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Deciphering Shades of Gray: Understanding Counterinsurgency

by Jon Mikolashek and Sean N. Kalic

There is a current trend in the United States Army, advocated by some officers, that population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN) theory should be the sole focus of their intellectual pursuits. Nicknamed COINistas by friend and foe alike, COINistas concern themselves with how and why insurgencies emerge. While this trend is understandable considering their numerous deployments in counterinsurgency environments, from an academic perspective they are narrowly focused and tend toward formulaic solutions. This means that they use their battlefield experience combined with recent and shallow knowledge gleaned from several popular counterinsurgency studies to produce a simplified “strategy” for the current fight.¹ The problem with this “solution” is that it overlooks the true complexity of the counterinsurgency fight by fixating on finding a simple solution. Our proposal is that there is a better way to understand counterinsurgency that will benefit the United States Army and the nation. The Army as an institution and these experienced and valiant, noble officers must incorporate more history into their critical thinking and study of insurgencies.

Our students possess an enormous amount of experience in the field- ranging from one to six deployments to Afghanistan, Iraq, the Philippines, and the Horn of Africa where they served honorably. However, despite their experiences, we at the United States Army Command and General Staff College are observing a disturbing trend. Nearly ninety percent of the officers at our school are lacking the proper understanding of history to allow them to merge their theory and practice.

Experience is important to any soldier. Soldiers, no matter where they stand in the counterinsurgency debate, have learned from their numerous deployments. However, they have not been willing nor have had the time to sit back and critically analyze their experience. More importantly, they lack an understanding of the historical material and issues that are at the heart of the insurgencies. This intellectual deficiency has created a major problem for the United States Army and its current counterinsurgency doctrine, especially in regards to followers of population-centric counterinsurgency. This failure of thinking leads to limited discussion or an outright disregard for any other thoughts or opinions that contradict their ideas. Too often soldiers rely on their personal experience and a small, overly hyped, sample of readings to inform their decisions. They believe they have discovered a magic counterinsurgency formula, when in reality they merely cherry-pick the same quotations and ideas that superiors have advocated. This creates a very narrow-minded counterinsurgent. Take for instance, our

¹John A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, (Westport, Prager), 2002; David Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 2009.

observations of U.S. Army Majors at the US Army's Command and General Staff College as they work through case studies on Algeria, the Philippines, and the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan; they only draw large generalizations about how to stop an insurgency. While their zeal and commitment are commendable, these presentations and discussions lack a contextual understanding of how to analyze and use historical context to influence decision making. They become just another brief, without any recognition of the significance of misapplying the "lessons learned." This oversight places the United States Army at a serious disadvantage, when thinking about counter insurgency warfare.

COINistas believe in population-centric counterinsurgency, meaning the United States Army must separate the population from the enemy. Often regarded as "soft" on the enemy, population-centric counterinsurgency does not ignore the enemy. However, its numerous contemporary supporters, such as David Kilcullen and John Nagl, make the difference black and white, when shades of gray are the reality. It is neither "soft" on the enemy, nor a prelude to nation-building. Instead, population-centric counterinsurgency is a viable method depending on the situation. Long-time opponent of population-centric counterinsurgency, Col. Gian Gentile, described the issue perfectly in a recent *Parameters* article asserting that "Population-centric COIN may be a reasonable operational method to use in certain circumstances, but it is not a strategy."² Yet advocates of current counterinsurgency strategy continue to believe it is the only strategy to secure a victory for the United State in Afghanistan. This is dangerous, especially since the United States Army will likely be involved in fighting future insurgencies under very different contextual parameters. We acknowledge that some of these officers will evolve their ideas over time, but over half of the officers in our experience believe they have "cracked the code" to waging a counterinsurgency and see no need to educate themselves beyond their present understanding.

The numerous COINistas are very vocal and growing more so every year. Most COINistas have multiple deployments in Iraq, while more enemy-centric minded officers have spent more time in Afghanistan.³ This perspective is vital to understanding COINista thought and it helps explain their rigidity. While their past deployments greatly influence their ideas, the United States Army as a whole has swung in favor of population-centric counterinsurgency. When soldiers return from deployments they are force fed population-centric theories from their commanders and seldom given any other information needed to develop a deeper understanding of other theories, as well as the contextual parameters. This is a two-fold problem, first it inhibits a true intellectual discussion on counterinsurgency theories. Second, it forces many soldiers to remain silent on the issue, because they fear not being promoted if they differ from the prevailing trend.

This issue was never clearer than the events surrounding the 5/2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team under Col. Harry D. Tunnell. Tunnell and his brigade received heavy criticism for his

² Gian Gentile, "A Strategy of Tactics: Population-centric COIN and the Army," *Parameters*, Vol. XXXIX, p. 6.

³ David Galula commented on a similar dynamic within the French Army during his time in Algeria. Galula believed there were two schools of thought on counterinsurgency warfare; the "warrior" school, and the "psychologist" school. The "warrior" school believed the main priority was to eliminate the insurgents themselves, while the "psychologist" school wanted to use propaganda and psychological warfare to transform the population. Galula further commented that the "warrior" officers predominately did not have counterinsurgency experience, while "psychologist" officers operated solely in French Indochina. Like today, as in Galula's time, a majority of the officers were not in either school. 64-66.

emphasis on “counter-guerilla tactics” in southern Afghanistan. While Tunnell did emphasize a more aggressive approach and created a bulls-eye for his critics, he did not discount population-centric counterinsurgency theories. Instead, the 5/2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team dedicated the Brigade Special Troops to work with the population and assigned the battalion commander numerous tasks developed from population-centric counterinsurgency theory. In our regard, this is a flexible and effective approach to counterinsurgency.

However, critics and media pundits still believe the aggressive approach was unproductive and led to the murder of innocent Afghan civilians by Staff Sgt. Calvin R. Gibbs. Though Col. Tunnel had no involvement, the former battalion commander under Tunnell, Lt. Col. Richard Demaree, commented in a recent article “Everyone knows Tunnell openly disagrees with counterinsurgency philosophy, but no one’s doing anything about it.”⁴ There are two things wrong with Demaree’s statement, first, population-centric counterinsurgency is not a philosophy, but a specific theory available to soldiers. Second, Demaree implies that someone in the Army should have corrected Tunnell. The question becomes, why does Tunnell need to be corrected? The answer from a counterinsurgency advocate’s perspective is obvious. Tunnell needs to be corrected because he operated beyond the parameters of the accepted tenets of population-centric counterinsurgency. Soldiers can further interpret this example another way, it is better to stick with unproven theories than to further their education and critically examine history and insurgencies.

This simple example demonstrates the COINistas adherence to a dogmatic solution. A major failing with their approach is that COINistas have limited knowledge of the context in which insurgents and counterinsurgents operated, and therefore rely on limited understanding and short-sighted solutions to produce their solution. To extend the point further, a quick reading of David Galula’s *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958*, offers great insights, but a varied and extensive understanding of the Algerian insurgency is required to understand Galula’s methods fully in Algeria. This lack of understanding is a major problem in fighting insurgencies. COINistas believe that what worked for Galula in Algeria will work in Iraq, and what worked in Iraq will work in Afghanistan. However, as the war in Afghanistan enters its tenth year, these officers must recognize the contextual issues that make each insurgency unique. Therefore we challenge them to begin thinking broadly about insurgencies and begin to acknowledge that there is not a single solution for fighting an insurgency, but rather a seemingly infinite numbers of solutions based upon the plethora of social, cultural, political, and military issues at play in a one given context. Simply, the Army as a whole must move away from a “unified theory of counterinsurgency.

A starting point in beginning to decipher the various shades of gray that represent counterinsurgency, is the need to acknowledge that there can be no “centric” methodology in fighting a counterinsurgency. All schools on counterinsurgency believe that the native population is critical to success. But what most counterinsurgency advocates get wrong is that the goal of a counterinsurgency is not just to turn the population against the insurgents, but also to deny the insurgents’ access to the population. In reality, the insurgents and the population are

⁴ *Anna Mulrine*, “Pentagon had red flags about command climate in 'kill team' Stryker brigade,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 28 2010. <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2010/1028/Pentagon-had-red-flags-about-command-climate-in-kill-team-Stryker-brigade> [accessed February 14, 2011].

both the focus of the counterinsurgent. It is imperative to find out what is most important to the insurgency, as well as the population. In fact, Frank Kitson argues that it essential to “understand how totally interdependent” all the various elements truly are if a nation is to begin building an effective counter insurgency.⁵ C. E. Callwell offers a nineteenth century perspective by quoting Lord Wolseley in *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, the “first object should be the capture of whatever they prize most, and the destruction or deprivation of which will probably bring the war most rapidly to a conclusion.”⁶ Regardless, the focus is on the enemy or what the enemy holds most dear.

Another approach, termed enemy-centric counterinsurgency, focuses on the insurgent and their organization, not the population. However, even the most ardent enemy-centric counterinsurgent recognizes the importance of the population and plans for them in their operations. This debate has created numerous media venues to perpetuate its agenda. The problem is the advocacy of a singular focus. Whether emphasizing the enemy or the population, these schools of thought need to recognize that both foci are necessary. An example of the need to look beyond a single cause is the use of films *Battle of Algiers*. This 1960s vintage film has been trotted out repeatedly to instill lessons of how to “win” a counterinsurgency for soldiers, and even policy makers, to gain insights into fighting a counterinsurgency. While mildly entertaining, the movie has minimal value, as two fundamental issues are overlooked. First, Gillo Pontecorvo, the well known Italian communist directed the film to highlight the ills of colonialism. Advocates of a narrow counterinsurgency strategy never recognize, nor acknowledge this critical point. Second, although successful in the city, Charles De Gaulle ultimately decided that independence for Algeria was a better political course of action, which resulted in a coup by elements of the French Foreign Legion. Finally, many of the events portrayed in the film are completely dramatized or made up. Often overlooked, these points take away from the film. We offer that the film is misinterpreted and provides a false sense of simplicity in fighting a counterinsurgency, and serves as a demonstration of shallow knowledge and undisciplined thinking.

A better way to use the film is to view the two additional DVDs that accompany the Criterion edition of the film *Battle of Algiers*. On these disks, the primary participants of both sides are interviewed and questioned about their involvement and methods used to conduct their campaigns. These segments are much more instructive and useful for understanding the tactics, techniques, and procedures, as well as the contextual importance from the perspective of both sides. By viewing these “bonus features,” a comprehension of the historical, political, and social, and cultural elements pertinent to the insurgency and counter insurgency emerge.

Additionally, officers reference Iraq as the gold standard on how to fight a counterinsurgency. Most point to General David Petraeus, and the surge, as the basic elements in a new formula for counterinsurgency. Using their experience in Iraq, most COINistas believe they can take what they learned in Iraq, use it in Afghanistan, and turn around the fledgling Islamic republic. However, this simplicity ignores the importance of context. COINistas simply do not spend enough time critically examining their experiences and reflecting upon these within

⁵Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, Peacekeeping*, (St. Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 2006?) p. 31.

⁶ C. E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 40.

an educated historical context. This is one of their greatest flaws. We acknowledge that the Army cannot dismiss what it learned in Iraq nor do we want it too. The United States Army must realize that population-centric counterinsurgency is only one tool, not the entire toolbox. As David Galula wrote, “We certainly must show the carrot in our left hand, but only if we brandish the stick in our right hand.”⁷ In Afghanistan, the United States Army and its partners cannot solely rely on population-centric counterinsurgency. Instead, they must be flexible and be willing to use a variety of methods, while keeping their goals realistic. Population-centric counterinsurgency, just as more enemy-centric methods can work in certain areas in Afghanistan, but in Regional Command-South and other places, the enemy dictates that a different approach is needed and the approach must be flexible, varied and realistic.

Another factor in fighting an insurgency that COINistas seem to forget is that the enemy impacts tactics and strategies. The counterinsurgent does not always have a choice in how it fights the enemy. Just like in the Vietnam War, General William C. Westmoreland did not have a choice between fighting an insurgency or the conventional North Vietnamese Army, he had to fight both.⁸ In Afghanistan, just as it was in Vietnam, the enemy dictates what the United States Army can and cannot do. In Afghanistan, the United States Army cannot implement a nationwide population-centric counterinsurgency strategy, it needs more flexibility.

To decipher shades of gray, we need to look at this issue from a methodological perspective. Lacking the time to build a deep and rich understanding of history and insurgencies throughout time, COINistas tend to produce synthetic solutions, which fail to recognize seemingly infinite number of variables influencing an insurgency. The need to acknowledge and accept that a single general theory is not the solution

A broader approach and understanding is necessary. COINistas must look long and hard at their experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, and dig deeper into what worked and what did not work. For this to happen, these officers must be given the time to research and critically examine their past deployments within a historical context of past insurgencies. If this occurs, COINistas will become broader read on insurgencies and warfare, and will see a fuller picture of past deployments, not just the narrow view they remember from their previous duty positions.

Take for instance an experience where Major A went on a rant during the first bloc of History instruction at CGSC about how “today’s Majors” need to understand Sun Tzu and Mao Zedong and not the fundamental underpinnings of the “Western Way of War.” He went on to state that “today’s fight” demands that “we understand” the foundations of the insurgents being fought today. Completely dismissing the significance of understanding Napoleon’s troubles with guerillas in Spain, this COINista failed to comprehend that although al-Qaeda in the early 1990s used Maoist language to make a broader appeal for followers, the reality is that having an understanding of Mao and Sun Tzu actually provides little insight into the operational abilities and strategy of al-Qaeda.⁹ In fact, the soldiers simple understanding of Mao’s lead him to conclude that al- Qaeda is in Phase II and needs to be stopped before they reach the conventional

⁷ David Galula, *Pacification in Algeria 1956-1958*, (Santa Monica CA: RAND Corporation 2006), p. 269.

⁸ Dale Andrade, “Westmoreland was Right,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 19, Issue 2, pp. 149.

⁹ Sean N. Kalic, *Combating a Modern Hydra: Al Qaeda and the Global War on Terrorism*, (Fort Leavenworth, CSI Press), 2005, 22-25; “World Islamic Front Statement Urging Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders,” in *Al Qaeda in its own War*, Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, eds., (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2008), 53-56.

war phase, which Mao identified as Phase III. Our question is how is this helpful in understanding the enemy in a deep and meaningful way? We offer it is not. In reality however, since al-Qaeda only co-opted Maoist language to build their initial following, the misidentification of their adherence to this model could have significant implications. Not to mention the fact that the dime-store understanding of Mao completely overlooks the ideological foundations of militant Islamist ideology.¹⁰ While it is critical to understand the nuances and language used by Mao and even al-Qaeda, there is little interest by COINistas in exploring the deeper theoretical underpinnings because they only “confuse” the attempt to find a conclusion. This is the major flaw that needs to be corrected.

COINistas need to educate themselves on the evolution of al-Qaeda and its operational capabilities; the rise of radical Islam, and the capabilities of transnational organized crime factions, and think about how elements of national power can be used to attrite, erode, and neutralize al-Qaeda and its ideology. The problem with this process is that it takes time to build an intellectual foundation and to develop critical thinking skills that allows soldiers to see that a counterinsurgency fight is not about deriving the “right” solution, but rather providing a comprehensive solution incorporating various elements of national power.

The above vignette is indicative of how COINistas think about counterinsurgency. They are bright, highly motivated officers, but they need to think more broadly and place their experience and the experience of past experts like Galula in the necessary historical context. Just because a certain tactic worked in Algeria, Iraq, or the Philippines¹¹ does not mean it will work in Afghanistan.¹² Each tactic or method must be specifically adapted to the specific village, region, or insurgency. There is no “blue print” for a counterinsurgency, and until we get the COINistas to understand this complexity, they are unable to decipher the shades of gray which represents the complexity of combating an insurgency.

Ultimately, we recognize that there is a real world need to devise, plan, and execute a counterinsurgency war, as well as a need for more information and understanding. We argue that there is a way to combine the experience and insights gained from years of fighting, but yet also extract necessary contextual information from literature and historical sources to get a fuller appreciation for the situation at hand. Historian John Sumida in *Decoding Clausewitz* makes the case that Carl von Clausewitz called for “imagination of the highly variable, contingent, fraught and therefore personal nature of the capacity to respond effectively to different situations.”¹³ This in essence is the same dynamic flexibility that Mark Moyar identifies in his study *A Question of Command*. At the risk of setting up a simple reductionist position, it appears that at least two respected authors on theories of war agree that the current fight demands flexible and dynamic leaders, a theme continual heard by military and political leaders over the last nine years. The problem however, is that today’s COINistas are kidding themselves that they are building a comprehensive understanding of the variations and nuances of insurgencies.

¹⁰ See Youssef H. Aboul-Enein, *Militant Islamist Ideology: Understanding the Global Threat*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2010).

¹¹ See Brian Linn’s *The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, 1899-1902*, University of North Carolina Press, 1989.

¹² Galula achieved success, but he was much too junior to have any influence on French strategy in Algeria.

¹³ John Tetsuro Sumida, *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to War*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 68.

Their paradigm above is fundamentally wrong. We would offer that in fact it is the complete opposite way of understanding insurgencies as offered by classical, as well as contemporary, scholars. Rather than searching for a solution, COIN demands a person continually process and reflect on personal experiences within an established context of historical understanding, which is also always expanding and deepening, to arrive at a decision that can be applied to the problem. This allows the soldier to be as dynamic and flexible as the insurgent.¹⁴ We do not fault COINistas for their desire to “find a solution,” but rather challenge them to expand their understanding of the enemy and the war in an effort to work toward a more complete understanding of the demands needed to achieve a complete victory.

History is a useful tool, however, history is not a fortune teller; the answers are not all in books. Despite the fascination with counterinsurgency, COINista officers overly rely on the same readings, and many with the same message. That message is simple; the only way to fight a successful counterinsurgency is to get to the people. Once you secure the people, the enemy will dissolve or become ineffective. The most cited cases are American forces in the Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century, British forces in Malaya, and the French in Algeria. Field Manual 3-24 only reinforces these events as models, along with a large dose of David Galula and Mao. However, Field Manual 3-24 only glances over the tactics, techniques, and procedures that made counterinsurgencies in Malaya and the Philippines successful, and when it does not glance over them, it cherry-picks population-centric ideas. What is lost in the mix is that forces in Malaya and the Philippines used enemy-centric methods, hunter-killer tactics, and other techniques to quell the insurgency. They never religiously stuck to one approach. A quick reading of a COINista favorite, Galula’s *Pacification in Algeria*, shows that only by varying methods and tactics can counterinsurgents defeat an insurgency.¹⁵

The solution to this problem is simple. Soldiers need more understanding of history. Reading and studying history develops critical thinking skills, necessary in a complex and challenging environment. Providing more history would give soldiers the necessary tools to analyze, discuss, and interpret past events and counterinsurgencies, as well as compare them to their own experiences.

Making history the cornerstone to soldiers’ professional education will not magically solve problems in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Philippines or future insurgencies, but it does provide them with the fundamental skill needed in their profession. Simply put, in order to best prepare for greater responsibility and leadership, our mid-career officers need to spend more time reading comprehensive, rigorous works of history. Officers should look towards, not only histories of insurgencies and counterinsurgencies, but histories of all aspects of warfare. While by no means an exhaustive list, officers should spend more time reading books ranging from specific works on Afghanistan such as Antonio Giustozzi’s *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, Ahmed Rashid’s *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, to histories on Islam and militant Islamist ideology such as Maria Rosa Menocal’s *The Ornament of the World?: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, Cdr. Youssef H. Aboul-Enein’s *Militant Islamist Ideology* to more general works of history.

¹⁴Kalic, *Combating a Modern Hydra*, 63.

¹⁵ Galula is associated with the population-centric school, but most COINistas fail to understand his definition of population-centric counterinsurgency. While he believed the population was the center of gravity, he was not opposed to using heavier tactics. See his handling of an insurgency captured by *harkis*, 172-173.

The end result would be a better informed and more prepared COINista; ready to fight and achieve victory.

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