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The dangerous myths and dubious promise of COIN

Douglas Porch

Counterinsurgency (COIN) is a topic of both contemporary and historical interest in the age of what has been called a global counterinsurgency. It is totally appropriate that historians should devote attention to COIN doctrine that is being rediscovered by military organisations and that has spawned its own ‘latter-day priesthood.’ This priesthood argues that population-centric, ‘hearts and minds’ doctrines offers a formula for success in winning over people and places in the grip of terrorist organisations.¹

This latest espousal of COIN as a war-winning formula by a group of military intellectuals and commanders ironically comes at a time when historians are increasingly questioning whether ‘hearts and minds’ strategies – anchored in minimum force, aid to the civil, and tactically flexible formations – ever actually formed the core of COIN strategies, let alone whether they were as effective as their proponents claimed.² Doubts over whether COIN will be able to deliver victory in Afghanistan,³ as well as the very tenuous stability produced by the so-called ‘surge’ in Iraq, have generated a number of COIN critics who argue that historical claims for COIN success, based on courting popular gratitude by improving economic conditions, are at best anchored in selective historical memory, when not fantasy fabrications.⁴

A second complaint is that COIN is a Western construct. Not only do COIN theorists, in the words of Brian Lynn, “project U.S. values onto foreign populations.”⁵ In addition, they operate within the context of liberal peace theory and its “single sustainable model of national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise,”⁶ in the words of the 2002 U.S. *National Security Strategy*. Rather than a vehicle for modern state-building, COIN is denounced as a revival of nineteenth century divide-and-rule imperialism masquerading as state-building.

Given the rich history of COIN going back over at least two centuries, the activities at the CIHM conference are not merely an exercise in historical curiosity. They can provide a perspective, a reality check, a foundational investigation into the assumptions and strategic context in which COIN has developed and in which it is applied. This examination should help to remind strategists, planners, intelligence operatives, politicians and others, that while insurgencies share certain common characteristics, every insurgency plays out in a particular historical context, is the product of a particular set of grievances and is shaped by unique ethnic, geographic, resource, ideological and strategic factors that defy a formulaic approach.

COIN: past and present

That COIN gradually emerged as a separate category of warfare can be linked to two historic factors: the professionalization of European warfare in the nineteenth century, and the emergence of a coherent doctrine of subversion in the twentieth. Wellesley may have been derided as a “Sepoy general” by Napoleon, but his India experience was not seen as a

disqualifier for command in Europe. However, the professionalization of European warfare in the nineteenth century left French imperial soldiers with the feeling that the conquest and policing of empire was professionally undervalued – a category of sub-war considered a poor preparation for ‘real’ war on the European continent. Critics complained that proficiency in imperial warfare was bought at the expense of preparation for continental conflict. This was especially true in France, where blame for the 1870 defeat against Prussia was laid at the feet of ‘African’ generals, whose decades of experience in raids and skirmishes in Algeria and Mexico was judged poor preparation for ‘real’ war.

The foundation of the post-1871 French military renaissance rested on the assumption that metropolitan and colonial warfare constituted separate categories of conflict. Liberated from Clausewitzian constraints, colonial soldiers were free to characterise their brand of warfare in Jominian terms. In the 1890s, Callwell and Lyautey defined a ‘small wars school,’ which emphasised not only the nobility of imperial soldiering, but also its unique requirements. Callwell argued that small war constituted “an art by itself” that required considerable tactical flexibility, unlike what he categorised as the “stereotyped system” prevalent in Europe.⁷

Lyautey publicised the “oil spot” and “combining politics with force” methods of Generals Pennequin and Gallieni. Efforts to separate colonial warfare from its conventional counterpart were calculated to bolster the image of colonial soldiering as a unique calling and a specialised category of conflict. It also sought to neutralise the intrusion of the national government into the management of imperial conquest. So, what was presented as imperial military methods became both a public relations exercise and a ‘tactic in a box’ to market foreign expansion as both effortless and low risk. COIN offered a win-win formula that would both expand the influence of the homeland and benefit the local populations, who would see invasion as a ‘liberation.’

Mao’s People’s War and the birth of COIN

A second factor that contributed to the elevation of COIN into a stand-alone category of warfare was the globalisation of insurgency following the Great War, first as an anti-imperial, nationalist phenomenon, and subsequently as a theory of subversion anchored in a communist-inspired ‘people’s war.’ Mao’s assertion – that if properly organised and sequenced, insurgency can produce strategic results – turned post-1918 nationalist rebellions into an orchestrated communist threat to the West’s ‘civilising mission.’

Surprisingly, given the French lack of success against what they categorised as *la guerre révolutionnaire* in the post-1945 wars, the latest U.S. *Army/Marine Corps field manual 3-24, Counterinsurgency* claims to take inspiration in part from a French veteran of the Algerian war, David Galula. But Galula is simply the preamble for the true unfinished business that inspires what is being referred to as the COINista school: the U.S. defeat in Vietnam. Fundamental to the COINista ideology is the U.S. Army’s alleged institutional aversion to counterinsurgency, which brought defeat in Vietnam, a charge most forcefully put by Andrew Krepinevich in his 1986 book, *The Army and Vietnam*.⁸

Indeed, the COINista gospel asserts that there is a right and wrong way to fight insurgencies. If the French proved to be too brutal and the U.S. military was too structurally conventional and firepower focused, the British developed the correct balance between persuasion and force. Thus, while COINistas' shared memory starts with Vietnam, their historiography begins with Tom Mockaitis's 1990 *British counterinsurgency*, which basically argues that building on the lessons of the 1919 Amritsar massacre and the 1921 loss of Eire, London institutionalised the idea of 'minimum force,' civil-military cooperation 'aid to the civil,' and tactical flexibility based on decentralised decision-making as the central principles of its counterinsurgency operations.

The rise of neo-imperialism in the 1990s provided the intellectual climate that, following the 9/11 attack on the United States, has jumpstarted the COIN renaissance. Such neo-imperialists as Max Boot, Robert Kaplan, Niall Ferguson, and the liberal internationalist Joseph Nye have argued that the requirement for international order compels the West led by the United States once again to take up the 'White Man's Burden,' predicting that the universal appeal of Western values and institutions will cause right-thinking non-Western peoples to welcome occupation as a liberation.

The 'end of history' opened the door to a group of young U.S. officers who see counterinsurgency as a mission set and who offer COIN as a doctrine around which the U.S. military can organise, much as British officers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries embraced the preservation of empire their *raison d'être*. John Nagl's *Learning to eat soup with a knife* resurrects the 1970s debate about the nature of the Vietnam War. Nagl's arguments are echoed by Australian COIN expert David Kilcullen, who, in his 2010 *The accidental guerrilla: fighting small wars in the midst of a big one*, repeats the mantra that counterinsurgency constitutes a special category of warfare carried out in a globalised environment.

Flawed History

There are several problems with the COINista arguments, but let's begin by challenging the Mockaitis-Nagl assertion that the British military broke the code on counterinsurgency in the inter-war years and managed to become an exemplary 'learning organisation' that transmitted its 'minimum force/aid to the civil' wisdom through the generations. The British Army did not have a particularly exemplary record at COIN or at any warfare, for that matter, at the time of Malaya. In *The politics of the British Army*, Hew Strachan argues that 'aid to the civil' was not imperial practice and that victories in British colonial campaigns were bought with timely political concessions, not earned through the efficiency of British COIN tactics.⁹

As for national styles of counterinsurgency, Chris Bayly and Tim Harper writing of decolonisation in Southeast Asia and David Anderson's masterful book on the Mau Mau have revealed them as wars every bit as repressive – even 'dirty' – as those fought by the French.¹⁰ 'Minimum force' and unity of civil-military control were treated as foreign concepts in North Ireland between 1969 and 1976, which contributed to the notorious *Bloody Sunday* incident of 1972 and to the ballooning of popular support for the IRA in the Catholic community.¹¹

Conclusion

What are the important takeaways about COIN? First, the claim that COIN constitutes a separate category of warfare, one made at least since the 1890s, is contentious at best. In the final analysis, Callwell's definition of COIN as "an art by itself" basically boils down to a mastery of small unit tactics, the acquisition of tactical intelligence, and a capacity to drink endless glasses of tea with tribal sheiks as they exact their price for cooperation. Historically, COIN-centric armies – the French in 1870 and the British in two World Wars – have had trouble adapting to conventional operations, not vice versa. Krepinevich argues that the U.S. Army in Vietnam failed to make the transition from conventional to COIN, and so lost. But the basic problem for the Americans in Vietnam was the strategic context in which the war was fought, not the tactics used. Meanwhile, 'conventional' U.S. forces have proven quick learners in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A second point is that, in many settings, COIN methods are mustered to support an agenda based on a set of assumptions that are quintessentially Western, and hence alien and unrealisable. Strategic goals like exporting 'freedom,' 'democracy' and the free enterprise system abroad as laid out in the U.S. *National Security Strategy* are at a best vague, when not totally destabilising, policy framework in which to implement COIN doctrine. Third, the role of historians is to establish the factual record so that mythologized versions of the past are not offered as a formula for the future. Theories based in shoddy research and flawed and selective analysis of cases are not only a-historical. They can lead to people getting killed because they fail to convey that each insurgency is a contingent event in which doctrine, operations, and tactics must support a viable policy and strategy, not the other way around.

Last, my guess is that we are on the downside of COIN for a variety of reasons, beginning with the fact that the 'liberal peace' justification for intervention is becoming less attractive to Western populations, if for no other reason that it has become horribly expensive. But the certainty is that predictions for success of COIN doctrines anchored in mythologized history and selective memory are perilous propositions.

Douglas Porch is a Professor at the Naval Postgraduate School (USA). This text is a concise transcription of his keynote address at the CIHM Congress (organised by the Netherlands Institute for Military History) in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, August 2010.

1. Lt. Colonel John A. Nagl, "The evolution and importance of *Army/Marine Corps field manual 3-24, Counterinsurgency*," www.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/84119.html.
2. Two recent works that cast new light on British counterinsurgency practices are Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten wars. The end of Britain's Asian empire*, (London: Penguin, 2007) and David Anderson, *Histories of the hanged. Britain's dirty war in Kenya and the end of empire*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005).

3. Helene Cooper and Mark Landler, "Targeted killing is new U.S. focus in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, 31 July, 2010; Albert R. Hunt, "A collapsing policy in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, 8 August, 2010.
4. An excellent recent article is Alex Marshall, "Imperial nostalgia, the liberal lie, and the perils of postmodern counterinsurgency," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 21, No. 2, June 2010, pp. 233-258.
5. Brian McAllister Linn, *Echo of battle. The Army's way of war*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 181.
6. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf>, p. 3.
7. C.E. Callwell, *Small wars*, pp. 23, 256-285.
8. Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army in Vietnam*, (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1986); see also, Krepinevich "Recovery from defeat. The U.S. Army in Vietnam," in George Andreopoulos and Harold Selesky, *Aftermath of defeat: societies, armed forces and the challenge of recovery*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 125-34.
9. Hew Strachan, *The politics of the British Army*, (Oxford: OUP, 1997), 181.
10. Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten wars. The end of Britain's Asian Empire*, (London: Penguin, 2007) attribute the British "victory" in Malaya to a policy of repression and deportation, and the egregious failure of the Malayan Communist Party to build a cross-communal coalition and collect the funds necessary to finance insurrection. David Anderson, *Histories of the hanged. Britain's dirty war in Kenya and the end of empire*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005) argues that the British pursued a brutal war stripped of human rights protection "while maintaining the appearance of accountability, transparency, and justice." P. 6.
11. Aaron Edwards, "Misapplying lessons learned? Analysing the utility of British counterinsurgency strategy in Northern Ireland, 1971-1976," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 21, No. 2. June 2010, p. 318.