



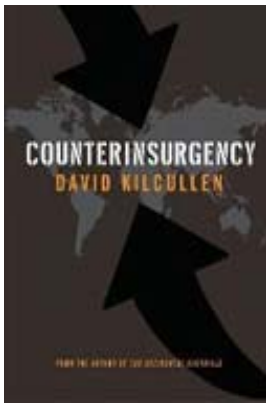
# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

## Interview with Dr. David Kilcullen

### Octavian Manea

*The COIN founding fathers of the '50s and '60s are still relevant, but the practice in the field has moved on significantly in the last 5 years.*



Interview with Dr. David Kilcullen conducted by Octavian Manea (Editor of *FP Romania*, the Romanian edition of *Foreign Policy*).

**What would success and victory look like in a counterinsurgency (COIN) operation? What specific role should the Western expeditionary forces should have in this fight?**

What would victory look like? It doesn't look like victory in a conventional military campaign. Insurgency is much like a disease. It has very negative symptoms that affect the whole of society. Victory in COIN is a lot less like military victory and a lot more like recovering from a disease. If you think about the last time you were sick, you may not be able to get out of bed, you had to take medicine, you couldn't do the things you wanted to do, but gradually you got stronger and you were able to do more. You might have continued to take antibiotics for a few weeks until you were completely better, but basically, sooner or later, you forgot that you were sick.

When we see societies that have recovered from an insurgency, we typically don't see a single big military victory. What we see is a *slow gradual improvement* to the point where a society comes back to full functioning. Now in the case of Afghanistan the problem is that the country hasn't functioned properly for at least one generation. Afghanistan in particular is not a counterinsurgency in a classical sense. It is actually a stability operation. We really care about the Taliban because they make the country unstable. But there are other things that make the country unstable as well, including the Afghan government, the destabilization by Pakistan, the corruption and criminal activity, the drugs. There are a lot of things that must be dealt with. If we were to defeat the insurgents, in a military sense tomorrow, and not fix all those other problems, a new Taliban would arise next year. We must think more broadly than counterinsurgency in the context of Afghanistan.

What is the role of foreign forces? I think that *the role of foreign forces is to create an environment that is conducive to stability and societal recovery*. If you think that victory is when the society recovers, then what we have to do is to create an environment that fosters this recovery. But *there are limits* to what we can do: we can set the conditions for the Afghans to

come together or Iraqis to come together and solve their problems. But the long history of counterinsurgency emphasizes that *foreigners can't fix all these issues. It has to be the locals.*

**How important are David Galula and Robert Thompson to the current “3<sup>rd</sup> COIN era”? And what specific tenets do you have in mind when you assess their role in influencing the current understanding of COIN?**

Galula and Thompson are both what I would call classical counterinsurgency theorists of the '50s and '60s. They were highly influential about 5 years ago in the drafting of FM 3-24, the *US Army and Marine Corps COIN Manual*. The main ideas that came from them were ideas about population security (focusing on the population, building political alliances with the population, making people to feel safe). I would say that today's counterinsurgency has actually moved a long way since 2006. What we actually are doing on the ground is probably a generation beyond FM 3-24. People have really absorbed and assimilated a lot of initial ideas and then moved on. A lot of what we are now doing is focused on issues like rule of law, counter-corruption and governance extension. The other really big departure has to do with local security forces. The biggest development since 2006 has been the Sons of Iraq (95,000 Sunnis that turned against AQ and joined our side). If you read Galula, FM 3-24 or Robert Thompson, there is nothing in there about that. It is not part of the concept of classical counterinsurgency - that you win over and make allies of former enemies. The experience of Anbar Awakening, in particular, and the experience we've had in issues like rule of law have taken us another generation beyond. *Galula and Thompson remain extremely important as foundational pillars of classical COIN theory, but the practice in the field has moved on significantly in the last 5 years.*

**One of the key quotes in your book *Counterinsurgency* is that of Bernard Fall's: *A counterinsurgent that is losing is not outfought, but out-governed. Is the ability of providing governmental services the right metric to assess winning in a COIN campaign? How do you win a governance contest?***

*Governance is extremely important in pretty much every counterinsurgency. But how it needs to be addressed is different from campaign to campaign.* In the case of Afghanistan, for example, ISAF still has in its campaign plan the statement that the aim is to extend the reach of the Afghan government. But the problem with the Afghan government is not that it doesn't have the reach but that it is corrupt and oppressive. In fact the better you do at the strategy of extending the reach of an oppressive government, the worse the situation can get. What I have been arguing for years is that we need to change the focus of governance in Afghanistan; away from extending the reach of the Afghan government towards reforming it. What we need is a process of governmental reform, noting that we were responsible for a lot of the problems that are on the ground. We have to deal with this problem. If you are going to succeed in the COIN governance contest, you have to deliver to the people legitimate, responsive, just and effective government. It is not enough to be effective but not just. You got to be just. Justice, or fairness, is probably right now the most important aspect for the Afghan population. People are not happy with the Taliban, but they do see them as more fair and just than the Afghan government. And that is a very significant problem for us.

**How would you assess the Marjah operation? There are a many critics who say the failure of “in box government” is a symptom of a larger failure-of the whole Obama surge and strategy.**

It is *too early to say if the surge is a failure or not*. But Marjah in itself as an operation is a lesson in how important just and effective governance is and how important is that the government has to be locally legitimate. *It is not enough to have somebody in place we think as legitimate, it has to be someone the local people respect and believe will look after their interests*. A lot of people start their assessment of Marjah from a period of two years ago when it was a stronghold of the Taliban. But they are actually forgetting chapter one of the story - that Marjah was held by the government until 2008. The government was so oppressive, so abusive to the population that the town elders got together, banished the government officials from their own village and then invited the Taliban in. So the root of the problems in Marjah is not the Taliban. They are the symptom, they came later. The root of the problem is bad, oppressive government behavior by the Afghan government officials. When we went in Marjah and drove the Taliban away, that wasn't the end of the operation, that was the beginning and what the population was looking to see was – are we going back to the same oppressive governance from the Afghan government that we had before the Taliban or are we going to have a better solution? I don't think that we have offered them a better solution. The military side of the operation has gone actually very well. But it is a symptom of the broader issue - that military operations in counterinsurgency are actually not central. *Governance, legitimacy, effectiveness are central and if you don't have that piece then it doesn't matter how good you are on the military side*. We are back at the Bernard Fall - “a government that is losing is not outfought, is out-governed”. I would argue that we are not losing in Afghanistan, but we are certainly being out-governed right now. We need to change that or we will lose.

**Under what tactical conditions could we see a community or a village choosing or flipping a side? What are the core driving motivations?**

We see a number of different population survival strategies in insurgency environments. They are surrounded from all sides by threats and by people demanding their allegiance - and willing to hurt them if they don't get their allegiance. What they are looking for is a consistent predictable system which gives them order, allows them to be safe; they are looking for a space within that system – in which they believe that if they are following the rules we set, they are going to be safe. I describe this as a theory of normative systems in counterinsurgency - a system of rules plus punishments. Legal systems or road rules are an example. You launch yourself on a highway and even if at times the road is chaotic you are confident to drive that route because you know the rules of the road, as everybody does. That is *a normative system*. There are the rules of the road that make you feel safe, even if you don't particularly like the police. Who is enforcing the rules is a separate issue from what the rules are. The rules make you to feel safe even if you don't like the person who is enforcing them. We see this all the time with organizations like Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah and the Taliban. *The population wants predictability, order and safety and that safety comes from knowing where you stand and knowing that if you do this or don't do this, following the rules, you will be safe*. Even if they don't like Hezbollah or the Taliban in particular, they still feel safer living within the set rules. So, creation of safety it is a lot about predictability, consistency, and reliability.

**An iconic image for your latest book is that of Deiokes (first king of the Medes according to Herodotus). What could Deiokes teach us regarding COIN?**

Deiokes is most likely a person from the Kurdish area of Iraq. I've used Deiokes as an example of *how the rule of law and the administration of justice at the local level are fundamental for the process of state building*. Deiokes is a story about how a local tribal elder becomes powerful in his own area, by mediation and dispute resolution, and issuing judgments that gain the support of population. He then expands, using the court systems, to gain control of the whole of society and eventually becomes the ruler, the king. The historical accuracy of the story is debated but the pattern is something we see repeatedly, particularly in places like Somalia, Iraq, or Afghanistan.

In the *Counterinsurgency* I used the example of the Taliban as they are also doing bottom up dispute resolution – a mediation program with villages – as well as gaining political authority over a particular society by administering justice and applying law. That is very powerful. The means by which insurgents gain authority is creating a consistent set of rules for the population. We too need to compete in that area and rule of law - with a predictable and consistent program of ordered expectations that allow people to plan and experience predictability. That is fundamental to a functioning society. Rule of law is one of the critical foundations of social order. We can't just let the Taliban have the field. We can't surrender that area of activities to them. We typically have done that, mainly because we focusing at the national level and trying to create national-level institutions, but actually the rule of law, the function of the rule of law happens at the local level, it is community based. The Taliban are displacing us at the local-level because that is the level they are focusing on. We need to put much more emphasis into local-level rule of law. The Taliban are running rings around us in this regards.

**What does the historical record of past insurgencies tell us? Is there any common pattern?**

There are approximately 385 examples of counterinsurgency efforts across the world since the end of the Napoleonic wars. This gives us enough research data on which we can make some judgments about particular trends and enduring themes. One is that the government usually wins. In about 80% of cases the insurgent loses and the government wins. That said, if you look at examples where the government wins you usually find two common features - first, it is usually a government that is fighting in its own country (it is not an expeditionary, interventionist third party) – and second - it is almost always a government that is willing to negotiate. Insurgency is about motivating a large number of people, sometimes millions of peoples, over decades, to take action on grievances to fight the government. You cannot motivate millions of people for decades with false grievances. The grievances have to be real. So you've got to deal with those grievances. If you do not deal with them, the historical record shows that you are much less likely to succeed. My numbers are: if you are fighting in your own country and you are willing to negotiate with the enemy you have about 80% chance of success. If you are fighting in somebody else's country and you are not willing to negotiate you have only 20% chance of success.

## **How powerful should the counterinsurgent be in order to compel the insurgent to negotiate?**

A counterinsurgent needs to convince the insurgent they are better off negotiating than continuing the fight. So it is about convincing the adversary that the insurgency will not attain strategic objectives. You can't get there using insurgency alone. Sometimes you can do that through a combination of negotiation and targeted violence against the insurgency. Usually we don't get there just through violence. It is usually a combination. In my experience insurgents keep fighting for decades until they believe they have a better option than fighting. A solely coercive approach can drive the insurgency to a point where it's reduced but that doesn't fix the problem. You have to deal with the underlying causes - the political grievances. The role of the military is to create conditions under which negotiations become possible. But negotiation in itself is the key activity.

## **Which is the strategic rationale for creating local defense initiatives, local concerned citizens?**

I wouldn't call it strategic rationale so much as strategic arithmetic. Let's imagine that we could have put 50,000 additional US troops into Iraq during the 2007 surge - we couldn't because we didn't have the capacity. But let's imagine that we could. By the time the 50,000 troops arrive in the country you will lose about 20,000 troops (about 40% of the troops will be focused on a non-combat role, headquarters, and logistics and so on). And if you put them in a rotational plan you will only have 10,000 people on the ground at any one time. The return of your investment, if you like, is only 10,000 people. You balance this investment with recruiting 50,000 Iraqis. If you recruit 50,000 Iraqis you don't have any logistic functions to worry about. You don't have a rotational plan because they already live in the environment; they are all out there at any one time. So you have all the 50,000 available at any one time. They have all the families out there so you can leverage a huge network, probably four or five times the size of the people that are working for you, reporting and letting you know what is happening. And most importantly those people that are actually working for you used to be in the recruiting base for the enemy. But now they are in your recruiting base. So at the end of the day you have taken people away from the enemy while putting them in your camp.

On one hand we deploy 50,000 western troops and we have a benefit of 10,000. We deploy the same number of local troops and you have a benefit of at least ten times. It is strategic arithmetic as much as a strategic rationale. If you want to have enough people on the ground to understand the environment, to make it secure, working with local people it is much more effective by magnitudes than working with foreign troops. But you need to do this with clear safeguards, because they could suck the oxygen away from the legitimate national government. What we found, both in Iraq and Afghanistan, you have to have really robust safeguards in place to make sure that you have a demobilization plan, a plan for linking them up under the authority of the local government. You have to have all these things in place. If you don't, it can be potentially very dangerous. It's like taking a powerful medicine without the right precautions.

## **What is the decisive terrain for an insurgent?**

The decisive terrain for an insurgent is the population. I am thinking of an insurgency like being like an iceberg - only the top 10% of an iceberg is above waterline, only about 10% of an insurgency are the fighters, the command group and the planners. The actual base of the insurgency (the other 90% of the iceberg that is underwater) is the population group. The ability to manipulate and mobilize and organize that group is the fundamental thing in an insurgency. Fighting the insurgent guerillas without dealing with the population base is like shaving the top of an iceberg-it is not going away.

## **Are the two surges, in Iraq and Afghanistan, comparable in any sense?**

Strategically yes. Operationally they are quite different. In Iraq we put five brigades into an area that consisted of Baghdad and the areas around the city. So it was a very small geographical area that saw a very quick build-up of troops. In Afghanistan we are doing a slow build-up of troops, over a long period of time in a much wider area. I think that the timeline is an extremely negative element of the Obama's surge. To a certain extent we are cutting our own throat by telling everybody that we are going to pull out starting next year. And the Taliban have been exploiting this heavily. We really must convince the locals that we are going to stick around for the long term. If somebody knows that you are leaving there is no way that they are going to put their lives in your hand, literally when they know that next year you are gone.

*David Kilcullen is President and Chief Executive Officer of the Caerus Associates a Washington D.C.-based firm specialized in providing creative, innovative and often counter-intuitive solutions to the world's hardest problems: poverty, disease, violent conflict, humanitarian assistance, energy shortage and climate change. He was Special Adviser for Counterinsurgency to the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice. He served in the Iraq war as a Senior Counterinsurgency Adviser to General David Petraeus during the successful 2007 "surge" and in Afghanistan as counterinsurgency adviser to the International Security Assistance Force during 2009-2010. He was a member of the White House review of Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy in 2008, and has advised the highest levels of the Bush and Obama administrations, as well as several allied governments. He is a Senior Non-Resident Fellow of the Center for a New American Security and is the author of numerous scholarly articles and books, including The Accidental Guerrilla (2009), Counterinsurgency (2010) and Out of the Mountains (forthcoming in 2011), all from Oxford University Press.*

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).

Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our [Terms of Use](#). We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: [comment@smallwarsjournal.com](mailto:comment@smallwarsjournal.com)

Visit [www.smallwarsjournal.com](http://www.smallwarsjournal.com)

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here](#).