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A Civilian's Comprehensive Critique of the U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual...In 5-6 Pages

by Braden Civins

The *U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, published in 2006, quickly became doctrine for the U.S. armed forces.¹ While the manual has its share of detractors, even its fiercest critics acknowledge that it is regarded as “transcendent” and has “become the defining characteristic of the...new way of war.”² This critique (1) explores the validity of a key assumption underlying the manual; (2) analyzes specific guidance offered as a result of that assumption; and (3) argues that the manual makes a significant omission of no small consequence.

The manual's primary assumption appears on its first page: “[a]chieving victory...depends on a group's ability to mobilize support for its political interests.”³ The population, then, is the center of gravity in COIN. The population-centric strategy accords with the conclusions of preeminent asymmetric warfare scholars such as Mao Zedong and David Galula; and the historical case studies described in the manual support the argument that COIN should be oriented towards winning “hearts and minds” through increased reliance on soft power (e.g., strengthening host nations, creating freedom of movement, providing stability, etc.). However, the manual advocates the population-centric approach as the only path to success and does not consider the merits of alternative strategies,⁴ thereby assuming, rather than proving, its primacy.

As a strong critic of population-centric COIN, Gian Gentile argues that the new approach to combating insurgency puts undue limitations on combat strategy.⁵ The manual is an intellectual straightjacket, and it precludes counterinsurgents from considering alternative, limited ways for combating insurgencies.”⁶ Gentile argues that turning away from reliance on hard power will cause U.S. forces to lag in their ability to conduct conventional combat operations. As support for this premise, Gentile cites the COIN-focused Israelis' sub-par

¹ Gian Gentile, *A Strategy of Tactics: Population-centric COIN and the Army*, U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE QUARTERLY, Volume XXXIX, No. 3, Autumn 2009, at 5.

² *Id.*

³ DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY, THE U.S. ARMY/MARINE CORPS COUNTERINSURGENCY FIELD MANUAL 1 (The University of Chicago Press Edition) (2007) [hereinafter referred to as COIN MANUAL].

⁴ Gentile, *supra* note 1, at 11 (concluding that the manual “offers no other alternatives, no other strategies or methodologies” aside from the population-centric approach).

⁵ See *supra*, note 1, at 5-10.

⁶ See generally *id.*

performance against Lebanon in 2008 as evidence.⁷ He also suggests that the manual's case studies are too narrow a sample to be conclusive.⁸

In another iteration of this criticism, one soldier, using Operation Iraqi Freedom as a model, concludes that, “[w]ithout the hard-fought, highly kinetic gunfights that took and held the initial lodgments in insurgent territory, the ability to introduce legitimate authority” and earn the population’s loyalty, would not have occurred.⁹ The author draws a distinction between those soldiers, like him, who endured hard fighting at the conflict’s outset and witnessed the necessity of kinetics and those that arrived later, trained in the use of soft power and convinced that success in Iraq hinged primarily on its use.

The most compelling case study supportive of a kinetics-based, or arguably a separate and discrete coercive approach that nonetheless relies heavily on kinetics, is the Sri Lankan annihilation of the Tamil Tigers, or LTTE. With a resolute political will, a “go to hell” disregard for the international community’s entreaties for peace, an unwillingness to negotiate with the enemy, and the successful exclusion of international media, President Mahinda Rajapakse managed a campaign that brought a decisive end to a conflict that had claimed over 70,000 lives.¹⁰ The LTTE, who formerly controlled an area of 15,000 square km., were largely destroyed by the Sri Lankan military’s offensive.

The Sri Lankan case study and withering criticism from kinetics-oriented scholars, however, do not expose fundamental flaws in the manual. In fact, the manual is not inherently incompatible with a kinetics-based approach. After all, the manual acknowledges that any COIN strategy requires operational flexibility, which begins with understanding the specific circumstances of a particular mission.¹¹ Accepting the “varied and adaptive” nature of insurgent warfare dissuades COIN practitioners from adopting the type of rigid approach Gentile claims the manual espouses.¹²

The manual’s brilliance is that it uses broad generalities in laying out principles of COIN operations, and hedges against unforeseeable exigencies by noting that soldiers must “be ready both to fight and to build—depending on the security situation and a variety of other factors.”¹³ It offers counterinsurgents broad discretion to find the “exact mix” of “offensive, defensive, and stability operations,” needed to achieve strategic objectives—at no point does it decry the use of kinetics.¹⁴ Rather, it advocates intelligent uses of force, characterized by the employment of a balancing test to weigh the benefit to be gained through fire against its potential consequences.

Where the manual does take a clear stance and provide specific guidance, moreover, it does so based on sound policy, legal, and practical considerations. For example,

⁷ *Id.* at 14.

⁸ *Id.* at 11.

⁹ Lt. Col. Mike Grice, *In Defense of Kinetics*, ARMED FORCES JOURNAL, March 2009 available at <http://www.afji.com/2009/03/3934457>.

¹⁰ VK Shashikuma, *Lessons from the War in Sri Lanka*, INDIAN DEFENCE REVIEW, Vol. 24.3, July-Sep. 2009.

¹¹ See COIN MANUAL, *supra* note 3, at 6.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.* at 34.

¹⁴ *Id.* (stating “[a]t the beginning of a COIN operation, military actions may appear predominant as security forces conduct operations to secure the populace and kill or capture insurgents; however, political objectives must guide the military’s approach”).

with respect to information operations, the manual's instruction to "manage information and expectations" represents not only a cautious and shrewd approach to preventing disillusionment among the host nation populace, but also a recognition of the widespread availability of information due to communications technology and media presence in combat zones.¹⁵ U.S. forces are constantly held to account for promises made, as the international community and media closely scrutinize U.S. activity.

The manual also offers specific guidance on the appropriate use of force. Such guidance serves a dual-purpose: ensuring soldiers' actions comport with the laws of armed conflict and minimizing any negative impact such actions have on the populace. For example, when calling for air support, the manual instructs commanders to "weigh collateral damage against the unintended consequences of taking no action."¹⁶ This instruction seeks to limit insurgents' ability to use as propaganda inevitable civilian casualties and it also accords with the international humanitarian law principle of "proportionality,"¹⁷ applicable in international and non-international armed conflict.

These instructions reflect policy and legal limitations that did not apply to the Sri Lankan campaign against the LTTE. It is practically and politically infeasible to prohibit media access to Iraq or Afghanistan, whereas the Sri Lankan government garners negligible media attention compared to the U.S., conducts operations within its own borders, and exerts significant control over a limited battle space. Moreover, a "take no prisoners" strategy, if applied by U.S. forces, would engender contempt from the international community as well as the host nation. The eradication of the LTTE was possible largely due to the unique circumstances of that conflict.

The assumption of the population-centric strategy's desirability, then, is more accurately characterized as a recognition of the various constraints imposed upon any major U.S. military action. "Hearts and minds" may not be perfect, but it represents a more nuanced approach than the more coercive, kinetics-heavy models promoted by the manual's critics. The manual is certainly not, as Gentile argues, restrictive in and of itself. Kinetics are still very much on the table—although, as noted earlier, they are to be employed with care and diligence. While the manual is not as limiting as its detractors argue, it is, however, conspicuously silent on a challenging and controversial issue.

The manual describes, in broad strokes, the relationship between insurgency and criminality. It notably does not provide guidance for addressing the farming of crops that serve as precursors to narcotics. Any population-centric strategy intent on developing host nation security and stability will necessarily have a substantial economic component. Given the pervasiveness of narcotics in areas of high insurgent activity, the often inextricable link among poppy, coca, and marijuana farmers and insurgents, U.S. historical opposition to narcotics, and the absence of a robust CN international legal regime to inform policy, there is little clarity on how to approach this issue. While the manual empowers field commanders to develop innovative solutions to a range of complex situations, it fails to do so in an area where

¹⁵ *Id.* at 44.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 365.

¹⁷ Rod Powers, *Law of Armed Conflict*, (noting that, under Geneva, proportionality requires a balancing test between the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated by attacking a legitimate military target and the expected incidental civilian injury or damage. Under this balancing test, excessive incidental losses are prohibited. It should also be noted that detention policy and detainee treatment practices found in the manual similarly map onto the language found in Geneva) *available at* <http://usmilitary.about.com/cs/wars/a/loac.htm>.

commanders' legitimate concerns regarding exposure to criminal liability, either under U.S. or international law, could significantly hinder the achievement of operational objectives. Establishing a paradigmatic approach replete with guidance and options for responsive action to the varied challenges posed by the narcotics trade should be regarded as no less than an operational necessity.

Braden Civins, a native Texan, is in his fourth and final year of study at The University of Texas, pursuing a J.D. from The School of Law and a Master of Global Policy Studies, with a specialization in Security Studies, from the L.B.J. School of Public Affairs. At the law school, he is a member of the Texas International Law Journal and former participant in the National Security Clinic, where he co-authored an ultimately successful appellate brief on behalf of a Guantanamo Bay detainee. During the academic year, he works as a student employee of the Robert S. Strauss Center for International Security and Law. He spent recent summers working at the Criminal Prosecutions Division of the Texas Attorney General's Office, the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, and the Department of State.

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