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Critics gone wild: Counterinsurgency as the root of all evil

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Critics gone wild: Counterinsurgency as the root of all evil

Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War, by Douglas Porch, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 434 pp. (paperback). ISBN 978-1-107-69984-7

Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency, by Gian Gentile, New York: The New Press, 2013, 189 pp. (hardback). ISBN 978-1-59558-874-6

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The Western interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan have produced a heated polemic concerning the merits and demerits of counterinsurgency – the operational approach underpinning both campaigns. The two books reviewed here provide a good summation of the arguments against counterinsurgency: it is not a strategy and will fail when mistaken as such; its theory does not make intervention and war significantly easier; and even the most successful counterinsurgency campaigns have been bloody, violent, and protracted. Yet as this review highlights, beyond these central points, criticism of counterinsurgency is too often off the mark in its approach and totalizing in its pretensions. There is much to criticize and an urgent need to learn from past campaigns, yet bold claims and broad generalizations can mislead rather than enlighten. The analysis is particularly unhelpful when the definition of the central issue at hand – counterinsurgency – is being unwittingly or deliberately distorted. In the end, these two books form a poor basis for the debate that must now take place, because they are too ideological in tone, too undisciplined in approach, and therefore too unqualified in what they finally say.

Keywords: Abizaid; Afghanistan; Briggs Plan; Counterinsurgency David Galula; David Petraeus FM 3-24; Gian Gentile; Muqtada al-Sadr; Douglas Porch; Gerald Templer; Iraq

Counterinsurgency is in crisis. At least that is the view of the works under review. The NATO campaign in Afghanistan, where ‘counterinsurgency’ (in reality, expeditionary counterinsurgency) was advanced as a quick fix to achieve security, has irrevocably dampened the enthusiasm that surrounded this term following its implementation in Iraq. A crossroads has thus been reached.

To some, the opportunity to integrate counterinsurgency fully as a military priority is matched in magnitude only by the cost of failing to do so. To this view,

counterinsurgency doctrine plays three vital roles: it reaffirms the significant requirements of intervening in foreign polities; it emphasizes the need for a more-than-military response to the problem of political violence; and it frames the local population as a significant player to be understood and included rather than as an obstacle to circumvent. Yet to its detractors, counterinsurgency is little short of a dangerous myth, encouraging politically naïve governments to take on over-ambitious exercises in state-building. Counterinsurgency theory, continues the critique, promises a template to make foreign interventions easy but ends up a poor substitute for any real strategy, resulting in one quagmire after another.

Spearheading the critique is Gian Gentile, colonel in the US Army and professor of history at West Point. In 2013, he turned his past writing on the topic into *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency*. Published in the midst of increased frustration with the campaign in Afghanistan, the book intends to 'drive a stake through the heart of the notion that counterinsurgency has worked in the past and will therefore work in the future' (p. 8). In this endeavor, Gentile is joined by a number of prominent academics, perhaps none more so than Douglas Porch, Distinguished Professor at the Naval Postgraduate School. His *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* is presented as a 'cautionary volume' that 'might help to avert much misery, and save lives and resources in future' (p. xii).

The most forceful contribution of these two books is to underline the centrality of strategy in all armed confrontations. Counterinsurgency provides operationally oriented theory, not strategy, and even *in toto* its principles and practices are no substitute for a campaign plan. Further, both authors stress the fundamentally violent character of war. The notion that war can be prosecuted cleanly, with death and destruction removed, is appealing but patently false. Finally, the authors warn that wars are ultimately political, so there can be no off-the-shelf or template solution with which to manage their complexity. Gentile and Porch passionately reaffirm these points, but it is unlikely they would find many scholars and soldiers who would disagree with them.

Indeed, it is regrettable that their discussion of counterinsurgency conflates the attendant theory – much of it banal and self-evident – with the strategies employed in the last two major campaigns, those of Iraq and Afghanistan. There is much to criticize about the way in which those efforts were prosecuted, but few of the most egregious allegations directed at the *theory* of counterinsurgency reflect what the field manuals and relevant literature actually say. In fact – amidst the normal vagueness and generalization attendant to theory – any objective analyst would be hard-pressed to find therein, as have Gentile and Porch, any urge to recklessness regarding foreign intervention or the notion that a template or technocratic solution can 'solve' the problem of insurgency. Even David Galula, a counterinsurgency expert roundly dismissed by both Gentile and Porch, cautioned that counterinsurgency 'may be sound in theory but dangerous when applied rigidly to a specific case'.¹ Similarly, FM 3-24, the Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency doctrine, wholly rejected by both authors, acknowledges that

counterinsurgency principles can be helpful but that ‘even following the principles and imperatives does not guarantee success’.² As to recklessness, if anything, proponents of counterinsurgency are acutely aware of what intervention means; these are, as one counterinsurgency proponent recently put it, ‘unsatisfying wars’.³

In reality, the backlash against counterinsurgency appears to stem not from its theory but from a range of separate concerns: the frustrations faced in Iraq and Afghanistan; the death and destruction associated with those campaigns; the changes they have imposed upon the armed forces; or – more pettily – the celebrity status bestowed upon some of those who benefited personally from counterinsurgency’s ascendance. Resistance to counterinsurgency as reified in Gentile and Porch derives from all of these and more, providing an explosive charge for a forceful, if at times unfocused, critique.

If there is an element of shadowboxing to the two authors’ main points, it is when they step into the ring and endeavor to go further that their critique truly goes astray. In their eagerness to bury ‘deep in the ground’ all that is counterinsurgency (Gentile, p. 135), the authors become tendentious (not to mention repetitive), advancing scree-like diatribes based on poor sourcing and contradiction. The biggest missteps can be traced to both authors’ misunderstanding of ‘counterinsurgency’. The term is admittedly vague but its questionable interpretation in these two books results in critiques far off the mark.

For Douglas Porch, counterinsurgency is the ‘lineal descendent’ of ‘colonial warfare’, a conflation that leads Porch to place all the excesses of colonialism on counterinsurgency’s doorstep. US military rule over Cuba in 1898–1902: counterinsurgency; the East India Company’s subjugation of the Mughal Empire: counterinsurgency; Germany’s massacre of 17,000 Herero and Nama in southwest Africa in 1904–1907: counterinsurgency; the Amritsar massacre: counterinsurgency; Guantanamo Bay, drone strikes, and even the Holocaust – yes, even the Nazi killing of 6 million Jews during World War II – are used by Porch to cast counterinsurgency in a bad light (pp. 126, 343, *passim*). With a net cast this wide, it is unsurprising that Porch does not like counterinsurgency, but his interpretation would surprise almost all those with practical or academic experience with the term.

It is true that *expeditionary* counterinsurgency theory as found in FM 3-24 does lean on a select few colonial campaigns – principally Algeria, Malaya, and Vietnam – and Gentile and Porch are justified in re-examining the historiography of these all-too isolated cases (more on this later). Yet to equate with counterinsurgency any attempt, across time and space, to conquer another people is to do extreme violence to whatever consensus has been achieved around the term’s meaning. Nonetheless, this conflation occupies half of Porch’s ‘counterinsurgency’ book and underpins his most forceful accusations. It is insufficient to suggest that because colonialism and counterinsurgency both require ‘initiative, diplomacy, cultural and linguistic knowledge, and an ability to manage civil society’ that they are therefore the same (p. 76). Had Porch limited himself to cases where these skills were applied toward the end of defeating

insurgents, his book would have been far shorter and more to the point. Even then, however, the relevance of these past campaigns to the current understanding of counterinsurgency would need to be established.⁴

Gian Gentile operates by a somewhat different but nonetheless problematic understanding of counterinsurgency. He introduces his study by suggesting that ‘in the popular telling, counterinsurgency aims to win the hearts and minds of local populations by providing security along with economic assistance . . . and finally good governance’ (p. 2). Given the years that Gentile has spent studying and criticizing counterinsurgency, this rendering must be a deliberate misinterpretation or a caricature. FM 3-24, the most basic yet central of texts on counterinsurgency, emphasizes host-nation ‘legitimacy’ as the path to success, not the doling out of services to a then-grateful population (it also emphasizes that legitimacy is contextually bound, so there can be no one mechanism whereby it is gained).⁵ The manual mentions winning ‘hearts and minds’ but once, and then – as others have pointed out – ‘with a sense of cold utilitarianism’.⁶ Still, this misinterpretation of counterinsurgency as an operationally decisive charity drive allows for one of Gentile’s most central arguments, that counterinsurgency is a bundle of tactics posing as a strategy.

This leads to a fundamental problem with both books: Gentile and Porch strongly believe that ‘counterinsurgency aficionados [are] convinced that tactics, not strategy, hold the key to success in conflict’ (Porch, p. 9). They therefore spend copious pages showing just how important strategy is to the resolution of past counterinsurgency campaigns. This should surprise no one; though neither Porch nor Gentile apparently noticed, FM 3-24 itself emphasizes the need for strategic direction to underpin tactical gains. It states: ‘Tactical actions thus must be linked not only to strategic and operational military objectives but also to the host nation’s essential political goals. Without those connections, lives and resources may be wasted for no real gain.’⁷ FM 3-24 is cited here not to claim that it is the most sophisticated take on the topic but to show that even ‘by the book’ counterinsurgency was never just a collection of operational techniques hoping for an unlikely win. These must have a strategic foundation or political content to gain meaning.

Gentile and Porch can rightly criticize those campaigns where an overarching strategy has been vague or lacking. Afghanistan may be included in this category. They are on far shakier ground, however, when they claim that counterinsurgency by definition seeks to win through tactical gimmicks or when they rather arbitrarily assess past counterinsurgency campaigns only at the operational level and then blame counterinsurgency for being astrategic. On the benchmark British campaign in Malaya, for example, Porch argues that it was won through ‘timely political concessions, not the excellence of British COIN tactics’ (p. 266). Yet the ‘timely political concessions’ in Malaya were inextricably intertwined with the counterinsurgency strategy implemented there. Likewise, on Northern Ireland, Porch points out that the British Army did not win with ‘a COIN, whole of government approach’ but instead relied on the Royal Ulster Constabulary to

‘create a military stalemate that paved the way for a political settlement’ (p. 286). It does not appear to register that what is being described is exactly a whole-of-government approach. Instead, Porch appears to blame the Army for not doing all of this alone.

There is an air of sophistry at work here. In both cases, tactical efforts are belittled, because they did not singlehandedly produce victory. This sets a test for counterinsurgency that not only misunderstands the term but that logically cannot be passed. Either the strategy is absent or wrong, in which case counterinsurgency tactics fail; or the strategy is sound – as in Malaya – in which case it, not ‘counterinsurgency’ (defined as a kitbag of tactics), won the day.

Porch later blames scholars of counterinsurgency for honing in on the tactical learning of military forces, as if tactics might hold the ‘key to victory’ (p. 322). This point is important and speaks to the over-militarization of counterinsurgency scholarship. Perhaps because most of those writing on these campaigns are militarily oriented, they tend to focus on the battlefield experiences of security forces rather than on the political crux of the matter. Thus, whereas counterinsurgency texts – to include Galula and FM 3-24 – are keen to highlight the political essence of the endeavor, they devote far less attention to actually understanding and studying what politics is, what it means, and how it works. This deficiency is unfortunate but also avoidable. In the study of counterinsurgency (past, present, and future), it indeed is critical, to quote Jeremy Black, that ‘military history becomes an aspect of total history; not to “demilitarize” it, but because the operational aspect of war is best studied in terms of the multiple political, social and cultural context that gave, and give, it meaning.’⁸

Finally, on the topic of characterizing counterinsurgency, it must be stated plainly that both Porch and Gentile equate expeditionary counterinsurgency – i.e. that waged by a foreign power in someone else’s country – with ‘counterinsurgency’ as a category, which can hardly be considered the case. On this point, one need only consult the numerous articles that have appeared over the decades in *Small Wars & Insurgencies*. At one end the spectrum, there is the highly successful Colombian counterinsurgency (‘national counterinsurgency’) conducted with US assistance. At the other end of the spectrum, there is the US itself endeavoring to do counterinsurgency in someone else’s country (‘expeditionary counterinsurgency’), as in Vietnam. In between, much discussed in *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, there is the Northern Ireland case, which is so intriguing precisely because it involves national actors involved in constituent-but-dissimilar sub-national spaces.⁹

Creating new myths: Eternal Reoccurrence

Ironically, sufficient thoughtful points are contained within Gentile’s and Porch’s misreading of counterinsurgency to provide food for thought. Unfortunately, the authors are determined to go further, and in doing so, their critiques become increasingly problematic.

Gentile approaches his subject through an attack upon what he posits as the standard counterinsurgency case-narrative. Using the campaigns in Malaya, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, he sets out to demonstrate that each case has been forced into the same heroic, inaccurate mold: the Army at first stumbles, gradually ‘learns and adapts’, and is then rescued by ‘a better general’, who turns the tide using counterinsurgency tactics so that ‘hearts and minds are won, and victory is achieved’ (p. 4). The spurious knights on white horses in his cases are General Sir Gerald Templer in Malaya, General Creighton Abrams in Vietnam, General David Petraeus in Iraq, and General Stanley McChrystal in Afghanistan.

Lost is the ample nuance present in the historiography of the cases. More tellingly, the structure forces Gentile into the very history by analogy of which he accuses his critics. In particular, it becomes his authorial mission to show how ineffectual Templer was in Malaya, so that by extension he can criticize Petraeus in Iraq. To do this, Gentile elevates Templer’s predecessor as director of operations, General Sir Harold Briggs, just as he later elevates Petraeus’s predecessor in Iraq, General George Casey – thus to attack the counterinsurgency narrative and fanfare. The pattern is repeated for each case examined in the book. Yet this type of historical analysis by analogy is deeply troubling, and it produces somewhat tendentious results when the history refuses to fit the mold.

The Malaya case serves to illustrate. His effort to undermine the counterinsurgency narrative leads him to argue that ‘the overall operational framework for the British Army was continuous and remained largely unchanged throughout the war: it was search and destroy’ (p. 40). The point here is that a conventionally oriented British military understood its role from the outset, something that when later applied to Iraq dents Petraeus’s standing as an innovator and undermines the contribution of his counterinsurgency strategy introduced in 2007. This analysis faces five immediate problems.

First, the British approach *did* change. Karl Hack, a leading scholar of Malaya – and not an active participant in today’s counterinsurgency debate – shows how the campaign evolved through ‘three main periods’, namely: ‘Counter-terror and sweep (1948–49)’; ‘Clear and Hold, characterised by population control of the Briggs Plan, . . . (1950–52)’ and finally ‘Optimisation, from mid-to-late 1952 to 1960.’¹⁰ Gentile cannot deny the discontinuity in approach, so to square the hole he dismisses any changes made as ‘tactical shifts’ and ‘adjustments’ (p. 40), but this characterization is applied both to the British Army’s shift from ‘large-unit sweeps’ to ‘small-scale patrols’ (p. 45) – a major innovation – and to the 1950 Briggs Plan, a milestone in the campaign that emphasized both population resettlement and food denial operations.¹¹

Second, Gentile seeks simultaneously to paint Briggs as *the* innovator (to devalue Templer) but also to downplay any overall shift in approach (thus to declaim any shift to counterinsurgency). This balancing act between change and continuity is sometimes confusing but is necessary for the trans-historical analogy to hold. On the one hand, he argues, the Briggs Plan was a ‘very detailed

and well-thought-out plan' that regained 'control of the key space and people', won 'their allegiance' (pp. 41–2), and allowed British Army field units 'to learn about the people, the terrain, and the enemy' (p. 48). On the other hand, in the same chapter, it is then argued that Briggs's arrival introduced only 'tactical shifts' and that the basic operational framework remained unchanged (p. 40). The arguments are incompatible, but since the purpose of both is to tar Templer (and by extension counterinsurgency), they are used indiscriminately.

Third, it is historically suspect to claim that there was no discontinuity between General Harold Briggs and General Gerard Templer. Whereas Briggs was in charge of only military forces, Templer was double-hatted as high commissioner and director of operations. Templer was also in theatre for twice as long as Briggs and is remembered for his uniquely enthusiastic and galvanizing style of leadership. Gentile tries to get around these factors through *reductio ad absurdum*. To downplay any change, he notes repeatedly that there was no 'radical', 'seismic', or 'tectonic operational shift' between the two (pp. 40, 44, 46, my emphasis), no 'radical discontinuity' or 'radical transformation' (pp. 36, 46, as above) – but this does not take us very far from the mainstream scholarship on Malaya, most of which sees Templer as perfecting and building on the Briggs Plan, not overthrowing it.

When Gentile goes further, suggesting for example that 'the most that can be said' is that Templer 'accelerated learning by codifying the practices already in place' (p. 42), he overstates his case – and contradicts himself. On other pages, he lauds Templer for having: optimized 'coordination' among the various services (p. 49 and again on p. 51); 'assess[ed] bureaucratic problems by firsthand observation, then implement[ed] solutions to them with vigor'; and instilled 'a renewed sense of energy and purpose to' the campaign. The grudging recognition of discontinuity is hardly surprising – even Harold Briggs recognized, in his final report as director of operations, that more needed to be done (urgently) to address the stove-piped relations amongst police, civilians, and the military, and to shift the counterinsurgency effort into a higher gear.¹² These and other concerns were noted and addressed following a high-level visit to Malaya by Olivier Lyttleton, then the colonial secretary, which resulted in the dismissal of both the police and intelligence heads and the appointment of Templer as *supremo* – as a 'dictator of sorts', to use Gentile's own characterization, 'who had the combined powers of chief military officer and civilian commissioner' (p. 49). So to say that 'there was no discontinuity with Templer's arrival' (p. 42) would seem plain wrong or deeply misleading.

Fourth, Gentile's assertion that 'search and destroy' not only remained unchanged as the basic operational foundation but also resulted in victory is problematic. The shift from large- to small-unit operations meant that the Army changed fundamentally the manner in which it was both searching and destroying. Gentile recognizes this shift (p. 45) but never includes it in his analysis. Similarly, the Army's improved cooperation with civilian agencies and intelligence services also had a tremendous effect on what it saw as its mission.¹³

As importantly, the ability of the British armed forces to concentrate on ‘search and destroy’ relied on the existence of a civilian colonial system, not just the police, home guards, Special Branch, and other security forces, but also the entire infrastructure that the British could bring to bear in its colonies. Such infrastructure was what allowed for the management of the New Villages, the isolation of the guerrillas, the diplomatic engagement with federal and state leaders, and the gradual political resolution of the underlying grievance fuelling the conflict. Gentile’s suggestion that ‘the British won because they crushed the Communists insurgents militarily’ (p. 6) misses all of these actors and all of these points. Seeking to replicate a ‘search and destroy’ approach in the absence of such support would produce very different results.¹⁴

Fifth, and perhaps worst of all, Gentile’s reading of how the war in Malaya ended obscures the critical role of strategy in persuading the Malayan elite to accept the Chinese as equals, in winning over the Chinese population as a result, and, thereby, in creating a multi-ethnic, democratic, and independent nation to which all Malaysians might rally. The military crushing of the insurgents was a necessary component, but as Thomas A. Marks rightly puts it, ‘Had the British simply refused to leave, we would most likely be talking about a misguided British defeat – another Aden.’¹⁵ In fact, it is rather odd that Gentile, whose book disparages the elevation of tactics to the strategic realm, nonetheless argues that the Malayan campaign was won at the tactical/operational level.

Douglas Porch faces similar difficulties in fusing strategic and operational analysis. By mischaracterizing counterinsurgency as a bundle of operational techniques, it becomes easy for him to criticize its adherents and its role in past conflicts. More generally, he repeatedly attributes success or defeat in past counterinsurgencies to the ‘strategic environment’, as if it were an independent variable, impossible to change. He writes for example that ‘insurgencies are more likely to cease combat when the strategic environment changes, so that they conclude that their goals can best be achieved through political, rather than violent means’ (p. 245). This is undeniably so, but it provides a very poor guide to understanding past campaigns. According to this logic, where the ‘strategic environment’ was favorable, counterinsurgency was irrelevant to the final outcome – this is how Porch explains Malaya (p. 124) and El Salvador (p. 245) but also Iraq (p. 202) – and where the strategic environment was unfavorable, counterinsurgency obviously failed – see Algeria and Afghanistan.

With such terms of reference, it is difficult to see circumstances where counterinsurgency, or any approach for that matter, could have made a difference. Indeed, this narrow focus on the strategic environment being right disregards the possibility – and the requirement – for counterinsurgents to *shape* the strategic environment, through operations, tactics, and a campaign plan that incorporates the political situation at hand. Doing so, of course, is always easier said than done, but the alternative – of simply waiting it out until the ‘strategic environment changes’ (p. 245) – is typically even less plausible.

Iraq and the legacy of the surge

For both Gentile and Porch, the lengthy deconstruction of history is really a preamble for their main thrust: that the surge in Iraq did not work and that the fanfare surrounding counterinsurgency today is therefore seriously misplaced. Gentile and Porch join forces to demonstrate that the shift in strategy under Petraeus in early 2007 had nothing, or very little, to do with the decline in bloodshed seen around that time. As the ‘surge’ is perceived as the true claim to fame for the counterinsurgency community and the basis of any lasting legacy, the early historiography of this period matters greatly, even though all facts and voices have yet to be heard.

The Gentile/Porch narrative on Iraq has two main components: first, the US military quickly adapted to counterinsurgency, long before FM 3-24, and Petraeus’s return in early 2007 therefore had no real effect on the campaign; and, second, counterinsurgency was largely irrelevant to the stabilization of Iraq in 2006–2008, which stemmed instead from various internal political developments. Attempts to argue these two points simultaneously result in some confusion. To illustrate the pre-surge credentials of the US military, for example, both Porch and Gentile describe how commanders and units conducted successful counterinsurgency long ‘before *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency* hit the bookshelves’ (Porch, p. 303). But to argue the second point – that counterinsurgency was epiphenomenal to what actually pacified Iraq in 2006–2008 – the success of these units must subsequently be downplayed as meaningless. There is tension between these two strands, yet as both belittle Petraeus and his counterinsurgency followers, they are nonetheless allowed to coexist.

Problematically, each strand, on its own merits, is seriously flawed. The notion that ‘through the first two years of the war the army across the board had adapted effectively to counterinsurgency operations’ (Gentile, p. 92) is at best suspect. (Porch makes a similar claim on p. 303.) Naturally some units adapted more than others. One example cited by both Gentile and Porch is the Ready First Brigade Combat Team, commanded by Colonel Sean MacFarland, which in 2006 worked politically to find partners within the Anbar tribal system and then split up into small teams to man combined Iraqi–American combat outposts at the epicenters of violence. The point of mentioning this and other units is to illustrate that the Army was always capable of adapting to counterinsurgency and did not need new doctrine, or a new general, to succeed – that ‘any good soldier can handle guerrillas’ (Porch, p. 206, citing Army Chief of Staff General George Decker). But whether these units represented the entire Army is highly doubtful.

The Army had neither studied nor cared much about counterinsurgency in previous years, requiring not only the Counterinsurgency Academy set up in 2005 – to train incoming units – but also the continued doctrinal and educational initiatives to transform the force as a whole.¹⁶ A major study of counterinsurgency capability commissioned by General George Casey in 2005 found that ‘20 percent of units in the field were demonstrating COIN proficiency;

60 percent were struggling to reorient themselves; and 20 percent of the units showed little COIN proficiency at all.¹⁷

It is insufficient in this context to argue, as Porch does, that the US Army's peacekeeping experience in the 1990s – in Kurdistan and Somalia, Haiti, and the Balkans (pp. 304–5) – readied it for counterinsurgency. Whereas these experiences overlap in some ways with the challenges faced in Iraq, peacekeeping and counterinsurgency differ in important respects, and reliance on past cases, conducted in permissive environments, is as likely to distort as help. It is also rather pointless to point to the existence of stability-operations doctrine prior to the Iraq War (p. 305), as doctrine means very little unless it is disseminated, taught, and embraced throughout the ranks – questions that Porch does not ponder.

Finally, Porch's suggestion that 'the fact that David Petraeus, John Nagl, and H. R. McMaster [three active duty commanders in Iraq] had focused their PhD research on counterinsurgency topics in the post-Vietnam era testifies to a continuity of interest in COIN' within the force (p. 305) is, frankly, incredible. The notion that three individuals – all known as mavericks – are in any way representative of the broader institution is itself highly questionable; and even then, the suggestion that McMaster and Petraeus doctoral studies concerned counterinsurgency is false (respectively, they dealt with civil–military relations and decisions about intervention post-Vietnam).

The evidence Gentile mounts to suggest continuity between operations pre- and post-surge is also problematic. His assertion about the Army adapting 'across the board' within two years of war is drawn from an Army study, *On Point II* – one of the very few sources to arrive at this conclusion. Porch cites another Army-commissioned study to suggest that the US Army was able, early in the war, 'to dispatch conventional foes handily and to sustain prolonged major counterinsurgencies with relatively few casualties' (p. 307). Yet the very same study also concludes that 'the Army demonstrate[d] qualitative shortcomings with respect to human intelligence, linguists, the configuration of its command and control, rules of engagement, detainee operations, and its overall approach to the locals outside of self-defined constraints for a "proper" military sphere.'¹⁸

Both Gentile and Porch also cite a key study by James Russell, who found bottom-up adaptation within several units in Iraq, before the surge. Nevertheless, Russell also emphasizes that 'the appointment of Petraeus... represented an important signal of America's commitment to the new methods of fighting the insurgents.' He continues, 'It is equally clear that the promulgation of new doctrine [FM 3-24] helped to systematically enhance the preparation of incoming units to conduct counterinsurgency, just at [*sic*] it is clear that the manual for the first time provided senior military leadership at Multi-National Forces Iraq, or MNF-I, with a template around which to structure and direct a national-level counterinsurgency campaign.'¹⁹ In their use of the Russell study, neither Gentile nor Porch noticed these points.

This brings us to the strategic context – and the strategic straitjacket inhibiting more universal adaptation toward counterinsurgency in the pre-surge

years. As Porch recognizes, the policy in 2005–2006 was to ‘transition security responsibility as quickly as possible to Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)’ forcing ‘in-country commanders-in-chief Generals John Abizaid and George W. Casey... to withdraw forces to large bases as a prelude to repatriation’ (p. 308). Those units that ‘split out of super FOBs [forward operating bases] into small combat outposts’ (p. 308) acted against the current of the policy set from above – and constituted a minority.

In contrast, when Petraeus arrived in theatre, it was with instructions from his commander in chief to deploy US troops ‘alongside Iraqi units... [to] be embedded in their formations’ as they worked ‘from local police stations; conducting patrols, setting up checkpoints, and going door-to-door to gain the trust of Baghdad residents’.²⁰ Thus the new strategy elevated practices that *some* commanders had used to the level of a strategic campaign plan. Gentile’s suggestion that there was ‘a continuous operational framework of armed nation building’ is therefore true only in the broadest sense of intent, not in terms of approach or style, all of which changed first gradually bottom-up (as Gentile seems to recognize) and then top down (p. 92).

Similarly Gentile’s suggestion that ‘the real story in Iraq is one of continuity between the commanding generals’ (p. 98) is at best inaccurate. Abizaid – and Casey – though both may have been unfairly criticized, did see US troops primarily as ‘an antibody’ in the Iraqi society and therefore downplayed their presence and exposure.²¹ This strategic direction was consistent with the policy set in Washington, at least until Rumsfeld’s departure as Secretary of Defense and the accompanying change in strategy in late 2006.

Gentile has scoured through Casey’s personal files, which he suggests prove the general’s understanding of counterinsurgency and desire to shift the campaign in such a direction. This interpretation is strange for several reasons. Gentile is effectively lauding Casey as pushing for a counterinsurgency strategy on the same page upon which he dismisses counterinsurgency as irrelevant (p. 110). Further, if Casey was as interested in a change of strategy as Gentile suggests, if he ‘fully accepted that he might need at least two to three more combat brigades as a surge of forces to help quell the violence’, why was there no request to this effect throughout the tenure of his command? One could pin the blame squarely on the civilian leadership of the Pentagon, but even then the suggestion of continuity between successive commanding generals falls flat.

As to the second component of the narrative – that the ‘surge impacted hardly at all the strategic dynamics of the conflict’ (p. 321) – this strand, too, faces severe challenges. Gentile (and Porch) attribute the 2006–2008 violence to various factors: the completion of ethnic cleansing in Baghdad (the fire thus burning out); the decision of Iraq’s Sunni community to side with its lesser enemy, the US military, against al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Shia-dominated government; and the decision of Muqtada al-Sadr to declare a ceasefire in the spring of 2007. Clearly, all these factors played a role, but not only is each

explanation in itself problematic, but even on aggregate, they also do not render irrelevant the effect of US actions – far from it.

The notion that ethnic cleansing in Baghdad had ended by the time of the surge is difficult to support even with the information available today. It had in fact proved necessary for US units deploying in 2006 to arrest cleansing trends in their areas of operation – through berms, forced isolation of communities, checkpoints, and other population control measures²² – and such techniques continued to be necessary during the surge. Not only was Baghdad not completely cleansed by the time of the surge, but one must also wonder why the ongoing genocide would spontaneously grind to a halt at this time²³ and not instead continue as a source of still further conflict – given the forced population movements, seizure of property, and large-scale death toll involved. It may be conceivable that casualties themselves would decline due to the forced separation of combatants, but this can hardly explain the economic, political, and security-related progress seen in Iraq in 2007–2010 or the nearly 860,000 internally displaced persons who in 2009 had already or intended to return to Baghdad.²⁴

Likewise problematic is the position that the Anbar Awakening (and the turned Sunni insurgents in the Sons of Iraq) was solely responsible for stabilizing Iraq. The notion of the US military as the ‘accidental hero’ of Iraq belies the active measures taken by American forces to enable and consolidate the gains made by their local allies on the ground. As critics of US operations in Iraq are often keen to point out, part of the effort involved putting some newfound allies on the payroll so as to finance their new agenda. A more generous assessment would also include the combined patrols, joint security stations, advising, and partnering – all new or enhanced initiatives that saw US and local forces working together toward common goals. Also important were the aforementioned checkpoints, concrete barriers, and other resources brought to bear by the US, which helped consolidate security gains.

One can discuss the relative importance of local versus American forces in various parts of Iraq, but it would seem tendentious to suggest that the latter never had a role to play. It is much more likely, as the International Crisis Group found at the time, that ‘the surge in some cases benefited from, in others encouraged, and in the remainder produced, a series of politico-military shifts affecting the Sunni and Shiite communities’,²⁵ with the geographic variation suggesting a need for greater micro-level analysis of specific towns and areas to truly get at the heart of the matter.

There is a second issue here: the distinction between foreign and local inputs is not only artificial but also unhelpful when seeking to understand a counterinsurgency campaign such as that conducted in Iraq, where a third-party state intervenes to help one party prevail over another (i.e. expeditionary COIN). Douglas Ollivant makes the point that in such counterinsurgencies, ‘success is deeply dependent upon the alignment of local interests with U.S. goals.’²⁶ Indeed, partnering and relying on political structures that share one’s agenda, either partly or fully, does not represent an abdication of control or loss of

initiative. It is in fact what a third-party force *must do* to have effect. Yet working with local partners is not easy; it requires an ability to read the local environment, identify opportunities for local partnerships, and build on those opportunities to further joint objectives. As emphasized in counterinsurgency doctrine, it calls for a deep understanding of the local environment and people, of their fears and aspirations, not least because such an understanding allows intervening troops to gauge the local legitimacy of those actors willing and able to support stated objectives.

As to Muqtada al-Sadr's ceasefire of August 2007, it is important to view this development in context. Sadr's militia had grown increasingly fissiparous over the course of the previous few years, engaging in crime, self-enrichment, and violence, even against Shia communities and rival Shia militias. When the Sunni threat that justified the strength and activity of these militias was transformed through the Anbar Awakening and Sons of Iraq phenomena, it 'had major consequences for Shiite militias such as Jaish al-Mahdi [JAM]'.²⁷ US troops were freed up to pursue this Shia militia, and its ability to withstand this new strategic environment (while also fighting with other militias) was seriously circumscribed, even as its own excesses imperiled its recruiting effort of alienated Shia males. In combination, these factors 'persuaded al-Sadr to stand down rather than risk another beating from the coalition, and the result was his announced ceasefire of August 2007'.²⁸

Another key factor here was the increased US force levels on the streets of Baghdad, including its Shia sections. A previous attempted 'surge', Operation Together Forward II of August–October 2006, had failed in part because US forces lacked the authority 'to clear neighborhoods that are home to Shiite militias'.²⁹ With the surge, the US military for the first time obtained the government's authorization to enter these areas.

Such factors must be considered at length even in a review, because it is through such accretion of skewed detail that Gentile and Porch seek, above all, to discredit General Petraeus. Through his fall, counterinsurgency also falls, Petraeus being the name most associated with the approach.

In fact, Gentile makes one final effort to discredit Petraeus. He writes that 'new sources of primary data on the levels of violence in Iraq' show that 'by the time Petraeus took command the overall levels of sectarian violence had decreased by at least a third' (p. 89). He therefore suggests that, surge or no surge, 'violence would have declined in the same way that it did by the end of 2007' (p. 110). The 'new sources of primary data' that Gentile refers to are not included in his footnotes, so it is difficult to assess exactly the trend that he describes. The source that *is* cited does show a decline in casualties beginning in December 2006,³⁰ but whereas there were certainly fewer casualties in January 2007 than in the previous month, that month still saw more than 3500 deaths.³¹ Also, Iraq still faced, *until August 2007*, between 2000 and 3700 casualties *per month*, rendering very misleading any notion that the problem of violence had already been resolved. More fundamentally, events in 2006 cannot by themselves explain the

subsequent reduction in casualties, by November 2007, to the 750-range and below.

It would clearly be inaccurate to state that the US conduct of counterinsurgency operations *began* under General Petraeus in February 2007; but even so, his campaign plan consolidated various operational approaches and elevated them to the strategic level. While it has long been recognized that US inputs were not the only factor contributing to the decline in violence and that analysis must be sensitive to other developments on the ground, the evidence strongly suggests that the US was more than an opportunistic bystander claiming credit for something it did not help shape. Both Gentile and Porch fervently deny this point, despite their repeated use of sources that underline this very conclusion.

Their contribution to the scholarship on Iraq is therefore the modest notion that the surge, on its own, did not stabilize Iraq, a proposition with which very few would disagree. Even Thomas Ricks, the former Pentagon correspondent for the *Washington Post* and a *bête noire* for both Gentile and Porch, precisely because of his coverage of counterinsurgency in Iraq, freely acknowledges that several factors brought about the reduction in bloodshed.³² Rather than build on preexisting scholarship, the tendency in both books reviewed here is to distort and dismiss it, in favor of pet theories unsubstantiated by data.

Counterinsurgency and implications for the future

Gentile's book is a relatively overheated account hamstrung by an artificial trans-historical analogy, but that of Porch suffers from excessive zeal, emotion, and anger. In either case, the haste to bury counterinsurgency is such that the analysis trips over itself in order to make points that examination reveals to be weak indeed. This tendency has two separate but related effects, one methodological, the other substantive.

Methodologically, the strongly teleological foundation of both books results in the cutting of corners and the tipping of scales. To charge these two historians with tendentiousness is no small matter, but how else is one to explain the ideological undercurrent to both texts, one that affects everything from argumentation to sourcing and style. Porch's treatment of Malaya, for example, purports to comment on the campaign as a whole, yet a cursory look at his sources reveals their focus to be exclusively on the first two or three years of the war. He is therefore able to recount various brutalities and excesses in the British use of force, from which he concludes that 'COIN tactics had served only to make the Emergency nastier and more costly in lives and resources than it need have been' (p. 256). Had he examined the Emergency as a whole, his assessment might have been different.

Even then, Porch goes much further, accusing the British Army of deliberately starving the ethnic Chinese community in its care (p. 255). This is a serious accusation, not found in any other scholarship on Malaya of which this

reviewer is aware. Indeed, the source for Porch's contention (a text that once again does not go beyond the campaign's second year) does not actually mention starvation.³³

Malaya again serves only to highlight the point. It is not the only case wherein Porch's sourcing – and argumentation – is questionable. He claims, for instance, that counterinsurgency proponents want security forces to 'violate the laws of war and humanity as a condition for victory' (p. 191); he claims that 'the COIN-dinista mantra is that the counterinsurgency formula invariably succeeds if it is not hijacked by conventional soldiers and sabotaged by impatient governments and peoples' (p. 177); and he claims the counterinsurgency proponents reject as 'old think' the 'Clausewitzian analysis of the interaction of war, armies, and society, and its impact on strategy' (p. 319). He speaks of the 'reckless behavior of small warriors with their expansionist agendas' (p. 75); he accuses them of 'traditional domino-theory hyperbole', leading governments toward increasingly misguided and brutal undertakings (p. 118); and of subverting the 'principal mechanism[s] of democratic civil-military control' (p. 23). Indeed, these small warriors are drawn to counterinsurgency, because it 'offers a doctrine of escapism . . . a flight from democratic civilian control, even from modernity, into an anachronistic, romanticized, Orientalist vision' (p. 330).

These types of statements are rarely if ever sourced. Whereas there is plenty of fire to this screed, much of it is misdirected – not least the lengthy criticism of John Arquilla, an unfortunate focus of ire throughout the first 100 pages of the book yet not a participating much less leading member of the counterinsurgency community that Porch seeks to critique. Rather than a work of history, then, Porch's book reads as an angry editorial (complete with spelling mistakes, most egregiously 'Barak' [Barack] Obama – p. 313). Porch has conducted a sweeping literature review of all critics of counterinsurgency – a mixed bag – extracting only those portions that can be displayed as hostile, omitting all qualification and context. He stoops to include a book review of *The Gamble* to complete his character assassination of Tom Ricks but fails to note that the review itself supports Ricks's central point, namely that the surge wrought a 'strategic shift' from 'focusing on detaining Iraqis and instead focus on protecting Iraqi civilians'.³⁴

Gentile too lets his ideological contempt for counterinsurgency cloud his sourcing and argumentation. He is quick to ridicule the purported 'tropes' and 'bromides' of the counterinsurgency community, but tracing the grossest of missteps back to their source, via Gentile's footnotes and index, one finds a collection of *Newsweek* articles, blog posts, and other journalistic accounts written by people one would hardly associate with the 'counterinsurgency force' (p. xviii) nominally under attack. He ascribes to counterinsurgency proponents 'the notion that these kinds of interventions . . . can be done in a precise and clean way' (p. 139), yet there is no statement to this effect in any of the counterinsurgency literature that this reviewer is aware of – and no source is given in the book itself.

Gentile takes Casey's own statements on his period in Iraq at face value, and he uncritically accepts the official testimony of senior military leaders such as General Tommy Franks to show how in Afghanistan the 'United States has been in the nation-building business from the start' (p. 119). The lack of critical analysis here – and in the use of sources that appear at first blush to validate Gentile's thesis – is remarkable. There is also a tendency toward cant, using emotionally loaded imagery to undermine counterinsurgency. For instance, he states that 'the reality of counterinsurgency warfare . . . is revealed in the anguish of an Afghan father who lost his son in a Taliban IED attack against NATO troops' (p. 113). The image is disturbing and angering, but it is unclear what counterinsurgency has to do with the boy's death, unless the suggestion is that the Taliban would not plant bombs and would not mistreat ordinary Afghans, if only NATO was not there. For the unguarded reader, though, this is yet another forceful reason to forget all about counterinsurgency, without of course considering alternatives for how to deal with an insecure, unfair, and cruel world.

This brings us to the second, 'substantive' effect alluded to above. The overriding problem with both books reviewed here is that they are so ideologically against something – in this case counterinsurgency – that it is difficult to parse what they are arguing *for*. That Porch and Gentile disagree with the Afghanistan campaign is quite clear, but they do not suggest any serious alternatives for how to deal with the security dilemma represented by that country and region. Porch in particular displays strong antipathy toward those he claims hanker for US interventions abroad, and all interventions are somehow 'colonial'. Yet advocating intervention is not the same as advocating greater understanding of counterinsurgency; those who study counterinsurgency are commonly unlikely to welcome intervention abroad, given the time and resources necessary for such endeavors to succeed – if they succeed at all. More generally, whereas Porch and Gentile are perfectly entitled to their opposition to intervention abroad, it would be enlightening to hear how then they propose the US deal with an insecure world full of conflict zones and bad neighborhoods. They provide no clues, lending an almost nihilistic undercurrent to their writing.

Presumably one of the goals of Gentile and Porch is simply to stop the use of counterinsurgency and its theory. This may in any case happen, given the traumas of Afghanistan and the semantic vagueness and divisiveness of the term. 'Counterinsurgency' now looks likely to 'be buried deep in the ground' (Gentile, p. 135), but even if this is true of expeditionary American counterinsurgency, it in no way obviates the ongoing nature of international counterinsurgency (e.g. AMISOM in Somalia) or national counterinsurgency (Colombia is alluded to above, but one could turn to any number of cases).

Let us make sure, then, we do not bury the lessons of the last decade of war in the rush to sooth our disappointment at the less-than-conclusive outcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Abandoning the term should in no way signify a return to an understanding of war as militarily decisive, apolitical, and wholly separated from its inevitable aftermath. Nor will abandoning the term help us avoid the

operational challenges most associated with it (thus the involvement of the UN in what may be ‘counterinsurgency lite’ in most cases but increasingly appears simply to be counterinsurgency in others).

In the past, we have needed counterinsurgency doctrine to remind ourselves of the full complexity of these challenges. This has been the main contribution of counterinsurgency doctrine. It is modest, because the principles and guidance provided are often banal. Yet it can also be invaluable, given the low standard of traditional military thinking on war. Whatever term we use or do not use, the complexity of third-party interventions will remain, so we best learn from our mistakes and our experiences in order to know more and be wiser next time we are asked to act.

Notes

1. Mathias, *Galula in Algeria*, 96.
2. US Department of the Army and US Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency*, 1–20.
3. John A. Nagl, ‘The Age of Unsatisfying Wars’, *The New York Times*, 6 June 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/07/opinion/the-age-of-unsatisfying-wars.html>.
4. A curious etiology is at work in Porch’s lengthy undressing of various French paragons of counterinsurgency: Thomas-Robert Bugeaud, Joseph Gallieni, and Hubert Lyautey. The original chapter on the three appeared in the 1st edition of *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, 1943) and was authored by Jean Gottman. Porch authored the chapter of the same title in the 2nd edition, edited by Peter Paret (Princeton, 1986), Ch. 14 (376–407), ‘Bugeaud, Gallieni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare’. Though it seeks to debunk the notion that there was a ‘hearts and minds’ essence to the French approach, the chapter is concerned primarily with issues of historiography (as opposed to strategy) and avoids altogether the hortatory tone that is a hallmark of both Porch’s book under review and its foreshadowing in this journal: Porch, ‘Dangerous Myth’.
5. US Army and Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency*, 1–20–21.
6. Burke, ‘The Wrong Debate’.
7. US Army and Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency*, 1–28.
8. Black, *Rethinking Military History*, 19.
9. Respectively, see e.g. Marks, ‘Colombian Military Support’; Andrade, ‘Westmoreland was Right’; Andrew Sanders, ‘Operation Motorman’.
10. See Hack, ‘The Malayan Emergency’, 404, *passim*.
11. On the dispersal of troops and its effects, see Ucko, ‘Countering Insurgents’.
12. Mackay, *The Malayan Emergency*, 117.
13. For an evolution of Army operations, see Sunderland, *Army Operations in Malaya*.
14. It seems almost superfluous to note that one of the major challenges for modern soldiers has been the need to assume various civilian roles concurrent with more traditional military tasks precisely because infrastructure is generally lacking.
15. Interview with Thomas A. Marks, Washington, DC, 30 March 2006.
16. For more on these initiatives, see Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era*. See also Serena, *A Revolution in Military Adaptation*.
17. See Russell, *Innovation, Transformation, and War*.
18. Brown, *Kevlar Legions*, 441–2.
19. Russell, *Innovation, Transformation, and War*.
20. White House, ‘President’s Address to the Nation’, Washington, DC, January 10, 2007.

21. Abizaid uses this analogy in Michael R. Gordon, 'Debate Lingering on Decision to Dissolve the Iraqi Military', *The New York Times*, 21 October 2004. Casey is quoted as using the same analogy in a book authored by his Chief of Operations at MNF(I). See Major-General [Jim Molan](#), *Running the War in Iraq*, 144.
22. For more detail, see [Ucko](#), 'Counterinsurgency after Afghanistan', 5–6.
23. [Biddle, Friedman, and Shapiro](#). 'Testing the Surge', 17–18.
24. Seventy-five percent 'of Baghdad IDP [internally displaced persons]... would like to return to their places of origin' most often because of 'improved security'. See [International Organization for Migration](#), 'Baghdad Governorate Profile July 2009', 5–7.
25. [International Crisis Group](#), *Iraq after the Surge I*, i. See [Biddle, Friedman, and Shapiro](#), 'Testing the Surge', for a good initial take on micro-level dynamics during the surge.
26. [Ollivant](#), *Countering the New Orthodoxy*, 2.
27. [Biddle, Friedman, and Shapiro](#), 'Testing the Surge', 25.
28. *Ibid.*, 26.
29. [Baker et al.](#), *The Iraqi Study Group Report*, 15.
30. [Department of Defense](#), *Measuring Stability in Iraq*.
31. *Ibid.*
32. See [Ricks](#), *The Gamble*, Chapter 7.
33. See [Bayly and Harper](#), *Forgotten Wars*.
34. [Schneller](#), 'Do Surges Work?', 152–3.

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