UANC was too late - he was already being undercut by more militant leaders and more violent groups. In some ways the South Africans realized this before they plunged into a full scale war (although they had a pretty lively COIN war up in Namibia, and in southern Angola, which I covered) and found the political imagination to negotiate with their main opponents. Interestingly, it was the military who were a prime mover behind this, advising civilian politics that over time their strategic position would erode, and they should negotiate soon, while they could still do so from a position of relative strength. And that's the most the military can do, get their side into as strong a position strategically, from which a political deal can be negotiated.

I think it's just a question of time before we'll be talking to the Taliban in Afghanistan. First we'll make a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban, then we'll engage the 'moderate' Taliban. That was the way we stabilized Iraq, by working with the (Sunni) Awakening, and it's just like Malaya, where the Brits worked the ethnic fault lines (in Malaya the communist insurgency was predominantly ethnic Chinese.)

**Q: Could you draw some (further) relevant parallels between the counterinsurgencies in Rhodesia and Afghanistan?**

Similarities are that both the insurgencies have secure foreign bases (hopefully getting less so in Pakistan, but it remains to be seen if the ISI will really get behind us,) both have an ideological base and foreign sources of funding/support - which help recruiting- in the case of the Taliban they have the whole Jihadist network to plug into. Both are predominant rural insurgencies (Iraq was more town/city based.) But Rhodesians had the disadvantage that they were on the wrong side of history - being one of the last conflicts of the colonial retreat, and that the government was a white minority one, until the last stage of the war (even if the Security Forces were predominantly black,) whereas Afghanistan already has a homegrown, indigenous

government - notwithstanding recent electoral shenanigans. I think the key will probably be something similar to the Awakening- working with local tribal leaders, creation of self-protection militias, backed by an improved Afghan army/police. The imminent arrival of 4,000 US trainers is a good sign.

It's important to stay away from the body count mentality. COIN conflicts are not won by such thinking. They are won by holding territory, and denying the enemy free range in 'liberated' areas. At present, it's my understanding that there are large areas of Afghanistan where the Taliban has relatively free range - that's what happened too, by the end of the Rhodesian conflict - where much of the countryside was in guerrilla hands (though the Security Forces could enter at will - they didn't have continuity of presence. 'Who owns the night?' is the simple question you ask to determine this.)

When I was doing post grad research on the Rhodesian war I came across a wonderful piece of data that -for me- settled the back and forth debate about 'liberated' areas, which the Rhodesian government always denied existed. It was a particularly trustworthy piece of data having been collected for reasons which had nothing to do with that controversy. These were the figures for the breakdown in cattle dipping. The Ministry of Agriculture had an expansive network of cattle dips across the rural areas, in which it was compulsory for all peasant farmers to dip their cattle (monthly, I think,) supervised and recorded and enforced by department of Agriculture staff. I got hold of a cattle dipping map which showed the date of the breakdown of each cattle dip, when security in that area got too bad to continue. It perfectly maps the growth of guerrilla influence, and shows as each area slips from the grasp of the government forces. (This is included in my Book Rhodesian Never Die, a study of the final years of White Rhodesia, co-authored written with Ian Hancock.)

**Q: You noted that during your BSAP tour, you had to contend with two competing legal systems: that of the Rhodesian government and that of the Tribal Chiefs. Though complex, it allowed the traditional tribal leaders to continue governance of their people. Would such a model be useful in Afghanistan?**

Well, one of the big complaints of local people in Afghanistan is the corruption among government agencies, including the legal system (see the recent op-ed piece in the New York Times by Joseph Kearns-Goodwin, an ex Captain who served there and has just finished a term with NATO's directorate of communications.) Rooting this out will be key to keeping the Afghan people on sides. But the problem Rhodesians had to contend with was that they superimposed a western legal system upon a traditional African people, who had their own, different, ways of resolving civil and even criminal conflicts.

The Rhodesian administration took cognizance of this by legislating that, in tribal areas, for civil disputes, and some lesser criminal ones, tribal law could apply, and as such the two systems co-existed. In Afghanistan there is a government of indigenous Afghans, (with their own legal

tenets) not one of Americans - which would be the parallel in this case. However it is as much a difference between urban and rural folk.

**Q: Any final lessons learned that could be translated from the Rhodesian experience into 21st century Afghanistan?**

I think we have to keep in mind exactly what our mission there is - and avoid mission meander. Stay focused on what it is we need to achieve and no more. The danger with any ramping up of our profile, or trying to run the Kabul government by proxy, is that our very presence there can become a further security threat in so far as it is used by Jihadists as a recruiting aid - the presence of infidels in Muslim countries feeds into the crusader demonology. The truth here is that our essential mission is to prevent Afghanistan being used as a springboard for further terrorist attacks, like 9-11, and that it not be used as a sanctuary for AQ.

But as beastly as the Taliban are (notwithstanding our role in helping them get into power in the first instance, against the Soviets!) they are not our core enemy -AQ is. That's one example of mission creep. We have no long term fight with the Taliban as long as they can de-link from AQ. The truth is that both Pakistan and Saudi are more integral to terrorist ops than either Iraq or Afghanistan. And to some extent, lawless places like Somalia and NWF of Pakistan are now the rear sanctuaries for AQ remnants.

As for lessons of Rhodesia? There are some important tactical ones. Take the war to the enemy, harass them, make them so preoccupied with their own security that they barely have the time to threaten ours by planning aggressive ops (use UAVs, as we are, to stalk and strike them across the border.) De-link insurgents from the populace (but not physically, by tactics such as compulsory Protected Villages, which were a mistake in Rhodesia.) Empower local political leaders, however hard that can be to do, and step back wherever we can, even when that means soft pedaling our roles in ops. Pump money into civil upliftment, water, school, roads but then stick around to ensure they work. Don't just build and leave (like the Kabul-Kandahar highway which we rehab-ed and then abandoned.)

I think 'turning' insurgents and recruiting them was a radical and controversial tactic that initially met much opposition among the military in Rhodesia, many of whom were worried that these 'turned terr(orst)s' couldn't be trusted - but in the event there was almost no back-sliding. These operatives - turned insurgents - know exactly how the guerrillas work and were key component of Rhodesian strategy. They can also be used creatively in a bunch of ways to sow confusion and mistrust among insurgent cadres. Instead of languishing in Bagram, and becoming more radicalized, we ought to be retreading more of these guys. Intel is the key to all COIN, and, as I keep saying that requires us to have a continuity of presence in the villages and countryside and the slums. By us, I don't mean NATO troops necessarily, but government forces mostly. The landmine lesson has mostly been learned (late and expensively).

I think the other lesson from Rhodesia is not to throw experience away, to allow troops to do longer tours of duty. It seems nuts that just as soldiers start getting experienced out there, we

rotate them home. Many would volunteer for longer tours (after, say, short home leave.) Give troops more cultural training, language courses. If you think they're a bunch of towel heads, they'll think you're a just a bunch of arrogant armed tourists in return.

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*John Noonan is a national security and defense writer with The Weekly Standard and Military.com. Both Mukiwa and When a Crocodile Eats the Sun are available for purchase at Amazon.com.*

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