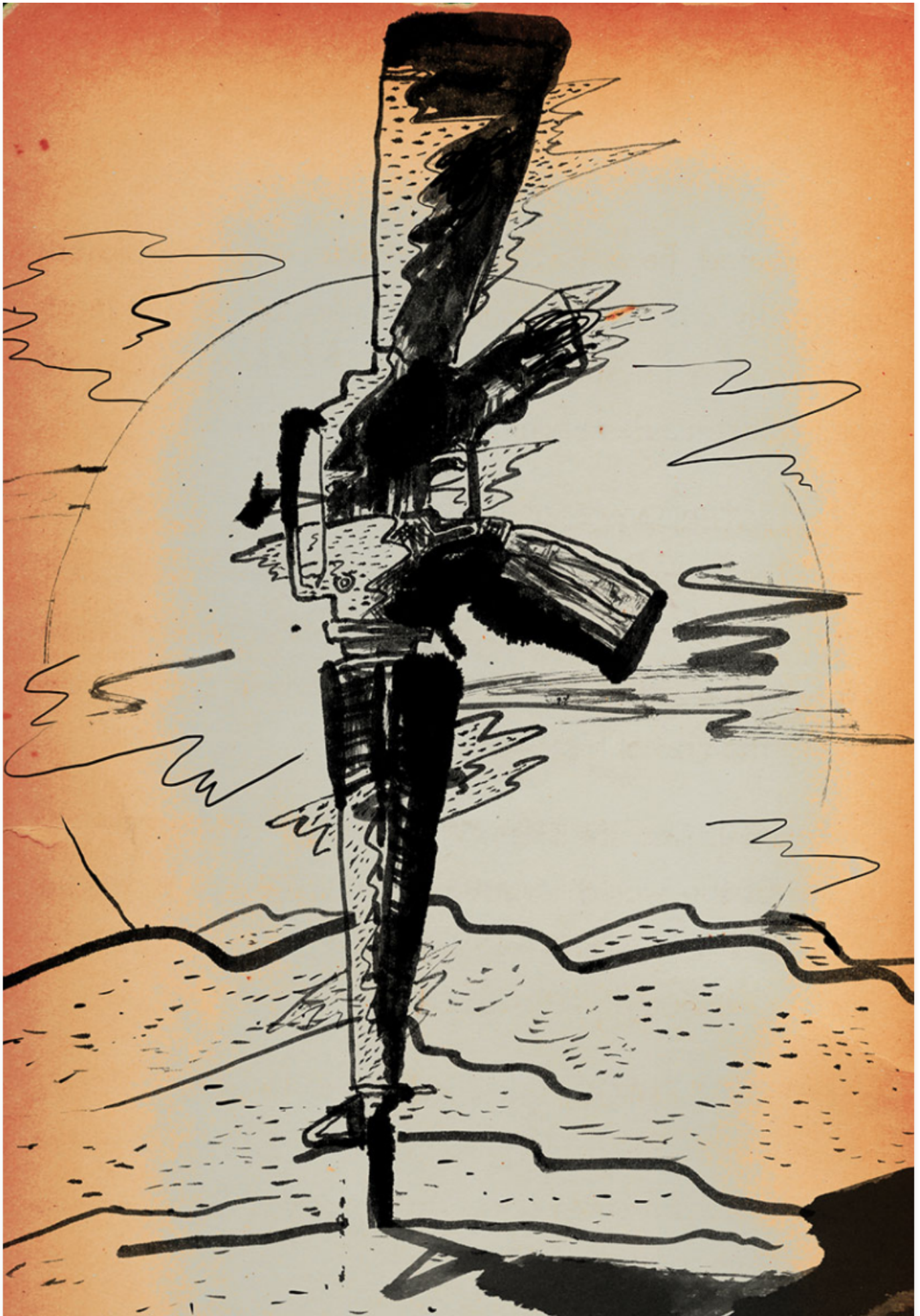
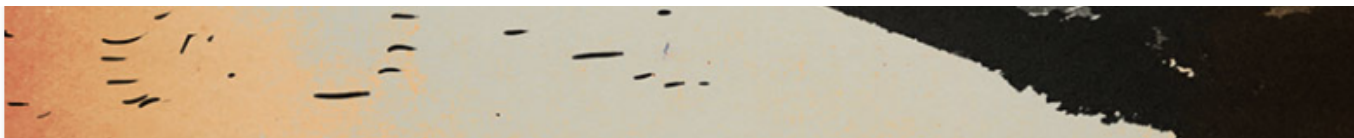


{essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the
University of Virginia

COINdinistas and their Discontents





Volume 47 (2014)

Reviewed Work(s)

The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War. By Fred Kaplan. (New York: Simon & Schuster Press, 2013). Pp. 418. Paper, \$16.00.

Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency. By Colonel Gian Gentile. (New York & London: The New Press, 2013). Pp.189. Cloth, \$24.95.

Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War. By Douglas Porch. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Pp. 434. Paper, \$27.99.

Approximately two months after the American led invasion of Iraq in 2003, President George W. Bush prematurely announced that combat missions had ended, while a banner behind him proudly proclaimed “mission accomplished.” Within weeks of Bush’s announcement, security and stability in Iraq rapidly deteriorated; by 2006, Iraq was mired in a brutal sectarian civil war. The 2006 bombing of the al-Askari mosque, one of Iraq’s and Shia Islam’s holiest sites, triggered a dramatic rise in retaliatory violence. In the midst of this chaos, a group of U.S. Army officers concerned that victory might elude the U.S. attempted to fundamentally alter American military doctrine.

The three books under review address the resurgence of interest in counterinsurgency (COIN) that culminated with the publication of *Field Manual (FM) 3-24*, and the U.S. military and government’s embrace of the theories espoused within its pages. While a precise definition of counterinsurgency eludes even the experts, it essentially involves a combination of military, political, and social measures designed to defeat insurgency and prevent its reoccurrence. Some of the strategies associated with COIN include civic action, also known as the effort to

“win hearts and minds” through aid and development programs; political reform to bring rebel sympathizers back into the system and to address some of their grievances; and targeting and killing insurgents. Several of the more prominent examples of U.S. counterinsurgency efforts took place in the Philippines, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Even with the winding down of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. may once again find itself confronted with complex insurgency threats in the future, and one in which COIN will be touted as a solution. These books offer valuable contributions to a subject that has received very little analysis in academia outside of insurgency during the Vietnam War.

In *The Insurgents*, Fred Kaplan, a journalist specializing in military and security issues, describes how General David Petraeus and a coterie of like-minded military officers attempted to transform how the United States wages war. Kaplan covers a series of interrelated topics, including: how and when various COIN enthusiasts, dubbed “COINdinistas,” developed their theories about how to defeat insurgency; the process of organizing, writing, and rewriting military doctrine; and its application in Afghanistan and Iraq. The title of his book, *The Insurgents*, portrays Petraeus and his allies as launching an insurgency—a long and protracted campaign, which featured the recruitment of sympathetic journalists—against official U.S. Army doctrine.

Petraeus’s approach to counterinsurgency focused on obtaining the allegiance of civilians by providing security and by initiating reconstruction and development projects. Commonly known as “population-centric counterinsurgency,” this policy advocates that soldiers should live and sleep among the people to earn their trust. According to practitioners of this approach, if civilians are protected and feel secure, they will theoretically provide intelligence to, and cooperate with, government forces. Unlike Gentile, Kaplan does not critique this policy—or any other elements of the more recent variation of COIN. This is unfortunate, because using soldiers to protect civilians often put both parties’ lives at greater risk.

Kaplan provides a sympathetic yet critical treatment of the COINdinistas. Unlike either Gian Gentile or Douglas Porch, Kaplan believes that Petraeus and his cohorts had a good grasp of history, especially the classic texts of counterinsurgency.^[1] However, he stops short of asking whether the lessons drawn from these texts were fundamentally sound

or historically accurate. As Kaplan correctly points out, counterinsurgency is a technique, not a grand strategy. Nevertheless, Petraeus eventually viewed his ideas as a set of axioms that were applicable everywhere. In Kaplan's words, "in part from overconfidence, in part from inertia," Petraeus viewed "the doctrine as a set of universal principles: 'the laws of counterrevolutionary warfare'" (362). Simply put, the general believed that success in Afghanistan could be achieved by replicating the American COIN strategy in Iraq.

Ultimately, "the insurgents" failed to revolutionize the American army's culture and the institution itself. As Kaplan explains, the COINdinistas failed to convince either the U.S. public or policymakers that insurgencies were permanent fixtures in the twenty-first century. While *FM 3-24* and the COIN strategists "made the American military more adept at fighting this kind of war," they "didn't—they couldn't—make this war acceptable either to the American public or to the people in the lands where it was fought." (365). In other words, Kaplan seems to believe that COIN could be a successful approach to thwarting insurgencies abroad—he thought the U.S. was successful in Iraq—if only the United States had the political will to undertake long campaigns and could better market its policies in the countries it was trying to assist.

The publication of *FM 3-24* and the COINdinistas' attempts to revolutionize the U.S. Army set off fierce debates within the military. One of the most vocal and fierce opponents is Colonel Gian Gentile, who has been openly critical of the army's embrace of counterinsurgency. There is no detached or scholarly tone in Gentile's *Wrong Turn*. It is readily apparent that the author has an ideological axe to grind and is not afraid to do so. Combining his personal experiences serving in Iraq with a wide variety of secondary sources, Gentile sets out a rather "modest" goal. As he makes clear in his introduction, he hopes "to drive a stake through the heart of the notion that counterinsurgency has worked in the past and will therefore work in the future in whatever form it morphs into" (8). Of primary concern for Gentile is the poor and shallow historical analysis COINdinistas have used to support their policies and theories. As Gentile argues, counterinsurgency is a "blend of some history, a lot of myth and suppositions about roads not taken...COIN depends on a narrow and selective view of histories that are messy and complicated" (12). Ultimately, Gentile believes that the historical record

does not provide support for the COINdinistas' conclusions, a point on which Gentile stands on firm ground.

Gentile analyzes several applications of COIN in Malaya, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. His overall argument is that the COINdinistas' explanations for either the failure or success of these efforts are faulty. In Gentile's opinion, the main reasons why COIN efforts have succeeded in the past have little to do with winning "hearts and minds" or population-centric methods. Rather, insurgencies were defeated by a healthy dose of coercion and force. Gentile argues that putting the emphasis on protecting the population puts them at greater, not less, risk. When military force is applied to "protect local populations, it more often ends up killing people and destroying things in the process" (8).

Gentile is highly critical of General Petraeus and his supporters in the media—especially the Pulitzer Prize-winning, *Washington Post* reporter Thomas Ricks—and within the Army.^[2] He criticizes the obsequious portrayals of the general as "the savior" of Iraq. Gentile uses Petraeus to criticize a major argument of the literature: that a leader well versed in COIN is essential for victory. As Gentile complains, "many people have become comfortable with the idea that 'reinvented' armies doing COIN under innovative generals can rescue wars that should not have been fought in the first place or have been fought under a failed strategy and policy" (30). More disturbingly, Gentile argues that the "better general" theory is a "recipe for perpetual war" (33).

Gentile revisits historical cases often held up as successes by COIN theorists to argue that the wrong lessons have been learned. In his chapter on the "Malayan Emergency," Gentile uses insurgent strategy—a commonly overlooked aspect—to refute the literature's argument that the arrival of Sir Gerald Templer changed British fortunes. The classic counterinsurgency texts have argued that Templer's tenure as commander ultimately paved the way for a British victory. Gentile strongly disagrees, and as he demonstrates, there was no seismic shift in British COIN strategy after Templer assumed control from his predecessor. More important was the insurgents' decision—which predated Templer's arrival—to alter their strategy of armed rebellion in favor of a more subtle approach of political work with the masses. Gentile also points out that contemporary British observers were not only cognizant of the shift in insurgent tactics, but he agrees with them

that this shift was more important than British counterinsurgency strategy.

Gentile also wades into the debate over Vietnam. He finds little evidence to support the “better war” claims of authors such as Lewis Sorley, Andrew Krepinevich, and John Nagl. [3] These authors have all claimed that the U.S. could have won in Vietnam if it had embraced COIN tactics earlier. While denouncing these claims as counterfactual arguments with little supporting evidence, Gentile argues that ultimately it did not matter if the U.S. had applied COIN earlier or fully embraced it. Citing George Herring, Gentile asserts that the Vietnam War was unwinnable at a “moral or material cost most Americans deemed acceptable.” In his opinion, since the U.S. was “not willing to fight the war without limits,” which would have included an all-out invasion of North Vietnam, “the war simply could never have been won” (60).

Gentile devotes a chapter to debunking common misconceptions about the U.S. effort in Iraq. In particular, he places “the Surge narrative” in his crosshairs. The Surge deployed approximately 30,000 additional U.S. troops to Iraq beginning in 2007. These troops were tasked with the responsibility of stabilizing Iraq by implementing General Petraeus’s COIN strategy. Gentile argues that there was no dramatic change after the arrival of Petraeus and American reinforcements. Rather, U.S. forces had been practicing the essentials of COIN several years before the implementation of the Surge. In Gentile’s opinion, it was entirely possible that violence in Iraq would have continued to decline even if President Bush had never appointed Petraeus as commander in Iraq. Gentile argues that important events that reduced violence in the country, such as the “Sunni Awakening” and the climax of sectarian violence, predated the Surge (110). The Sunni Awakening refers to the rupture between various Sunni tribes and Al-Qaeda in Iraq. This allowed U.S. forces to take advantage of the split by paying their former enemies to halt attacks against American troops and to provide security against further terrorist attacks. Gentile finds the omission of Iraqi actions troubling, because it allowed the COINdinistas to sell the Surge narrative to the American military, people, and policymakers. Consequently, it convinced key policymakers and military planners that its success could be replicated in Afghanistan (11).

In *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War*, Douglas Porch, a historian at the Naval Postgraduate School, provides another excellent critique of counterinsurgency. An author of several works on French military history, Porch traces the evolution of COIN from imperialist “small wars” in the late-nineteenth century to the Surge in Iraq. Porch devotes a considerable amount of space to discussing the origins and the various practices that have characterized French COIN theory. Unlike other authors who trace current U.S. COIN practices back to the British, Porch believes that French tactics profoundly shaped contemporary American counterinsurgency doctrine. He finds this troubling because of its reliance on coercion, terror and its association with imperialism.

By tracing a series of COIN efforts from the late nineteenth until the twenty-first century, Porch argues that the theories underpinning counterinsurgency have been remarkably constant. There has not been much deviation in theory since the 1840s, when the French military officer Thomas-Robert Bugeaud crushed a revolt in Algeria. Bugeaud did not rely on population-centric measures or a hearts and minds approach. Rather, the French officer used a very heavy hand. The tactics Bugeaud employed have reappeared in subsequent COIN efforts, including internment, resettlement, curfews, collective fines, food control, and deportations. These measures have been mainstays of British, French, and U.S. counterinsurgency practice.

Counterinsurgency joins *Wrong Turn* in arguing that the case studies used by COINdinistas to support their claims reflect a specious reading of history. In particular, Porch reserves his ire for David Galula, a former French officer who served in Algeria, whose theories are prominent within the pages of *FM 3-24*. Porch finds Galula’s influence troubling because his account ignored the brutality, racism, torture, and implosion of French civil-military relations that were a feature of French COIN practice. Perhaps more importantly, Galula’s claims are not supported by extant French archival sources. Galula implied to his readers that if the French applied the tactics he used in his sector, then they would have emerged victorious in Algeria. As Porch rightly notes, the French military obeyed most of his tactical prescriptions, including torture. In doing so, “they not only lost, but failed catastrophically” (177). Moreover,

Porch—along with other critics—notes that Galula’s sector had little insurgent activity and was supported with generous resources.

Porch is especially critical of the latest infusion of anthropology into COIN. Echoing concerned anthropologists, he argues that the inclusion of trained anthropologists in counterinsurgency efforts is not designed to improve understanding of a country’s values or culture; instead, it is ultimately aimed at targeting and killing the enemy. Moreover, he believes that the recent variant of COIN replicates the self-righteousness of nineteenth-century imperialists. In Porch’s words, *FM 3-24* offers a “vision of strategic imperialism appropriate for a neo-imperialist age in which the real sources of organized political violence are made to disappear in a puff of Western values and beneficent population-centrism” (312).

Periodically, COIN reappears from the ashes after an unsuccessful military campaign. Every time it resurfaces, and in whatever form it manifests itself—Low-Intensity Conflict (LIC), Military Operations Other Than War (“mootwah”), Stability Operations, etc.—it provokes controversy, especially because critics believe that terror and brutality underline the strategy. COIN interventions are often as deadly and destructive as their conventional counterparts. Ultimately, the current reincarnation of U.S. counterinsurgency strategy floundered in the mountains and valleys of Afghanistan. In January 2012, President Obama emphasized that U.S. forces “will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations” (Kaplan, 357). Arguably, the U.S. has slowly started to shift its emphasis away from COIN and nation-building. For critics of counterinsurgency, inside and outside of the Army, including this author, it is a welcome move.

Brian D’Haeseleer

American University

[1] David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964); Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966); Charles Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*. (London: Harrison and Sons, 1899).

[2] Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).

[3] Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); John Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Westport: Praeger, 2002); Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt & Bruce, 1999).

Issue:

2014

Quarter:

Spring



Published by

 [View all posts by](#)

Historiographical Essays, Historiographical Reviews

20th century, Military, Politics

COMMENTS ARE CLOSED.

FIND US ON:

» [Facebook](#)

» [Twitter](#)

ADMIN:

» [Log in](#)

» [WordPress.org](#)

PROUDLY POWERED BY WORDPRESS | **THEME: BASKERVILLE 2 BY ANDERS NOREN.**

UP ↑