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# Got Vision? Unity of Vision in Policy and Strategy: What It Is, and Why We Need It

Simons, Anna

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### **GOT VISION?**

#### **UNITY OF VISION IN POLICY AND STRATEGY: WHAT IT IS, AND WHY WE NEED IT**

**Anna Simons**

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**July 2010**

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## FOREWORD

The premise of this monograph is simple: for all the talk of “unity of effort” and “unity of command,” without someone at the helm who has “unity of vision,” asymmetric confrontations are hard (if not impossible) to win.

In this monograph, Dr. Anna Simons examines a range of individuals who proved adept at seeing the forest *and* the trees, did not have to be taught to think in terms of branches and sequels, and did not need to be prodded by doctrine (or a President) to consider what the second, third, and fourth order effects of an action might be. Simons uses India’s extensive experience with insurgency to make the point that with the right *who* in charge, the right *what* will follow. She analyzes three exceptional Indians (K. P. S. Gill, S. K. Sinha, and Mahatma Gandhi). Yet, in doing so, she also makes the case that no one else can duplicate their approaches. So, what then might be gained by studying their lessons learned? For one, the Department of Defense and the Services should pay far greater attention to assessment, selection, reassessment, and deselection. Second, counterinsurgency (and related) field manuals will always be more useful as screening tools than teaching aides when it comes to identifying counterinsurgency (COIN) potential.

Intentionally provocative, this monograph not only challenges current ways of doing business, but should add a new dimension to the COIN strategy debate.



DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
Director  
Strategic Studies Institute

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANNA SIMONS is a Professor of Defense Analysis at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), joining the faculty in 1998. Prior to teaching at NPS, she was an assistant and then associate professor of anthropology at the University of California at Los Angeles, as well as chair of the Masters in African Area Studies Program. At NPS, she teaches courses in the anthropology of conflict, military advising, low intensity conflict in Africa, and political anthropology. Dr. Simons is the author of *Networks of Dissolution: Somalia Undone* and *The Company They Keep: Life Inside the U.S. Army Special Forces*. She has written extensively about intervention, conflict, and the military from an anthropological perspective for a wide range of publications, such as *The American Interest*, *The National Interest*, *Orbis*, *Third World Quarterly*, and *Parameters*. Dr. Simons holds an A.B. from Harvard College and a Ph.D. in social anthropology from Harvard University.

## SUMMARY

What do we need when confronted by adversaries who do not adhere to our rule set or social code? Drawing on India's extensive counterinsurgency experiences, as well as British and American examples of cross-culturally astute strategists, this monograph makes the case for frontloading selection. Its premise is that with the right individual(s) devising strategy, everything else should fall into place. The author contends that certain intuitive abilities are key – abilities that no amount of doctrine can instill or teach.

The argument made here moves beyond “unity of effort” and “unity of command” to identify an overarching need for “unity of vision.” Without someone at the helm who has a certain *kind* – not turn, not frame, but *kind* – of mind, asymmetric confrontations will be hard (if not impossible) to win. As with strategic insight, individuals either know what to use to strategic effect when dealing with another society, or they do not. Having prior cross-cultural experience of the players involved in the conflict is essential, but just understanding other players is insufficient. Equally important is being able to come up with a strategy that fits “us” as well.

The monograph identifies a number of individuals who used unity of vision to considerable strategic effect. It then moves on to consider three exceptional Indians (K. P. S. Gill, S. K. Sinha, and Mahatma Gandhi) to further illustrate the point that with the right *who* in charge, the right *what* will follow. Among the conclusions reached is that the Department of Defense and the Services should be investing far more effort in assessment, selection, reassessment, and deselection.

tion than they currently do, and that when it comes to identifying those with the right attributes, counterinsurgency (and related) field manuals should be used as screening tools – not teaching aides.

In addition to unity of vision, the author introduces two other concepts. The Lawrence paradox refers to our propensity to turn unduplicable lessons into generic principles as if anyone should be able to apply them. In contrast, the Gladwell heuristic seems far more useful. Borrowing from Malcolm Gladwell's notion of connectors, mavens, and salesmen, what this yields is that those responsible for policing or helping to police communities at the local level should be able to identify local connectors, mavens, and salesmen. At the operational level, counterinsurgency leaders should be able to think (and potentially act) like connectors, mavens, and salesmen themselves, while strategy itself calls for an individual who possesses the insights and abilities of a connector, maven, and salesman all rolled into one – akin to an K. P. S. Gill, an S. K. Sinha, a George Kennan, or an Edward Lansdale.

**GOT VISION?**  
**UNITY OF VISION IN POLICY AND STRATEGY:**  
**WHAT IT IS, AND WHY WE NEED IT**

For all the talk these days about the need for “unity of effort” and “unity of command” when confronting enemies (and working with allies), neither is likely to work without a coherent overarching policy. To come up with such a policy requires something altogether different: “unity of vision.”<sup>1</sup>

Visionary generals are said to possess “*coup d’oeil*”; they can size up the tactical, operational, and strategic dimensions of a battlefield and see scenes as both the sum of their parts *and* as wholes.<sup>2</sup> My contention in this monograph is that individuals chosen to devise strategy in today’s asymmetric or irregular environment need a comparable kind of situational awareness. As in the past, we need individuals who see the forest *and* the trees, do not have to be taught to think in terms of branches and sequels, and do not need to be prodded by doctrine (or a President) to consider what the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th order effects of an action might be.

This monograph is not meant to challenge current conventional wisdom so much as push beyond it. It draws on recent research into India’s lessons learned regarding counterinsurgency (COIN).<sup>3</sup> Consequently, there is a COIN bias to what I describe, but the gist of this argument should hold for any asymmetric confrontation in which we face an enemy who fights us according to his rule set and social code—which is likely to be any enemy we face in the future, unless we return to set-piece battles fought only among uniformed professionals.

## THE WHO VS. THE WHAT

Essentially, the argument to be outlined here is that far more attention should be paid to the *who* rather than the *what* of cross-cultural conflict. Bottom line up front: if we get the *who* right, the right *what* will follow.

Unfortunately, Washington, the Department of Defense (DoD), and the Services lavish far more attention, money and, ironically, manpower on the *what*. Just witness the effort expended over the past several years hashing out Joint, never mind Service-specific, definitions for irregular and unconventional warfare. But—perhaps the ground is beginning to shift. Take Andrew Krepinevich’s and Barry Watts’s recent assertion that it is “past time to recognize that not everyone has the cognitive abilities and insight to be a competent strategist.”<sup>4</sup> As they note, “strategy is about insight, creativity, and synthesis.”<sup>5</sup> According to Krepinevich and Watts, “it appears that by the time most individuals reach their early twenties, they either have developed the cognitive skills for strategy or they have not.”<sup>6</sup> As they go on to write:

If this is correct, then professional education or training are unlikely to inculcate a capacity for genuine strategic insight into most individuals, regardless of their raw intelligence or prior experience. Instead, the best anyone can do is to try to identify those who appear to have developed this talent and then make sure that they are utilized in positions calling for the skills of a strategist.<sup>7</sup>

Mark Moyar concurs. The point he makes again and again in his new book, *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq*, is that “counter-insurgency is ‘leader-centric’ warfare, a con-

test between elites in which the elite with superiority in certain leadership attributes usually wins.”<sup>8</sup> Or, in plainer English, the better-led side tends to prevail. Moyar eschews the current debate between those who favor a population-centric (such as COIN) vs. enemy-centric (such as counterterrorism) approach. Of course, as most small unit leaders I know would say, to be effective on the ground clearly requires that you do both: you cannot secure the population without killing at least some of the bad guys. But, in a sense, this is exactly Moyar’s point: Give enough young leaders with the right stuff sufficient leeway, and they will figure out what to do in their areas of operation. As for how to determine who has the right stuff, Moyar identifies 10 attributes. Individuals have to have, or be good at, initiative, flexibility, creativity, judgment, empathy, charisma, sociability, dedication, integrity, and organization. While he acknowledges that “the surest way to test an individual’s suitability for counterinsurgency leadership is to put that person in command of a unit engaged in counterinsurgency operations,” he also says:

The best way to predict the suitability of inexperienced candidates for counterinsurgency command or counterinsurgency leadership development programs is to screen them for the characteristics common to effective counterinsurgency commanders.<sup>9</sup>

His recommended screen is personality tests.

Krepinevich and Watts are not quite so bold as to list a set of attributes or recommend a screening technique for competent strategists, never mind for those who should help guide grand strategy at the national level, but their conclusion underscores the same point: selection is key.

Of course, identifying those rare individuals with the mindset and talent to develop strategy will not be easy. . . . The problem of selecting competent strategists is much the same as picking future air-to-air aces based on intelligence tests, educational records, personality traits, or even performance in undergraduate pilot training. We simply do not have very reliable predictors of performance other than waiting to see which pilots later excel in actual air-to-air combat. George Marshall and Dwight Eisenhower had similar difficulties picking capable combat commanders during World War II. Nevertheless, as difficult as the problem of selecting competent strategists may be, it is one that the U.S. national security establishment needs to face.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike Moyar, who does not single out cross-cultural insight as a critical COIN aptitude (perhaps because he erroneously believes empathy and sociability are sufficient to help COIN leaders fill the “knowing the enemy” gap), Krepinevich and Watts believe it is essential that strategists know as much as possible about the adversary. They highlight the significance of cross-cultural expertise: “Looking ahead, the United States unquestionably needs to develop a cadre of experts on militant Islamic groups, China, and other key areas of concern such as Iran, North Korea, and Pakistan.”<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, Krepinevich and Watts do not indicate whether they think strategists need to possess this cross-cultural expertise themselves, or should simply be able to tap into it. But tellingly, those they cite as “experienced national security hands” under President Eisenhower—Paul Nitze, Allan Dulles, George Marshall, Robert Lovett, and Charles Bohlen—*were* veterans of experiencing life outside the United States, with time spent under the shadow of our then-and-

future adversaries. As it happens too, these were also individuals who *pioneered* “national security.” That is why it is more than just a little ironic that among their academic progeny today are very few policymaking defense intellectuals who have spent much time living in the non-West, despite the fact that all of our current (and likeliest future) adversaries hail from the non-West.

Yet, if one believes the devil—and failure and defeat—lie in the details, this points to a real problem, particularly if one also believes it is impossible to get a “feel for” or “feel about” a situation second-hand. Add to this the fact that it is never enough just to understand the enemy. As Sun Tzu is always cited as saying, there is also the need to understand us. And then there is the need to understand how the enemy understands us; the iterations of who understands what about whom demand constant attention.

## UNITY OF VISION DEFINED

If, meanwhile, we examine those individuals who devised successful strategies for besting non-Western foes in the recent, post-imperial past, here is one thing we can say: all proved capable of developing a *fin-gerspitzengefuhl* (or fingertip feel) for another society organized significantly differently than their own.<sup>12</sup> Without any formal training in anthropology, such disparate figures as T. E. Lawrence, Douglas MacArthur, Joseph Stilwell, George Kennan, and Edward Lansdale all proved adept at turning their insights about another culture *to* strategic effect. More significantly, the strategies they came up with succeeded *as* instruments of war.

Take Containment, which is now regarded as a major 20th century success, a grand strategy so mas-

terful that everyone is casting about for its equivalent today. To figure out how best to thwart and counter the Soviets, George Kennan not only had to get the Soviets right, but his strategy had to fit them *and* fit us. It had to be so suited to the Soviets that we could defeat them without precipitating a nuclear war, and so suited to us that we could continue to execute it for an indefinite period of time. Or, consider General Douglas MacArthur's success as proconsul in post-war Japan. Somehow he had to figure out how to shatter the Japanese commitment to war without breaking the Japanese spirit or causing the country to veer toward communism. Each man faced nested sets of problems.

As for T. E. Lawrence, he had to walk the fine line of keeping Faisal, the Hashemite prince, sufficiently restrained so as not to precipitate an Anglo-French rupture during World War I, while in World War II, Joseph Stilwell's thankless task was to work through the reluctant Chinese to liberate the Burmese from the Japanese. To do so, each of these men had to overcome all sorts of other challenges, like too few resources and theaters full of ambitious rivals.

However, try to compare across just this small group of individuals, and here is what you also find: Lawrence spoke fluent Arabic and could out-Bedouin the Bedouin. Lansdale spoke no foreign languages and could barely hit a target. MacArthur was a proven commander. Kennan was a mere Foreign Service Officer. Nonetheless, somehow, each proved able to identify that feature or set of features in another society that could be used as *the* fulcrum by, with, and through which to permanently alter conditions. And they did so *as* individuals, although none did so alone.

Kennan had Charles Bohlen, who may have been an even more astute Sovietologist. Lawrence was hardly

the only Arabist in the field. Lansdale's partner was Filipino leader Ramon Magsaysay. Nonetheless, we still credit Kennan, Lawrence, and Lansdale with being the progenitors of successful policy. Being cynical, we might attribute this to their having written more, better, and/or first, thereby associating their names with "their" policy. But even if this is the case, they were still master codifiers. Somehow they were able to do more than just absorb the situational zeitgeist and operationalize it. They successfully explicated what others could not yet articulate.

Perhaps it is too trite to suggest that these men routinized ideas by being forcefully persuasive. All, certainly, had healthy egos. But also, none could have accomplished what he did without a reflexive ability to understand "them" and "us," and what to do *to* "them" without jeopardizing "us." Consequently, unity of vision refers to more than just the repackaging and rebranding of conventional wisdom or, as has happened most recently with COIN, the rediscovery of forgotten lessons learned. It is not a paradigm shift in the sense that Thomas Kuhn initially used the term.<sup>13</sup> Someone who can achieve unity of vision doesn't only *explain* reality in a new way, but figures out how to get us from war to victory and thereby foresees how to *change* reality, too.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Cross-Cultural Dimension.**

In a sense, unity of vision begs a kind of understanding that is similar to what anthropologists might say all successful cross-cultural endeavors require. Typically, well-trained anthropologists take a bottom up approach; talk to anyone and everyone they can; compare what people say with what they do; and seize

on connections, continuities, inconsistencies, and internal contradictions. Really good anthropologists are as interested in learning from the past as the present, are more interested in “why” than “how,” and do not *study* others so much as internalize their point of view. The best anthropologists go on to produce analyses that even their study subjects find revelatory.

Ruth Benedict, for instance, used just such modes of inquiry to investigate a situation she could not explore first-hand during World War II when she was asked to analyze the Japanese. She did this by talking to as many Japanese and people familiar with Japan as she could. She paid attention to how the Japanese raised their children; spent their days; and thought about honor, the Emperor, sleep, cleanliness, deprivation, auto-eroticism. Everything was fair game because anything might yield a critical insight.

But the same could also be said of Edward Lansdale and how he went about gauging the Filipinos’ mood in the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> He met no one from whom he did not think he could learn something. Presumably, Lawrence was equally sponge-like with the Bedouin.<sup>16</sup> And, as Colonel George Lynch, commander of the 15th Infantry said of Joseph Stilwell in 1937, “Stillwell knows China and the Far East better, in my opinion, than any other officer in the service” — a product of his “tireless curiosity.”<sup>17</sup>

What — we might wonder — prompted such cross-cultural curiosity in men who never enrolled (or had to enroll) in cross-cultural awareness training classes? As facetious as it sounds, “who knows” is the only reasonable answer. Some individuals clearly feel certain affinities others do not, just as some have competencies others do not, which brings us back to the idea of attributes and the incomparable importance of selection.

Consider, for instance, what Krepinevich and Watts say about strategy:

Strategy involves more than enumerating what one hopes to achieve: it entails crafting plausible ways of achieving one's ultimate goals despite limited resources, despite political and other constraints, and despite the best efforts of *opponents* to prevail in achieving their own ends.<sup>18</sup>

"The best efforts of *opponents*," emphasis on the word "opponents" – this implies that the mindset, the calculations, and the capabilities of the enemy *have* to be taken into account, which is precisely where (and why) one might think anthropologists' methods of inquiry should be of service to strategists today. And indeed they are – but only up to a point. This is because, at best, anthropology's contributions to assessing others' strengths and vulnerabilities can only (maybe) get someone partway to understanding. One also needs a deep appreciation for history. But even with both approaches, what no social science method can help with is how to intuit which of *their* features to turn into *our* opportunity.

This is where unity of vision comes in. For better or worse, unity of vision requires an intuitive leap by someone who *already* has enough of a feel for their *and* our realities, and can then go on to sketch a congruent, cohesive, sustainable plan, flexible enough at the level of implementation, but laser like in its focus. Conceptually too, such a plan needs to be easy enough for everyone up and down the chain of command and across government to understand.<sup>19</sup> And, it has also got to be something our partners, whomever they are, will agree to.<sup>20</sup>

Do we have any such strategists today? Let me leave that question hanging for a moment to make the case for unity of vision from a slightly different angle.

## INDIA'S EXAMPLE(S)

India has had to contend with a greater array of insurgencies than any other country in the post-colonial period and, while no military has a particularly impressive record of waging counterinsurgency abroad—and here India is no exception (it failed in Sri Lanka)—Indians have been relatively effective *inside* India.<sup>21</sup> So, what might India's successes teach us? First, that it would be wrong to conclude that success hinges on cultural familiarity, familiarity that we might then mistakenly believe can be taught and thus learned. While familiarity is surely necessary, it is hardly sufficient. Rather, a certain kind—not turn, not frame, but *kind*—of mind is also required.<sup>22</sup>

Take, for instance, K. P. S. Gill and S. K. Sinha.

### **K. P. S. Gill.**

K. P. S. Gill is famous throughout India and beyond for helping crush militant Sikhs' efforts to turn Punjab into the independent state of Khalistan during the 1980s and early 1990s. For a host of reasons, Sikh extremism was treated seriously by the Indian government; among them, a disproportionate number of Sikhs served in the Indian Army and the national police. But also, Indira Gandhi's assassination by two of her Sikh bodyguards in retaliation for the military's assault on the Golden Temple Complex during Operation BLUE STAR lent added urgency to the government's efforts.

Gill was not the first man to be put in charge of crushing Sikh extremism.<sup>23</sup> Nor did he do so single-handedly. He worked closely with both the Army and Punjab's civilian authorities.<sup>24</sup> But the winning strategy for rooting out the militants was largely his, based on a lifetime of police work.<sup>25</sup>

Gill never formally studied COIN. Instead, his knowledge was based on on-the-job learning, beginning with his assignment to the state of Assam as a member of the all-India Indian Police Service (IPS). This is noteworthy because after spending time listening to Gill describe his methods, two things about him become clear.<sup>26</sup> First, from the outset of his police service, he excelled at catching people in their own lies. Either he would listen to what a culprit said, detect the weakness in his (or her) story, and then investigate the truth, or he would make sure he had gathered enough information before the discussion or interrogation even began to walk the guilty party right off the plank. Second, Gill did not just enjoy, but actually looked forward to, getting people to spring traps of their own making.<sup>27</sup> In this regard, he bears an uncanny resemblance to Edward Lansdale.<sup>28</sup> According to his own and others' accounts, Lansdale applied considerable wit and wile to helping Ramon Magsaysay defeat the Huk Rebellion in the Philippines in the 1950s. It is clear from Lansdale's autobiography that he always tried to infuse humor into his operations. One gets the sense that he was also a great raconteur; Gill certainly is, which in turn suggests that there may be something more to a love of plot twists and punch lines than those writing textbooks about counterinsurgency realize. Perhaps thinking in terms of arcs, plots, and character development is critical to unity of vision.

One thing often cited to explain Gill's success (and something he cites) is that he was a Sikh and therefore understood Sikhs. He makes this point in *The Knights of Falsehood*: Not only was he from the same social stratum the militants were bent on radicalizing, but he knew the tenets of the Sikh religion better than they did, and therefore knew exactly how to turn their rhetoric against them.<sup>29</sup> He also had the forensic skills to make his charge stick—that they were perverting the Sikh religion and *were* “knights of falsehood.”

Thus, one lesson that *could* be distilled from Gill's example is that it takes intimate familiarity with what insurgents are peddling to undo them. But this leaves two other points about his background unexplored. First, he was not just steeped in knowledge about the Sikh faith. He knew a lot about other religions as well. And he had a passion for poetry. Together, these avocations would have given him ways to express himself that he would not have acquired simply by studying his opponents alone. Second, as a lifelong policeman, he knew the police; he understood what made the rank and file (and their leaders) tick, and how they could be challenged to operate more effectively.

In sum, Gill could not only plug into the psyches of all the key players in the Khalistan drama (to include journalists, politicians, community leaders, etc.), but he had a well-developed feel for how to appeal to and/or outwit them all equally well, *and* he relished doing so.

### **S. K. Sinha.**

Unlike Gill, S. K. Sinha hails from a very distinguished police family, but chose to devote the bulk of his career to the Indian Army instead, entering it be-

fore Independence and retiring as a Lieutenant General in 1983.<sup>30</sup> Sinha subsequently served as Ambassador to Nepal, Governor of Assam, and, most recently, Governor of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). Like Gill, Sinha spent time in India's Northeast relatively early in his career. He also served in Punjab during an early phase of the insurgency. Another connection between the two men is that they are both extremely well-educated and extremely well-read. Beyond this, however, Sinha's insurgency experiences—and the lessons he offers in his lectures and published writing—would seem to fly in the face of most of those that can be (and are being) distilled from Gill's experiences.

For instance, before being posted to insurgency-ridden Nagaland as a brigade commander, Sinha "read extensively all the available literature on counterinsurgency operations in Malaysia, Vietnam, and Kenya."<sup>31</sup> He also drafted India's first COIN manual. As he put it, "Of course, the experience of security forces in other countries could not be applied in toto, and there was need to make suitable modifications to suit our conditions."<sup>32</sup> Among his innovations was an emphasis on what he came to call "psychological initiatives." In the case of Assam, this meant paying homage to Assam's rich culture and history.

Apart from the usual civic action programme [sic] like building roads, constructing bridges, organizing medical camps, providing veterinary cover and so on, the basic cause of insurgency has to be addressed in a subtle, sustained and specialized manner. In Assam the main cause of insurgency was alienation from the Nation through misconceptions. This was duly addressed through highlighting past cultural, civilizational, spiritual and historical links with the rest of the Nation.<sup>33</sup>

Sinha did this by showcasing Assamese contributions to Indian culture at every turn, both inside the state (and governor's mansion) and outside as Assam's chief booster. His goal was to make "the people of Assam proud of their past and the rest of India proud of Assam."<sup>34</sup> In his view, highlighting Assamese history and culture was as important to achieving security as was providing physical security and promoting economic development. Indeed, he considered all three equally critical to reincorporating the Assamese *into* India, and together they comprised his "three-prong" approach to counterinsurgency.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Sinha relied on the same three prongs in Kashmir where he similarly insisted on a unified command and on economic development. However, unlike in Assam where he focused on oil refineries and tube wells to boost local productivity, in Kashmir he concentrated on extending the railroad and bringing electricity to villages. He likewise tailored civic action to specific Kashmiri needs. For instance, he supported a Department of Kashmir Studies at Kashmir University and helped emphasize Sufi traditions and *Kashmiryat*. Same method—some might say—different tools. Yet, was Sinha really applying the same approach? If reincorporation meant reminding Assamese and Indians beyond Assam how tied together they had always been, reincorporation of Kashmir required gently underscoring differences instead—namely, between Kashmiri and Pakistani (and other "foreign" forms of) Islam.

Here is where the devil lurks in the details, which means so might strategic insight. Imagine, for instance, if we wanted to distill Sinha's approach into a principle that could then be turned into a replicable practice. How would we codify it? Maybe: *Appreciate*

*local history, religion, traditions, and priorities. Use what can be used for glue as glue and use what works as a wedge as a wedge.* Or that, at any rate, would be one way to generically summarize something that could work equally well in regions as diverse as Assam and J&K.

Yet, what does such a platitude really tell us? It conveys nothing about how to actually figure out what might work *as* either glue or wedge. It offers nothing concrete or actionable. It would not help assist anyone who could not already read the local culture for himself, while the supreme irony is that for these very reasons it is precisely the kind of tenet a Sinha or Gill would never need.

## THE LAWRENCE PARADOX

One problem with the U.S. military's current fixation on collating and disseminating COIN principles and related tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs)—or, the *what* and the *how*—is that these are all retrospective, while (as most manuals acknowledge) *to be* successful requires that individuals innovate and improvise anew. This is what Gill and Sinha had to do—which is why what they did then became noteworthy. At a certain point, each man may have realized he was employing his own distinctive method. Clearly, Sinha came to think in terms of three prongs, and when he was assigned to J&K, he adapted what he felt had worked for him in Assam. Intuitively, Gill may have known only a Sikh policeman would be able to successfully crush the Khalistan movement. But not just any Sikh policeman managed that feat. He did—a fact that will always be remembered once what he did is captured in the Gill Doctrine. However, as soon as such a distillation occurs, it also helps sweep from

view the real source of his success, namely *his coup d'oeil*, which is the very thing no one else can duplicate.<sup>35</sup>

Maybe it is not fair to blame T. E. Lawrence for this paradox — of reducible but unduplicable insight.<sup>36</sup> Lawrence was, after all, quite specific that his “Twenty-seven Articles,” which represented his compilation of what worked among the Bedouin, should only be applied to Bedouin. But, did he really mean this? He knew at the time he published his list that the Bedouin were on the verge of change, thanks to the very Revolt he helped them orchestrate. Thus, it is hard not to conclude that Lawrence wanted people to carry his 27 principles into other settings. He may even have hoped they would so that no one would have to reinvent his wheel. In other words, perhaps Lawrence did genuinely seek to prevent others from having to learn lessons the hard way themselves. But we also cannot ignore the fact that through disseminating his lessons, he was also ensuring that everyone would remember it was he who *had* invented the wheel.

Lawrence belonged to a class and generation for whom blatant self-promotion or claims that he, T. E. Lawrence, was the real key to his success, would have been unseemly. Cleverly, he let others (along with the authorship of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*) do this for him. But any form of positive publicity can help create the paradox: success attracts attention. Success signals that someone has done something new and different that works. It is only understandable that everyone will then want to know *what* worked and how to replicate it. Ergo, the keen interest in distilling lessons learned while, when these are good lessons, it seems only natural that they then be condensed into principles that can be taught.

Here, however, is where it is instructive to return to the examples offered by Gill's and Sinha's accounts, since the real substance of their accomplishments is to be found in the details of their anecdotes. Ask Mr. Gill how he knew what to do in a particular situation, and he has to describe the particularities of that situation; invariably it was the specifics of *that* situation that led him to play his hand the way he did. Indeed, in listening to Gill and reading Sinha, it is doubtful that anyone else would have done what they did quite the way they did it. Nor did they have to refer to anyone else's principles to know what to do or try to do. Instead, what comes through time and again is that these two men relished their ability to pull the rug out from under their opponents. They could no more *not* rise to that challenge than they could *not* read people. All of this was autonomic.

But, if that is true, then is anything they did *really* replicable? Worth asking too, is to what extent was their vision context-specific. If someone has the ability to read people and the local scene in one setting, can s/he read *any* set of people and *any* local scene? Would Lawrence have been any good against the Huks? Could Lansdale have helped Prince Faisal best the Ottomans?

As Brent Lindeman makes clear in a recent master's thesis that focuses on pre-Awakening successes achieved by two different U.S. Army Special Forces team sergeants working with tribal leaders in al Anbar Province (Iraq), individuals have to be considered in the round, and not just as the sum of a set of attributes.<sup>37</sup> This is in no small measure because the kinds of traits everyone likes to list are precisely those that certain military units (like Special Forces) already say they screen for. Yet, everyone in these units clearly does not perform like a Gill or a Sinha—or like Lin-

deman's two exceptional team sergeants. This is also why Malcolm Gladwell's notion of *connectors*, *mavens*, and *salesmen* may offer a more useful heuristic than anything anyone writing about COIN has come up with thus far.

According to Gladwell, connectors know lots of people in lots of different social circles; mavens know as much as it is possible to know about a particular subject; and salesmen know how to get people to change their minds.<sup>38</sup> Apply this to counterinsurgency, and those responsible for policing or helping to police communities at the local level should be able to identify the connectors, mavens, and salesmen in the communities they are responsible for protecting. They should want to do this not only because it is the most effective way for them to generate intelligence, but because it is the most expedient means by which to keep their fingers on the pulse.

If we were to then think about foreign internal defense more broadly – say regionally within a country or even nationally – what should we want those at the operational level to be able to do? Presumably we would want them to be able to think (and potentially act) *like* connectors, mavens, and salesmen themselves. After all, these are the individuals who need to stitch together the big picture. Consequently, they need to be able to think (and/or operate) comfortably *across* communities (plural) and know more than just a cursory amount about their allies and the enemy.<sup>39</sup>

Push on this further and what does this suggest about those responsible for devising strategy? Ideally, those who devise strategy should possess the insights and abilities of a connector, maven, and salesman all rolled into one. Is it a coincidence that this describes the very varied individuals who have achieved unity of vision in the past? That seems unlikely.

## One More Indian Example.

Or just consider for a moment the man who may have been the 20th century's greatest insurgent *and* counter to an armed insurgency: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Unlike Mao (who often earns the title as the 20th century's preeminent guerrilla warfare leader), Gandhi did not simply adopt and then adapt tried and true guerrilla warfare methods. He pioneered – invented, actually – militant nonviolence. Not only did he use nonviolence to help Indians secure their independence, but, in doing so, inspired nonviolent movements around the world, to include the civil rights movement in the United States. Whether it should be Gandhi or Mao who is judged to have had a more lasting impact on modern perceptions of effective struggle, of the two, Gandhi was the clear cross-cultural master. He had to be to both galvanize Indians and hoist the British on their own petard.

By taking what he learned from having studied for the bar in England, Gandhi was able to cleverly use the Brits' own legal system against them. In addition to understanding how important it was for the British to retain the moral high ground, he recognized how game-changing it would be if he could cut this out from under them. What makes his insights even more impressive is that to do so in the court of law was one feat. But to do so in the court of Indian public opinion – at the same time that he was shaping that opinion – meant Gandhi also had to understand groups and castes he would not have been exposed to without purposely seeking them out.

As hagiographic as Richard Attenborough's 1982 film, *Gandhi*, might be, it is still instructive to watch. It is hard to come away without admiring Gandhi for

being able to bait the British so effectively. By all accounts, Gandhi possessed a keen sense of humor. He was also brilliant at improvisation. Even when he was only just beginning to feel his way toward Satyagraha in South Africa, it could be said: “he did not quite know yet what he was going to do, but he had already created an expectancy from which he would take his cues.”<sup>40</sup> For instance, he certainly had not planned on rallying the Indian community in Johannesburg, South Africa, to take an oath of solidarity in September 1906, but, improvising on the spot, that is exactly what he got Indians in Johannesburg to do. Only as this happened did Gandhi realize, as he said later, that “some new principle had come into being to which at first he gave the name ‘passive resistance’.”<sup>41</sup>

What is critical to note is not just that Gandhi intuitively understood how to build his own momentum, but that he did so by always teasing, testing, and probing. Anything could be turned into an opportunity—to include the British urge to throw him into jail—though of course what helped him turn British strength into a weakness while highlighting Indians’ weakness as their strength, were his own strengths: his caste (upper), his networks of friends and followers, his deep knowledge of the law, and his gift for being able to communicate with people from all walks of life. In other words, it was his attributes as a connector, maven, and salesman *across* different cultures that granted him the unity of vision to see how Indians would, could, and should prevail.

## IMPLICATIONS

How far can we push this Gladwell heuristic, or the Gill, Sinha, and Gandhi examples? Probably not too far

or they will tempt us to devise another “checklist.” At best, being a connector, maven, and salesman is suggestive. One thing it suggests is that more should be made of individuals’ singularity, just as more should be done to mitigate the Lawrence Paradox.

For a host of reasons, the United States should rethink the usefulness of counterinsurgency and irregular warfare doctrine. Without question, most Soldiers and Marines need some sort of guide, or at the very least, left and right limits. TTPs, and “dos and don’ts” help serve these purposes. At the same time, few veterans would want anyone to have to learn (or relearn) lessons the hard way if this can be helped. But consider what doctrine draws on. There are entire shelves full of books about best practices in COIN, unconventional warfare, irregular warfare, etc. Ironically, the best of these collate lessons from first-person accounts. In fact, this is exactly how the works now considered classic were first put together during the Vietnam era: writers drew on examples from World War II, Kenya, Malaya, and Algeria. Since September 11, 2001 (9/11), many of these classics have been reissued or their material has been repackaged and updated by new authors. Indeed, there are now so many of these works in addition to new field manuals that no one has to go back to read first-person narratives at all. Plus, why wade through so much specificity? First-person accounts are too particular to time and place. Better to cut to the chase with genericized lessons learned instead.<sup>42</sup>

However, as this monograph has argued, the penchant to genericize in and of itself teaches the wrong lesson. It implies that once the right lessons have been taught and trained, anyone should be able to apply them. Yet, history suggests this is hardly the case. More to the point, those who orchestrated suc-

cessful campaigns in the past invariably broke new ground. That is *why* their campaigns succeeded. This was usually in the wake of something old and tried, which means such individuals came to the situation able to read and analyze it differently than their predecessors, or they saw different possibilities, or both. Not everyone can do this. Nor can everyone assemble what amounts to their own doctrine from the vectors that others' doctrine strips away – and especially not when the vectors are comprised of arc, plot, and character. Worse, strip out the specificity, and there goes the neighborhood, along with all the necessary context. Or to put this in even more basic terms, if you do not already know who you can trust and/or do not have what it takes yourself to be able to quickly identify trustworthy connectors, mavens, and salesmen in someone else's culture, it is doubtful that you will succeed. Arguably this does not just hold at the tactical on-the-street level, but at "god" level, too.

A second problem with doctrine as it relates to cross-cultural contexts (as opposed to doctrine designed to help mesh and organize men and machines) is that it requires too much updating. As it is, DoD is forever changing terms, which then requires that training be realigned with whatever are the new terms' points of reference. In contrast, how much effort does the military expend on refining its assessment and selection tools? Ask most of those who have served on advisory teams in Iraq about this. Or ask why so few of the military's preeminent advisors – Special Forces Soldiers and Officers – have volunteered for military transition teams (MiTTs).

The law of averages alone suggests that somewhere in the field right now are individuals with the abilities of an K. P. S. Gill or an S. K. Sinha. But what is

being done to try to identify, let alone, promote them? Many might point to career progression and pipeline challenges as the problem. But integral to the wrong incentive structure is a more fundamental recognition problem.<sup>43</sup>

Among the things that could be done to ameliorate this situation is to use doctrine as a screening tool for assessment and selection. For instance, if COIN principles do not strike individuals as generic common sense—if individuals do not respond to advice about the importance of establishing rapport or securing trust with “well, duh” — then these individuals should not lead others in COIN environments. In other words, COIN doctrine should probably be relegated to little more than a screening mechanism—which is not to suggest that COIN doctrine and history should not be taught. Rather, it is to take seriously the prospect that if *coup d’oeil* is a trait and not a skill, then, as with the strategic competence Krepinievich and Watts describe, people either have this ability or they do not. Certainly, individuals thrown into novel situations might discover they have hidden talents they were not previously aware of, just as people’s vision can expand or contract with experience. But not even this will be able to be gauged if assessment and *reassessment*, or as Moyar notes of COIN leadership generally, selection and deselection, are not taken seriously.

If it turns out that *coup d’oeil* is context-specific, which it may well be for some individuals—like a Lawrence but not necessarily a Gandhi (who was as effective in South Africa as he was in India)—then “fit” and determining who belongs where becomes all the more important, if not all-important. That, in turn, makes selection even trickier, but hardly insurmountable since there are not *that* many people who

can combine the attributes of connector, maven, and salesman all in one, let alone *also* possess a *fingerspitzengefühl* for the enemy.<sup>44</sup> Again, the latter is not just critical for getting the enemy to undo himself, but no amount of COIN study, regardless of how many cases someone reads about, or Ph.D.s he has advising him, will suffice for being able to know what to do oneself. Could this help explain why we have had so much difficulty since 9/11? Have we had anyone with these capabilities at the helm?

To be fair, no one with the right kind of mind may have known enough about Iraq or Afghanistan prior to our return to these theaters, or those who knew enough may not have had the right kind of mind. Either way, what we did not have available in 2001 or 2003—or, arguably, still—should speak volumes about the need to begin assessing and selecting *now* for the individuals from among whom we will need unity of vision in the future. One of the few silver linings to the protracted nature of both conflicts is that we have a very large pool of young Americans with considerable experience abroad in difficult circumstances. Among them already will be those who do not like “them,” others who do not get “us,” many who cannot triangulate cross-culturally, and some who have almost everything it takes but still will not be able to make that final leap of wanting to out-wile the enemy. If history is any guide, individuals with the right stuff sometimes make themselves stand out. At other times, the sun, the moon, and the stars have to align just so. Consequently, self-selection may require more than just a few strategic nudges, though overarching what we desperately need—a new emphasis on selection, assessment, and reassessment—remains the cautionary proviso that there is nothing prescriptive we can

be sure *will* work, not even when it comes to finding the right *who* to be in charge. But – get those who "get" this right and we will be that much closer to having the right *whos* from which to choose.

## ENDNOTES

1. Not the most felicitous term, except as it can serve to trump those other two unities, "unity of command" and "unity of effort."

2. William Dugan, *Coup d'oeil: Strategic Planning in Army Planning*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, November 2005.

3. Thanks are owed to Thomas Mahnken for funding this research when he was Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Policy Planning; as well as to Steve Whitmarsh, Wade Ishimoto, Chandi Duke Heffner, Ajai Sanhi, K. P. S. Gill, and Tanveer Ahmed for their invaluable assistance in India. Points made here were initially written up in a research report on "Anthropology and Irregular Warfare" co-authored with Mike Weathers, further refined in a conference paper, "Unity of Vision: What It Is and Why We Need It," presented at the Biennial International Conference of the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces & Society, October 2009.

4. Andrew Krepinevich and Barry Watts, "Regaining Strategic Competence," *Strategy for the Long Haul Series*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA), 2009, p. 41.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

8. Mark Moyar, *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009, p. 3.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

10. Krepinevich and Watts, p. 40.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

12. It is important to distinguish between colonial era cross-cultural encounters and post-colonial conflict for two reasons: different goals and different methods.

13. Ironically, the Pentagon may be among the most chronic misusers of his concept. Many in the military, along with their civilian counterparts, seem to be under the impression that people can decide to shift a paradigm and, by dint of their decision, shift it. But according to Kuhn, paradigms shift when the gap between what theory can and cannot explain becomes too noticeable to be ignored, and an alternative—already in the wings—does the job better.

14. Or, for another way to think about unity of vision, consider this description of Warren Buffet's method: "invert, always invert. Turn a situation or problem upside down. Look at it backward. What's in it for the other guy? What happens if all our plans go wrong? Where don't we want to go, and how do you get there? Instead of looking for success, make a list of how to fail instead" —from Paul Carroll's review of Alice Schroeder's biography of Warren Buffet (Paul Carroll, "Why Panic Passes Him By," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 15, 2008, p. A17.)

15. According to Jonathan Nashel, *Edward Lansdale's Cold War*, Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005, this is how Lansdale operated whenever he was abroad.

16. Article #2 of T. E. Lawrence's "Twenty-seven Articles," *Arab Bulletin* #60, August 20, 1917, states: "Learn all you can about your Ashraf and Bedu. Get to know their families, clans and tribes, friends and enemies, wells, hills, and roads. Do all this by listening and by indirect inquiry. Do not ask questions. Get to speak their dialect of Arabic, not yours. Until you can understand their allusions avoid getting deep into conversation, or you will drop bricks. Be a little stiff at first."

17. Barbara Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China 1911-45*, New York: Bantam Books, 1978 (originally 1971), p. 206; “tireless curiosity” is Tuchman’s term, p. 46.

18. Krepinevich and Watts, p. 13, emphasis by the author.

19. Or at least enough people and/or key principals.

20. Under certain kinds of foreign policy, it could even be *how* we decide whom to partner with.

21. Tribal insurgencies have been ongoing in India’s North-east since Independence. Insurgencies involving religion have engulfed Punjab and Kashmir. Most recently, Naxalism—a version of Maoism—has posed a threat in multiple states.

22. Equally critical and worthy of examination is India’s administrative structure which, as sclerotic as it has become, still offers a compelling model for how an otherwise communally divided country can: (a) organize itself to thwart insurgents, and (b) support a meritocratic, apolitical civil service, national police, and professional army.

23. Mr. Gill himself contends that he waged war against terrorists and criminals, not insurgents, and makes a marked distinction between the two.

24. Who, at the time, were also Sikhs—a nontrivial fact.

25. For more, see Mark Tully, “Operation Black Thunder,” in *No Full Stops in India*, London, UK: Penguin Books, 1991.

26. In February 2008.

27. Akin to the Coyote in Wile Coyote and Roadrunner cartoons, but with the difference that Gill would *catch* Roadrunners (plural). Wile—seeing the humor in the trap one devises, and setting traps that will be the stuff of stories—may be an absolutely essential, woefully under-remarked trait.

28. As conveyed in Lansdale's autobiography, *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1991, as well as in accounts about him.

29. K. P. S. Gill, *The Knights of Falsehood*, available from [satp.org/satporgrp/publication/nightsoffalsehood/falsehoodl.htm](http://satp.org/satporgrp/publication/nightsoffalsehood/falsehoodl.htm).

30. I am drawing on Sinha's written accounts: Lieutenant General S. K. Sinha, *A Soldier Recalls*, New Delhi, India: Lancer International, 1992; and Lieutenant General (Ret.) S. K. Sinha, *A Governor's Musings: Soldier Statesman Speaks*, New Delhi, India: Manas Publications, 2006; and I am treating S. K. Sinha as a successful COIN strategist not only because Indians do, but because he made major strides as Governor even though insurgency persists. Assam and J&K are considerably different from each other and from Punjab, where K. P. S. Gill had the full backing of the state, for a variety of reasons already alluded to, and achieved total success.

31. Sinha, *A Soldier Recalls*, p. 204.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Sinha, *A Governor's Musings*, pp. 234-235.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

35. Without question, the lessons they learned merit teaching. But by focusing on the *product* of their trial and error – the lessons learned – it is too easy to lose sight of what they came to the situation already knowing, and knowing how to do. For Gill's doctrine, see *The Knights of Falsehood*. Also see Prem Mahadevan, "The Gill Doctrine: A Model for 21st Century Counter-terrorism?," *Faultlines*, Vol. 19, April 2008, available from [www.satp.org/satporgrp/publication/faultlines/volume19/Articlel.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/publication/faultlines/volume19/Articlel.htm).

36. First published in *Arab Bulletin* #60, August 20, 1917. Granted, Lawrence helped spearhead an insurgency, not a counterinsurgency, but his "articles" have inspired an endless number of COIN spin-offs.

37. Brent Lindeman, *Better Lucky Than Good: A Theory of Unconventional Minds and the Power of 'Who,'* master's of science thesis, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, December 2009.

38. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*, New York: Little, Brown, 2000.

39. None of which is to say that those at ground level should not be able to think strategically, too. But, at a minimum, this seems to be what is needed to operate tactically, coordinate operations, and devise strategy. Needing to be able to operate across communities is also required when it comes to the Interagency, as does (maybe?) being familiar with the 'enemy.'

40. Erik Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Non-violence*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1993 (originally 1969), p. 199.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

42. For example, here is a summary description from a very good paper delivered to a COIN-oriented American audience about India's COIN lessons learned. Colonel Behram A. Sahukar, "The Indian Approach to Counterinsurgency Operations," unpublished/undated manuscript circulated in Spring 2008: "This document has attempted to *formalize* the conduct of COIN operations and has emphasized that all military [actions] in COIN operations all actions [sic] must [be] people-centric, confirm [sic] to the laid down laws, use minimum force and aim at restoring civilian control, while at the same time acting aggressively against those elements who receive foreign support and are bent on confronting the government and exploiting the laws of war," emphasis by the author). The aim, clearly, is for doctrine to be widely applicable. Tellingly, while the paper cites occasional individuals—like S. K. Sinha—it does not discuss the significance of particular individuals for, or in, COIN. This could reflect a military tic: selection of the right individuals to serve in the right billets is presumably reflected in rank, and context and "fit" should not matter and should not need to be taken into account, at least not by anyone outside the unit.

43. For a slightly different take on incentive challenges, see Brent Clemmer, *Aligned Incentives: Could the Army's Award System Inadvertently Be Hindering Counterinsurgency Operations*, master's of science thesis, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, June 2009.

44. To reiterate: "expertise" in COIN is no substitute. All COIN expertise encourages is parachute assessments.

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