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The Strange Death of the Counter-insurgency Era

What lessons can we learn from the counter-insurgency era that spanned the US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq? As M L R Smith and D M Jones see it, COIN was more of a narrative than an empirical concept, it concealed ideologically-tainted modernization projects that worked at cross purposes with actual needs, and much more.

By MLR Smith and David Martin Jones for ISN

The notion of counter-insurgency is an elusive idea that in general terms simply denotes the attempt to confront a challenge to established authority, but which came to function as a synonym for long-term external armed interventions by Western states, most notably in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the mid-2000s, 'COIN' was elevated to a position of explicit importance in defence thinking and became a source of endless fascination in analytical circles. The 'classical' thinkers of counter-insurgency were resurrected from a largely forgotten past and became an object of reverence. COIN became the defining military practice of the age.

Since 2011 Western forces have been withdrawn from major theatres of operation. In 2014 Western nations ended their major combat roles in Afghanistan. Once heralded as an almost universal formula for success in complex interventions, the costs, consequences, and controversies associated with the counter-insurgency era have left an ambiguous and unfulfilled legacy. Analytical opinion has already moved on. The occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan that once loomed large in political life have already begun to fade from view, displaced by new and different crises on the world stage. Few have stopped to ponder the aftermath. Now that most of the troops have gone, what should we make of the ambiguous COIN era?

In particular, commentary still struggles to answer the most fundamental question: what, exactly, is counter-insurgency? COIN's ambivalent character is partly explained by the lack of clarity of the term it is intended to counter: 'insurgency'. Analysts and practitioners have deployed terms as various as small wars, irregular war, unconventional war, guerrilla or revolutionary war in an attempt to capture this indistinct phenomenon. These various terms have rarely succeeded in clarifying what precisely an insurgency is. Accordingly, the notion of counter-insurgency is rendered equally obscure and malleable, one that can cover anything from policing operations to large-scale military combat.

COIN as narrative

Dissecting the term counter-insurgency reveals not so much a concept as a *narrative*. Its actual

meaning may be contested, but as an explanatory mechanism through which the past can be filtered, it becomes a powerful tool. For example, between 2007 and 2011, the COIN narrative maintained that the confusion and complexity of Iraq's post-invasion civil strife could be reduced to a single understanding: 'an insurgency'. This required applying the recently re-discovered tactics of classic population-centric Cold War counter-insurgency, distilling them into *The US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*. The decline in violence in Iraq after the 2007 'surge' seemed to vindicate the approach. Irrespective of a genuine causal connection, Western militaries extolled the virtues of COIN. The counter-insurgency school became an intellectual movement, advancing through the corridors of power, think tanks and academe.

The narrative power of COIN lay not only in that it offered a simple, if deceptive, explanation of the decrease in violence in Iraq after 2007 but that it purported to identify recurrent patterns of conflict that yielded enduring tactical lessons for operational conduct. This claim rested on the analysis of supposedly 'classic' counter-insurgency campaigns, most notably the British conduct of the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960) and French practice during the Algerian War (1954–1962). Other cases also made appearances in the narrative, either as positive or negative examples. These included the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya (1952–1960), the Northern Ireland conflict (1968–1998) and Vietnam (1965–1975). The somewhat arbitrary conflation of these diverse conflicts under the rubric of COIN gave historical veracity to the narrative.

COIN as apolitical science

Thus, COIN's centrality to contemporary debate over armed conflict derived from the apparent proof that past practice yielded lessons for current and future wars. That the theory identified a distinct form of conflict, characterised as insurgency, led naturally to the assertion that a series of palliative methods and core operational principles could be implemented that would, if correctly applied, ensure success. These practices invariably included: securing the loyalty of the population; grievance reduction; the integration of civic action plans; democracy and human rights promotion; and the minimum application of military force in overarching programmes described in terms of 'clear, hold, and build'. This emphasis on technique, however, came at the expense of the contingency of political decision-making that always gives rise to war and which exerts a continuous influence over military operations.

The methodology of COIN, therefore, reflected an attempt to scientifically rationalise warfare into a series of steps or procedures, promoting the technical 'how', over the political (and more complicated) 'why'. The overriding concern for the 'how' of operational conduct thus pre-empted vital strategic questions about proportionality: for example, what crucial political values are at stake in interventions and what costs are worth incurring to defend them? The 'why' question is political and depends upon contingent circumstances. COIN theory not only had no answer to the question, it never saw fit to even pose it.

The ideology of COIN

This leads onto another of the characteristics of the COIN advocacy, that although it eschewed overtly political statements, it was, paradoxically, highly ideological. On the surface, COIN theory wished to present itself as apolitical: offering an historically proven set of techniques for action across time and space. According to this understanding, counter-insurgency responded to the timeless dynamics of insurgency with an equally timeless set of rules for action. Such claims to universal applicability, however, concealed a normative project, namely, modernization.

Though remaining unarticulated, the ultimate goal of counter-insurgency theory as it evolved in the United States and Europe after 2003, was to propel conflicted societies mired in customary practice or

authoritarian political cultures along the road of socio-economic improvement and democratic development. Yet, the question of whether non-Western, tribal and ethno-religiously divided political cultures in the Middle East or South Asia were susceptible to such nation-building schemes and worth the long-term costs of Western efforts in modernizing them was never asked. Buried within Western counter-insurgency discourse was an ideology, which asserted that successful nation building would facilitate a liberal democratic 'end of history.'

Mythologising the past

This brings us to a final characteristic of counter-insurgency thinking, which is that its underlying end-of-history teleology exhibited a capacity to mythologise the past, disfigure historical understanding and obscure complexity. The promotion of an assumed British expertise in small war and counter-insurgency evinced all these limitations. Analysts repeatedly credited the British armed forces with an almost gnostic counter-insurgency expertise based on their experience with colonial warfare, particularly in winning over the population through techniques of minimum force and hearts and minds. Rarely was this reputation scrutinised. Commentators simply assumed the practice they needed to demonstrate.

The British armed forces never officially extolled any innate expertise in COIN. Yet the constant repetition by external commentators of a British facility for this supposedly distinctive form of warfare meant that by the first decade of the twenty first century sections of the British military and political establishment came to assume that they did indeed possess a distinctive competence in this sphere. Prior to the end of the Cold War, the armed forces tended to view its colonial encounters in terms of orthodox demonstrations of hard power to curtail rebel activity. As a consequence of buying into this myth, when shortcomings in British military interventions became evident, most notably in southern Iraq in the mid-2000s, commentators expressed dismay at the demise of this non-existent tradition of COIN excellence.

Such myth making, moreover, obscured a more prosaic but important reality, namely that Britain had prevailed in many of its 'small' wars, not solely because of innovative tactics on the ground, but primarily as a result of a government commitment to see these campaigns through so that stipulated political objectives were met. Ironically, COIN's cherry picking of the historical record misrepresented the tactical proficiency that the British did possess. This proficiency, far from demonstrating a flair for minimum force, invariably exhibited a talent for escalation into the dark arts of intelligence-led Special Forces operations and the penetration of rebel networks—from Malaya to Northern Ireland to the back streets of Baghdad. This is where Britain's capacities really lay and continue to reside.

Conclusion

Ultimately, what a careful unpacking of counter-insurgency illustrates is a simple but important truth: COIN-think is symptomatic of a fallacy at the heart of much contemporary Western social inquiry, which is the attempt to impose a structure on the contingent complexity of the past. These structures of thought were never present at the time. In this respect, counterinsurgency 'theory' is little different from many other attempts to read the past through an understanding of a social or political 'science' as if it were possible to identify timeless patterns, lessons and principles. In this regard, counterinsurgency is a distorting lens that narrows an appreciation of the past, over-simplifies the present and over-determines the future. COIN is therefore a false narrative and should not be regarded as a formula for prescribing the principles of action to be used in future wars. COIN-centric readings of history, like all grand social science theorising, should be treated with scepticism.

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