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The Cognitive Dissonance of COIN

Right Doctrine, Wrong War

by Jason Thomas

The psychological investment in COIN is now so deep that the cognitive dissonance would be too great to change course or admit COIN is the right doctrine for the wrong war. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that despite contrary evidence, people are biased to think of their choices as correct. Like climate change, so much has been invested in counterinsurgency with huge reputations at stake, that anyone who challenges COIN in Afghanistan could be labeled a COIN skeptic.

No matter how much we try to win the hearts and minds, no matter how many millions of dollars is spent on development and regardless of attempts to improve governance and eliminate corruption, the socio-cultural ecosystem of Afghanistan does not respond to the doctrine of counterinsurgency. While the pockets can be won the heart and minds in Afghanistan will always remain notoriously capricious.

There are many reasons to continually question COIN from every angle, but the two this paper is concerned with are i) whether COIN could be the right military doctrine being applied in the wrong campaign; and ii) preparing for the next major unconventional war – as is often the case in political campaigns and war, we tend to find ourselves fighting on the issues, theories or practices in the last campaign.

This paper will attempt to “play the ball and not the man” by pointing to the range of reasons unique to Afghanistan on top of self-imposed obstacles that reinforce the hypothesis of right doctrine, wrong war.

Psychology of incompetence or dissonance

One of my favourite books is the *Psychology of Military Incompetence*, by Norman Dixon, a former member of the British Royal Engineers bomb disposal unit. It provides an easy to read narrative on numerous disasters throughout military history. Norman Dixon attributes historic instances of military incompetence to such traits as “the ignoring of intelligence reports which did not fit in with preconceived ideas,” “a delusional underestimation of the enemy (a 'magical' attempt to minimize the external threat),” the fear of failure, “an implacable resistance to the 'uncertainties' of innovation,” and other authoritarian personality traits.¹

Much of the incompetence during that period was the result of good old fashioned British stiff upper lip. Before being accused on making anachronistic comparisons, there is no question of the impressive, dynamic, thinking warriors who are defending freedom today. Nevertheless,

¹ Dixon, Norman *The Psychology of Military Incompetence*, Pimiclo Edition 1994

the psychological resistance to changing course either in the military campaigns highlighted by Dixon or in Afghanistan could be the result of cognitive dissonance. The anxiety that comes with the possibility of having made a bad decision can lead to rationalization, the tendency to create additional reasons or justifications to support one's choices. The most famous case in the early study of cognitive dissonance was described by Leon Festinger and others in the book *When Prophecy Fails*.²

The authors infiltrated a group that was expecting the imminent end of the world on a certain date. When that prediction failed, the movement did not disintegrate, but grew instead, as members vied to prove their orthodoxy by recruiting converts. The question for the proponents of COIN in Afghanistan, is are we suffering from the psychology of cognitive dissonance?

In its intense experience of insurgency, the Vietnam War, the United States never managed to make this doctrinal shift. John Nagl argued that at the institutional level, Vietnam can be seen as the history of individuals attempting to implement change but failing to overcome a stronger institutional culture that was predisposed to attrition.³

When you believe in a doctrine that has been resurrected by some of the most significant former and current military and civilian experts in the world, then it would take a great deal of courage to admit COIN will never work in Afghanistan. Again, the key point this paper is attempting to make is not to debunk COIN but to question whether it is the right doctrine for the wrong war. When USD7.9 billion has been spent on development alone since 2002⁴, almost 1,500 international troops killed in action, with deep political investment from the Obama Administration and now the military COIN supremo himself, General Petraeus, is in command of the Afghanistan campaign, then Leon Festinger's book *When Prophecy Fails* is beginning to look like credible analogy for the explaining the intense commitment to making COIN damn well work. The fact is COIN may have met its match in Afghanistan.

This insurgency is not like the others

From the counterinsurgency *Dion* himself David Galula, to modern day counterinsurgent warriors such as David Kilcullen and John Nagl, there are consistent themes that define an insurgency and counterinsurgency battle. Galula asserts the strategically important fact that the insurgents are challenging a local ruling power controlling the existing administration, police and armed forces⁵. William McCallister pointed out that concepts of legitimacy and influence are key components in the struggle between state and non-state actors in irregular warfare.⁶

The flip-side then is that counterinsurgency is fought by the incumbent government or authority and is in response to insurgencies fighting a civil or revolutionary war. In his new book *Counterinsurgency*, David Kilcullen describes "Counterinsurgency" as an umbrella term that describes the complete range of measures that a government takes to defeat insurgencies.

² Festinger, L. (1956). *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of A Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World*, by Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter. Harper-Torchbooks, Jan. 1956

³ Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, p. 116

⁴ <http://afghanistan.usaid.gov/en/Page.FAQ.aspx>

⁵ Galula, David *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory & Practice*; p.1; 1964.

⁶ McCallister, William. *COIN and Irregular Warfare in a Tribal Society*; Applied Knowledge International 2007

Essentially, an established government or authority already exists and is not fighting for its own legitimacy at almost every level of society.⁷

In Algeria the counterinsurgency movement began in 1955 and evolved from the French controlled government side in response to the insurgents, predominantly, National Liberation Front (FLN), seeking independence.⁸ The Malayan Emergency was a similar conflict between a colonial incumbent and a Communist movement for independence.⁹ East Timor's struggle for independence from Indonesia involved an insurgency, growing pressure from the local population and support from the international community. In 1999 the Indonesian Government held a referendum to decide between remaining an autonomous state within Indonesia or independence. Two-thirds of the East Timorese chose independence and violent clashes exploded onto the streets led by elements within the Indonesian military and a pro-Indonesian militia. There have been odd moments of civil unrest, such as riots in 2006 and a failed attempt coup in 2008.¹⁰ However, as with Algeria and Malaya, the catalyst for the unrest was from within not from a foreign power seeking to create a democratic federal model of government and Western standards of administrative governance while attempting to rebuild an ethnically diverse population into a unified nation.

Up until General David Petraeus took command in Iraq, the British had the better track record on counterinsurgency. Similar to Algeria and East Timor, the insurgencies were far less complex and sophisticated than the globalised, borderless insurgency faced today. Past insurgencies were primarily monolithic or national in form. The insurgencies were working for very specific local goals (like overthrowing a local government), and they derived most of their power from the local population. With such a centralized base of power, previous insurgencies were vulnerable to strong military responses and were countered by triumphant British military campaigns.¹¹

Given the background of the major counterinsurgency campaigns that are held up as models for the modern day warrior, it does not take a TE Lawrence to work out that Afghanistan is substantially different. This argument by no means neglects to recognise the behind-the-scenes influence of foreign powers in each of these counterinsurgency style wars.

In Afghanistan there continues to be a substantial proportion of the population who support the Taliban. This support is not necessarily based on an Afghan nation administered from Kabul by a Taliban Government. Just because they support the Taliban does not mean they support nor have any ideas on international terrorism. Those who don't support the Taliban don't necessarily support GiRoA either and display a high degree of suspicion towards the unelected, largely invisible and mostly corrupt Provincial Governors and sub-Governors. Mostly, support is determined by basic human motivations to survive.

⁷ Kilcullen, David. *Counterinsurgency*. 2010, p. 1. Scribe Publications.

⁸ Martin S. Alexander and J. F. V. Kieger, "France and the Algerian War: Strategy, Operations, and Diplomacy," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol.25, No. 2, June 2002

⁹ Joel E. Hamby Civil-military operations: joint doctrine and the Malayan Emergency, Joint Force Quarterly, Autumn, 2002

¹⁰ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/feb/12/easttimor.indonesia>

¹¹ Mackinlay, John; Al-Baddawy, Alison *Rethinking Counterinsurgency*; RAND Corporation: National Defence Research Institute, 2008; p. ix.

As Charles Simpson III observed on Vietnam in his book, *Inside the Green Berets*:

in the dirty, dangerous business of revolutionary war, the motivation that produces the only real long-lasting effects is not likely to be an ideology, but the elemental consideration of survival. Peasants will support the [insurgent] ... if they are convinced that failure to do so will result in death or brutal punishment. They will support the government if and when they are convinced that it offers them a better life, and it can and will protect them against the [insurgents]—forever. Forever is a long time, but so is death.¹²

Given the corruption and mostly ineffective Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP), the only sustainable source of security is US and ISAF forces. The June 2010 report from Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction found only 23 per cent of the ANA and 12 per cent of the ANP are capable of operating without ISAF supervision.¹³ Now that everyone knows the US will begin drawing down troops from July 2011 for an eventual complete hand-over for 2014, protection against the [insurgents] – will not be forever.

In a nut-shell, the Afghan/GiRoA side of the counterinsurgency is struggling to present a safe, secure alternative let alone an independently powerful and economically beneficial central government.

From working with Coalition forces in Afghanistan many troops observed how Afghanistan had become a politically correct war. Ralph Peters hit the nail on the head in his 2006 *New York Post* article when he observed it is hard enough to bear the timidity of our civilian leaders - anxious to start wars but without the guts to finish them - but now military leaders have fallen prey to political correctness. Unwilling to accept that war is, by its nature, a savage act and that *defeat is immoral*, influential officers are arguing for a kinder, gentler approach to our enemies. Much of this is not due to the military commanders but an omnipresent media and well meaning civilian advisors with a Western democratic mind-set.

Wikileaks tapped into this vein by focusing on civilian deaths and casualties when it cherry-picked the military reports from the release of 91,000 classified files knowing full well that this is one of the sensitive areas between Karzai and the US forces. In 1901, Winston Churchill said, “the wars of peoples will be more terrible than the wars of kings.”¹⁴ While Churchill was not concerned with counterinsurgency he foresaw the challenges of implementing war in a democratic age, waged among a civilian population under the spotlight of Western democratic sensitivities.

While entering a village in Waghez District, Ghazni in April this year we came under machine gun and rocket attack. Some soldiers clearly saw two men on a motorbike fire an RPG before they sped off behind a building at a distance of about 500meters. Coming out the other

¹² Simpson, Charles, M. *Inside the Green Berets*, p62, 1985

¹³ Actions Needed to Improve the Reliability of Afghan Security Force Assessment: June 2010, p.2. The report indentified serious flaws in the system the United States has used since 2005 to assess the capabilities of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

¹⁴ Churchill, Winston, Hansard Speech to the House of Commons 13 May 1901:
<http://www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/speeches/speeches-of-winston-churchill/108-army-reform>

side they no longer had the RPG and because of the rules of engagement the gunner in the MRAP I was in could not fire on the motor bike and the two insurgents. Most reasonable members of the general public reading this account, knowing this is war, would shake their head and ask “aren’t the Coalition Forces meant to shoot those people?” If the insurgents had been shot the media reports would have said “two unarmed civilians were shot by US forces...”

COIN's late arrival in Afghanistan

We must also remember that a complete approach to COIN involving military, foreign affairs, governance, law and order, building the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and development has only really been applied in Afghanistan with the full attention of the US administration since 2006-07. Even then with too few troops and even fewer civilian implementing partners who are prepared to get out from behind their fortresses in Kabul. The Rand Corporation in 2007 was accurate and frank in its assessment when it pointed that it wasn't until 2006 that the UK and the US began coordinating Departments within their own administrations; then came the realisation of the need to coordinate between the various governments and international agencies.

The ramification for the military is that an array of loosely connected national governments and their various departments are conducting a COIN campaign. The campaign embodies the same holistic concept as Thompson's approach in Malaya, but in this case each sector is now represented by one or more government departments at the national level, and this escalation of complexity and scale is further amplified by an international dimension. Rand Corporation's constructive analysis suggests that the better coordination on paper has actually led to further obfuscation in practice.

Even now as the surge of US troops reaches its peak the problem is that few of the other departments or countries for that matter are unified in their understanding and commitment to the implementation of a common version of COIN.¹⁵

This internationalised approach to the implementation of COIN in Afghanistan now looks more like a nation building welfare program that the foreign military is being asked to implement throughout the country adding yet another blindingly complex layer of challenges. As Galula states the military's control of the operations would be self-defeating, for it would mean the counterinsurgent government had acknowledged a signal defeat: that it is unable to cope with the insurgency through normal government structures.¹⁶ What does this mean when that military is seen as an invading force?

As Trent Scott and John Agoglia explained the current operating environment in Afghanistan is extraordinarily complex, lethal and diverse; it is more than simply an insurgency. The fundamental failure in governance to meet the needs of the population underscores a

¹⁵ Mackinlay, John; Al-Baddawy, Alison Rethinking Counterinsurgency; RAND Corporation: National Defence Research Institute, 2008; p. 54.

¹⁶ Galula, David Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory & Practice; p.63; 1964

deteriorating situation that is further exacerbated and complicated by criminal activity, narco-trafficking and spoiling actions by third parties (including most prominently Iran and Pakistan).¹⁷

Even if the US and its Coalition allies could roll out FM 3-24 with the tactical improvements put forward in the Scott and Agoglia paper, it is the GiRoA that must eventually take over and contend with an environment that any member of the G-8 would struggle to contain, let alone the second least developed country in the world.¹⁸

Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., astutely pointed out in his 1977 biography of Robert Kennedy, the notion that reforms can be carried out in a wartime situation by a beleaguered regime is “the fatal fallacy in the liberal theory of counterinsurgency, with the United States so often obliged to work through repressive local leadership, the reform component dwindled into ineffectual exhortation.”

It also has not helped the COIN cause through ever changing objectives and direction from political leaders. Eugene Robinson’s Op-Ed piece in *The Washington Post* on 3 August 2010 highlighted a number of confusing directions from the Obama Administration. It is not surprising then that the military are finding it difficult to know what version of COIN they are implementing. For example, when he announced his escalation of the war, Obama described his troop increase as a temporary surge and pledged to begin a withdrawal next July. The administration continues to insist that this is official policy -- but warns us not to expect, you know, an *actual* withdrawal.¹⁹

On August 01 Defence Secretary Robert Gates said "My personal opinion is that draw-downs early on will be of fairly limited numbers...I think we need to re-emphasize the message that we are not leaving Afghanistan in July of 2011. We are beginning a transition process and a thinning of our ranks, and the pace will depend on the conditions on the ground."²⁰

Robinson further highlighted the perverse logic at work when again quoting Gates who claimed that the administration's policy in Afghanistan is "really quite clear." But this is how he described it: "We are in Afghanistan because we were attacked from Afghanistan, not because we want to try and build a better society in Afghanistan. But doing things to improve governance, to improve development in Afghanistan, to the degree it contributes to our security mission and to the effectiveness of the Afghan government in the security area, that's what we're going to do." Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, gave a similar description of the U.S. mission: "Afghanistan has to be stable enough, has to have enough governance, has to create enough jobs, have an economy that's good enough so that the Taliban cannot return" to establish a brutal, terrorist-friendly regime.²¹

¹⁷ Scott, Trent, Agoglia John Getting the Basics Right: A Discussion on Tactical Actions for Strategic Impact in Afghanistan; Small Wars Journal, 2008.

¹⁸ Human Development Index: http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2009_EN_Complete.pdf Human Development Report 2009[(p. 171, 204)

¹⁹ Robinson, Eugene: The No Win War. OpEd Washington Post 3 August 2010

²⁰ <http://www.wtop.com/?nid=116&sid=1655928>

²¹ <http://thepage.time.com/transcript-adm-mullen-on-meet-the-press/>

Preparing for the next campaign

It may seem as daunting as counting stars in the night sky but we need to be planning for the next military campaign to confront an insurgency with global intent. Galula points out that French military history contains excellent examples where the construction of doctrine has been so rigidly retained as articles of faith. In 1940 they duplicated a recipe proved during World War I and fought a 1918-type of war against the German panzer divisions. The result in both cases was disastrous.²²

As with any risk management plan, constant testing must be as important as the plan itself. Intensive analysis and testing of scenarios, developing a deeper understanding of the potential cultural and social ecosystems the jihadists may occupy and the most effective doctrine, strategy and tactics that will need to be applied, must begin now.

If all of us who operate in this space, military and civilian, are honest with ourselves, we must admit the impetus of global jihad is likely to transcend beyond Iraq and Afghanistan. Like any international, borderless movement or corporate brand, it does not rely on a one dimensional front line. Like a parasite, the most powerful and well funded Muslim extremists will move onto the next weak host from which to wage its jihad. Both Somalia, Yemen immediately comes to mind. This is a trans-national movement taking full advantage of the tools of globalisation. Slowly but surely the extremists have gained equal footing on the mainstream media platform and are given free and almost uncritical reporting by journalists. A logical counterstrategy would investigate and focus on the opponent's real source of energy rather than on proxy battlefields.²³

The following are suggestions for improving the adaptability of COIN for future campaigns:

1. Stress test COIN and other military doctrines against a range of insurgent scenarios taking place in potential host countries – what is unique about the cultural and tribal dynamics.
2. Anticipate the next host nations and begin a coordinated, international effort to limit the opportunity for the global jihadists to re-base themselves (Australia has done a good job with its intense support of governance, security and development initiatives in Indonesia) – almost an international version of COIN.
3. Develop sophisticated social networking and internet countering-platforms devised by and run by mainstream, globally recognised and respected Muslim organisations.
4. Intensify the global 'hearts and minds' campaign to convince young, mobile and increasingly sophisticated Muslims that the West is not a threat to their belief systems. This must be coordinated at an international level across governments and non-government actors.

²² Galula, David. *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory & Practice*; p.xii; 1964

²³ Mackinlay, John; Al-Baddawy, Alison. *Rethinking Counterinsurgency*; RAND Corporation: National Defence Research Institute, 2008; p. 54

5. Identify communications strategies and tactics to undermine the jihadists perceived legitimacy in the minds of eye of mainstream media. Every time the insurgents claim ‘civilians have been killed by US forces’ this is treated as fact by the media.
6. Avoid seeking a generic, off-the-shelf, model of COIN devised from previous campaigns to be applied to the next campaign.

These are suggestions merely scratch the surface of what could be done to prepare for the next campaign.

CONCLUSION

We have explored, some may say superficially, a range of reasons why Afghanistan could be COIN’s Waterloo. In doing so the paper stuck to its commitment to “play the ball and not the man” in this argument. That is to say we have not targeted the proponents of COIN or COIN itself as a military doctrine.

We have spent time pointing out the fundamental differences in Afghanistan compared to the models of counterinsurgency used by David Galula and other legends in this field. Not to mention the confusing direction and objectives being set by the Obama Administration.

Add to that the sophistication of Trans-national jihadist movements to exploit the weakness and advantages of Western democracy and globalisation and COIN may have met its match in Afghanistan. Yet, the deep psychological investment in COIN makes it almost impossible to pull back without suffering massive political and military cognitive dissonance.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider the next kind of insurgency we may face and how we may need to confront that war by not only continually adapting COIN as a military doctrine, but coordinated international foreign policy form of COIN that may divert the jihadists launching from yet another failed state.

Jason Thomas has completed an eight month mission in Afghanistan as the Regional Manager for a USAID implementing partner. The role involved delivering counterinsurgency operations with US and Coalition Forces in three Provinces in Afghanistan - Ghazni, Wardak and Logar. Before Afghanistan Jason had worked in the civil war area in Sri Lanka after establishing one of the largest private responses to the Boxing Day Tsunami in Victoria, Australia. This also involved negotiating with the Tamil Tigers and being the first Westerner allowed by the GOSL into the high security zones following the end of the civil war last year. Jason implemented the Kokoda Track Project in Boroondara in 2008 taking disadvantage youth up the Kokoda track with the support of the Victorian Police, Hawthorn Football Club and the Kokoda Veterans from the 39th Infantry Battalion - this has now been adopted by the YMCA as an annual event. He has worked as Director of Research in the New Zealand Parliament for ACT New Zealand, political advisor in the House of Commons and House of Lords, London and as well as being political strategist for CEOs and Boards of Australian ASX 100 companies. He was Queen's Relay Baton Runner for the 2006 Commonwealth Games, nominated for Citizen of the Year in 2005 and awarded a Paul Harris Fellow in 2006.

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