

Concept Failure?

COIN, Counterinsurgency, and Strategic Theory

BY COLIN S. GRAY

Theory should cast a steady light on all phenomena so that we can more easily recognize and eliminate the weeds that always spring from ignorance; it should show how one thing is related to another, and keep the important and the unimportant separate.¹

The general theory of strategy, which explains the structure, content, and working of the strategy function, has a domain of intellectual authority that is universal and eternal. This logical precedence over the wide variety of historically unique strategic phenomena means that the theory can provide order and discipline to help those who argue about particular ideas and their practical expression in action. This article is a modest attempt to bring general strategic theory to the intellectual feast of rival ideas and doctrines about COIN, or should it be counterinsurgency, that continues to excite combative theorists.²

By way of historical placement of argument, I am pleased to acknowledge my debts to a few scholars whose arguments have combined to help spark this particular effort of mine: Antulio Echevarria, Sebastian Gorka and David Kilcullen, and David Ucko.³ They bear no responsibility for my argument here, but I find much of their recent reasoning to be distinctly compatible with my own. In fact, it is my hope that this article will deserve to be regarded as usefully complementary to their writings.

COIN is neither a concept nor can it be a strategy. Instead, it is simply an acronymic descriptor of a basket of diverse activities intended to counter an insurgency. COIN cannot be debated intelligently as a general and generic project any more than can war and its warfare. COIN effort is a subset of effort in war, and—save in moral context—it makes no sense to attempt to argue about either, save with specific reference to particular cases. We might as well try to debate taxation. Its known general evil has to be somewhat offset by the contestable claims advanced for the good that it should generate—security, social justice, and so forth. It is tempting to suggest that strategic theorists should accept the same golden rule as that which helps discipline the medical

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profession—“first, do no harm.” But to approach the recent COIN and counterterrorism debate with that candidate injunction in mind would be sociologically naïve because of the career dynamics that incentivize herd behavior with faddish and fashionable conceptualization.

It is my contention in this article that the United States and the world order values that it seeks to advance and protect have been harmed by a failure of conceptualization pertaining to COIN and counterterrorism. However, hastily I must add, there is a serious danger that the rhythm of debate will encourage an indiscriminate massacre of both guilty and innocent concepts. This article argues that COIN per se is not, and plausibly cannot possibly be, a concept that has failed. Among several problems with such a charge would be the nontrivial actuality that COIN is not a concept. The fact that many people who need to know better—and could know better, were they educated in strategy—think inappropriately about COIN is unfortunate and harmful. But we should not permit such conceptual abuse to enjoy an authority it does not deserve. The relevant challenge here is neither to bury nor to praise COIN (with apologies to William Shakespeare), but rather to help ensure that it survives with minimum damage as a necessary option-set in America’s national security strategy quiver.

COIN per se is not, and plausibly cannot possibly be, a concept that has failed

National security policy and the strategy to implement it are indeed complex and can pose genuinely “wicked” dilemmas admitting of no attractive choices. Nonetheless, they are not akin to quantum theory. The American challenge with COIN, counterterrorism, and

affiliated issues does demand some granularity in comprehension if decisions and actions are to be wisely taken and pursued. However, we have access to a general theory of strategy, supported by a general theory of politics and statecraft, that draws on 2,500 years of thought and experience.⁴ The COIN debaters of today have powerful conceptual allies, if only they know to employ them prudently. As the great Prussian Carl von Clausewitz wrote, “Theory exists so that one need not start afresh each time sorting out the material and plowing through it, but will find it to hand and in good order.”⁵ Clausewitz advised also that “all theories, however, must stick to categories of phenomena and can never take account of a truly unique case. This must be left to judgment and talent.”⁶ It is my argument that the judgment and talent required to cope with COIN cases, extant and potential, needs to benefit from the education that sound general theory can provide to those willing and able to learn. A major advantage that should be secured by some serious education in strategy is a greater ease than before in identifying shoddy concepts that are not sufficiently fit for the purposes their advocate-owners claim.

Of course, this article is about Iraq, Afghanistan, and post-both imbroglios. But it is about them only in the sense that it seeks to clarify and help explain how to think usefully about these painful episodes and the others that lurk for sure in America’s future strategic history. This article is “policy science,” designed to address the structure of the issue area of COIN/counterterrorism, not policy or strategy advocacy. America’s recent record of thought and action about COIN is mainly, though not entirely, poor; hence, this article. What is particularly frustrating is recognition that the conceptual failure is all but wholly gratuitous and should have been avoidable. Americans in

the 2000s went to war, and by and large have remained conceptually wounded. The irony in this persisting condition has not been lost on American military historian Brian Linn. In his persuasive words:

Even before [the global war on terror], the defense community was in the midst of a vibrant debate over whether the nature of war itself had changed. Advocates offered the prospect of a glittering future through a “Revolution in Military Affairs,” “Military Transformation,” and a “New American Way of War.” But their voices were only some, if perhaps the most strident, in a much larger discussion. Others defended the relevance of military philosophers such as Henri Jomini and Carl von Clausewitz, while still others advocated what General Wesley K. Clark termed “modern war—limited, carefully constrained in geography, scope, weaponry and effects.” The debate, like the defense community, overflowed with buzzwords—asymmetric conflict, fourth-generation warfare, shock and awe, full spectrum dominance—many of which quickly became passé. And with some significant exceptions, much of this debate confined itself to hypothetical threats, to the relative merits of weapons systems, and to new tactical organizations.⁷

Linn proceeded to observe that “this failure of military intellectuals to agree on a concept of war might seem surprising, given that virtually everyone in the armed forces claims to be a *warfighter* and every few years at least one of the services proclaims its intentions to make each member a *warrior*.”⁸ The failure that Linn noticed was not of the kind that might occur when a number of powerful rival concepts are

contending for intellectual primacy. Instead, there was failure to agree, which he registered; in addition, there was failure to produce a dominant idea worthy of hegemonic status, and finally there was failure of the kind signaled in the famous Gresham’s law, wherein the 16th-century financier claimed that currency of lower value tended to drive that of higher value out of circulation. By analogy with Sir Thomas’s law, the plethora of adjectivally modified concepts of contemporary war and warfare has driven older and simpler concepts and theory almost into hiding. “Thucydides (or Sun Tzu, or Clausewitz) was mainly right!” is not as exciting and salable as a narrative of revolutionary change, even when the change must entail some alchemy (for example, war allegedly changing its nature; or human behavior suddenly, post–Cold War, reflecting the benign consequences of a normative revolution that denies repression as an effective domestic policy option, and suchlike attractive fantasies).

The conceptual tool needed to explain conflict phenomena is ready to hand, but people seem not to know what it is or how to use it. As a result, a thousand weeds of strategic theory flourish, and the only authority is official endorsement and use, which typically is transient. The classical canon of strategic thought, although widely praised and quoted in fragmentary wisdom nuggets, plainly has no significant intellectual disciplinary role. All of this is unfortunate because much of the recent COIN debate fundamentally is nonsense; it rests upon false or misleading ideas, indeed literally upon misconceptions. A further irony of this quintessentially ironic subject is the incontestable fact that the cost of formal education in strategy is trivial compared with the costs incurred for reasons of ignorance of its nature and working on the part of ill-educated practitioners.⁹

Lest there be any misunderstanding, I am not going to attempt to argue that an education in strategic theory will serve like the philosopher's stone postulated in medieval alchemy to be able to turn the base metal of failure or impasse into the gold of strategic success. Rather, it is my claim only that there is available a relatively simple general theory of strategy (and war) that transcends and conceptually reorganizes such subordinate subjects as COIN and counterterrorism. This general theory, far from retiring COIN theory, actually saves it from the misconceptions of overzealous if undereducated advocate theorist-practitioners. So what is my argument?

COIN debate would benefit if the debaters took a refresher course in the basics of strategy

Argument

If this debate about COIN is to be reset along more productive lines than those typically pursued in the often heated and bad-tempered exchanges of recent times, it is necessary to place some reliance on the conceptual tools that strategic theory provides. Unsurprisingly, in its several forms that theory yields what Clausewitz specified: it sorts out what needs sorting. There is much that should be debated about COIN, but the controversy is not helpful for national security if the structure and functioning of the subject matter, suitably defined, are not grasped and gripped with intellectual discipline. To that end, what follows is a nine-part argument intended to make more sense of the not-so-great COIN debate triggered by the unmistakable evidence of confusion, frustration, and

either failure or unsatisfactorily fragile success in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is neither policy nor strategy advocacy, but generically it is advocacy of policy (and its politics) and strategy, properly employed.

Formal education in strategy is not an adequate substitute for experience or talent and aptitude, but it should help. COIN debate would benefit if the debaters took a refresher course in the basics of strategy. Many fallacies and inadequate arguments about COIN in Afghanistan, for instance, are avoidable if their proponents were willing to seek and were able to receive help from theory. Harold Winton offers useful guidance when he identifies five functions for competent theory: such theory “defines, categorizes, explains, connects, and anticipates.”¹⁰ About what does theory perform those functions? The answer, which for strategy is the equivalent of $E = mc^2$, is ends, ways, means, and (with caveats) assumptions. If a strategist's narrative performs well on this formula, he has indeed cracked the code that enables—though it cannot guarantee—strategic success. The strategist needs to understand his subject, which is not COIN or counterterrorism; it is strategy for his particular challenge in COIN or counterterrorism. It is hard to find compensation for a lack of case-specific local knowledge, but it is even harder, and can be impossible, to compensate for weakness in understanding of strategy.

There is a classical canon of authors worth reading for their contributions, both intended and not, to the general theory of strategy. This theorist has reshaped and assembled the theory in the form of dicta (formal statements that are not quite principles and definitely not laws).¹¹ Rather than test readers' patience with a recital of my dicta, here I capture much of

U.S. Marine greets local children during partnered security patrol with ANA soldiers in Helmand Province



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their meanings and implications by offering a list of “strategists’ questions,” some of which, with some amendments, I have borrowed with gratitude from the late Philip Crowl, followed by my own redrafting of the now long-traditional “Principles of War” as a set of Principles of War that I believe more suitably serves the declared purpose. First, the following are the strategists’ questions:

- ❖ What is it all about? What are the political stakes, and how much do they matter to us?
- ❖ So what? What will be the strategic effect of the sundry characters of behavior that we choose to conduct?
- ❖ Is the strategy selected tailored well enough to meet our political objectives?
- ❖ What are the probable limits of our (military) power as a basket of complementary agencies to influence and endeavor to control the enemy’s will?
- ❖ How could the enemy strive to thwart us?
- ❖ What are our alternative courses of action/inaction? What are their prospective costs and benefits?
- ❖ How robust is our home front?
- ❖ Does the strategy we prefer today draw prudently and honestly upon the strategic education that history can provide?
- ❖ What have we overlooked?

The intention above is not to provide an exhaustive basis for strategic enquiry, but rather to capture the spirit as well as most of the content of a properly skeptical strategist's concerns. My second list is designed to complement the longstanding wisdom in the Principles of War (mass, objective, offensive, surprise, economy of force, maneuver, unity of command, security, and simplicity)—which actually are principles of warfare—with some “new,” though hardly novel, principles that are more fit for their purpose. The Principles of War (new style) reads as follows, in barest form of expression:¹²

war requires the ability to adapt to failure and to cope well enough with the consequences of chaos, friction, and the unintended consequences of actions

- ❖ War is a political act conducted for political reasons.
- ❖ There is more to war than warfare.
- ❖ There is more to strategy than military strategy.
- ❖ War is about peace, and sometimes vice versa.
- ❖ Style in warfighting has political consequences.
- ❖ War is caused, shaped, and driven by its contexts.
- ❖ War is a contest of political wills.
- ❖ “War is nothing but a duel on a larger scale”:¹³ take the enemy into account.
- ❖ War is a cultural undertaking.
- ❖ War requires the ability to adapt to failure and to cope well enough with the

consequences of chaos, friction, and the unintended consequences of actions.

These new-style Principles of War complement, rather than substitute for, the extant principles that, as noted already, are really principles only of warfare. Considered as part of the canon of dicta, precepts, and the like that comprises strategy's general theory, these bundles of questions and principles serve as potent intellectual auxiliary legions in aid of education in strategy. Their purpose, meaning their practical value, is to stimulate and encourage a strategic sense in politically motivated behavior. It is this strategic sense that is so vital if the various levels of activity that we can identify as politics/policy, grand strategy, military strategy, operations, and tactics are to work coherently in mutually supporting ways in pursuit of common goals. Because strategy is an artistic social science, we do not need to demand that its theory is built on the basis only of nuggets of wisdom that are testable and therefore demonstrably correct for any and every occasion.

The merit in COIN cannot sensibly be posed as a general question. It is beyond argument that insurgency has been a constant, indeed a perennial, feature of strategic history. Logically, it has to follow that counterinsurgency must have like historical provenance. Revolt, rebellion, insurrection, civil war, whatever the preferred terms of art, are a phenomenon woven into the history of the fabric of human societies and their politics. It may seem to make sense to classify a particular body of historical experience as, in effect, “what we mean by counterinsurgency,” and it could be true that some similarity in contexts between cases does allow for an understanding that extends beyond an individual case. Gorka and Kilcullen claim that COIN, as the concept typically has been employed and understood of recent years, relies

upon a data set that is far too exclusive in historical and other domains to be sound.¹⁴ They are probably correct in their criticism of COIN theory, at least as recent theory has been interpreted. By analogy, the leading contemporary COIN theory provides an arguable cosmology limited only to the recent history of our solar system rather than to the whole universe of which our system is but a minor part.

It is not my intention for this article to join battle on COIN “vs.” counterinsurgency and suchlike debate. Rather, this analysis offers what amounts functionally to the services of an intellectual policeman in the form of strategy. It is probably true—certainly it is fairly plausible—to argue that disputes about tactics for COIN should be resolvable in the light of the strategic sense advocated here. The framework for thought, decision, and action provided by the elemental formula of ends, ways, and means—with assumptions—enables strategic sense to operate and endeavor to shape events. Whether or not an insurgency should be opposed is not a general question. The answer always must depend on the specific circumstances. This is not so much a matter of COIN doctrine or techniques, including the military; rather, it is first and foremost a political issue. As a general rule, domestic insurgencies must be countered. For reasons of national security and public order, as well as personal survival, established authority has a duty to attempt to counter insurgents. Whether or not it is sensible for an outside polity to intervene in other polities’ insurgencies is a question that can only be posed in the particular. Mastery and employment of the strategic frame of thought and action should go a long way toward the generation of prudent decisions. However, since chance and friction are ever apt to rule in matters of war and warfare as the Prussian insisted, there can never be a

guarantee that even high rectitude in strategic method will be rewarded with success.¹⁵

In COIN, all war and its warfare are about politics no more or less than in strategic behavior applied to other missions. Politics is a necessary, though not sufficient, defining descriptor of war. This point is a simple one, but apparently it is easy to misunderstand. Because war and its warfare are about politics, it does not follow that war is politics: it is not. It is a fallacy to believe that counterinsurgency is activity of a species different from interstate war in regard to its nature. Both interstate and (counter) insurgent warfare are owned by politics. There are some important differences between interstate and intrastate war, but degree of political meaning is not among the distinctions. Because it is in the very nature of war for it to be about politics, it is not possible for some kinds of wars to be more political than others. The political nature of the defining motivation and consequences of warfare is not impacted by the character or the intensity of the fighting. Scholars who seek to emphasize the critical importance of political factors—correctly in my view—err seriously if they come to believe that their approach to counterinsurgency is inherently more political than that of debate opponents who lean toward a more actively military engagement. What is happening in the contemporary COIN debate is evidence of conceptual confusion.

War is war; it is prosecuted in a greater or lesser part by military force, and it is always, and by definition, about politics. Ironically, it is not uncommon for the two poles in this controversy to be making a like conceptual error. Specifically, one pole of opinion gravitates around the fallacy that an insurgency has to be countered predominantly by a political grand strategy because, in truth, it is really a political war (about legitimacy and authority). The

other pole of opinion gravitates around the fallacy that an insurgency is in its most essential, certainly most pressing, nature a military challenge. The second approach argues that if we win the warfare in the counterinsurgent war, favorable politics inexorably will follow the military success that provides security to the population. This second view is substantially—though not wholly—let alone reliably, correct, insofar as we can draw upon history for empirical support. But both approaches implicitly

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claim authority from what is a conceptual error about the nature of war and strategy. Again, both camps of opinion are correct in the core of their set of beliefs. On the one hand, those who unwisely deemphasize the importance of the warfare in countering insurgents nonetheless are correct in their promotion of the importance of politics. On the other hand, those who inappropriately demote the relative significance of the political in favor of effort to win the warfare are correct in their insistence on the enemy's military defeat.

Means and methods in counterinsurgency must vary from case to case since each conflict has distinctive features. Conceptual creativity that sees the light of day in wars that allegedly are irregular, hybrid, complex, difficult, fourth generation, and the rest of the products of fertile imaginations must not be permitted to obscure the simple and usable verities that war is war and it is always about politics. Theoretical elaboration of the claimed structure of allegedly different kinds

of wars is usually an example of conceptual construction on sand.

It is not sensible to categorize wars according to the believed predominant combat style of one of the belligerents. Guerrilla-style warfare is potentially universal and, on the historical evidence, for excellent reasons has been a favored military method of the weaker combatant eternally. There are no such historical phenomena as guerrilla wars. Rather, there have been countless wars wherein guerrilla tactics have been employed, sometimes by both sides. To define a war according to a tactical style is about as foolish as definition according to weaponry. For example, it is not conducive of understanding to conceive of tank warfare when the subject of interest is warfare with tanks and so forth, typically, if not quite always, in the context of combined arms. It is important conceptually not to allow the muscle to dominate the brain. Tanks, cavalry, and nuclear weapons are provided with strategic and political meaning only by the warfare that they serve (or might serve) and by the war that licenses that warfare. And the war, of course, is provided its purpose and its license to unleash harm by politics. We need not be a disciple of Clausewitz to follow this reasoning, but if we are not, we should be.

Regardless of our position regarding rival emphases in good strategic counterinsurgency effort as between military styles and between military and civilian initiatives, what we are seeking to counter is not the insurgents' tactics, but rather their strategic meaning for political effect. A key to this point is to be found in Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, when he asserts persuasively that "what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy."¹⁶ All strategy is done by tactical action, but a heavy focus on tactics is ever liable to lead us astray from the strategic plot and its political context. A

particular security menace may well have the dominant current character of a guerrilla style in military behavior, but that contemporary tactical fact should not be allowed to define the conflict for us.

Counterinsurgency is not a subject that has integrity in and of itself. Because war is a political, and only instrumentally a military, phenomenon, we must be careful lest we ambush ourselves by a conceptual confusion that inflates COIN to the status of an idea and activity that purportedly has stand-alone, context-free merit. Whether or not COIN should be attempted must always be a policy decision for strategy that is made in a political process. It is highly misleading to write about COIN as if it were a technique, a basket of operational and tactical ways and means, utterly divorced from specific historical political circumstances. There is and can be no “right way” to do COIN, though there are several ways most probably that might be right enough for a particular case in an imperfect world. To connect, or reconnect, with the fundamentals of the subject under discussion here, the dominant policy questions have to be: “Should we attempt to help counter this insurgency?”—and, if the answer is yes, “How should we do so?” This seemingly simplistic approach is useful because it frames the issue area in desirable width, depth, and context.¹⁷ Our counterinsurgency playbook should not be confined to recent or current COIN method wisdom, but rather ought to draw upon the full range of our strategic understanding and of historical experience far beyond our own.¹⁸ This is not necessarily to condemn contemporary beliefs on best practice in COIN; it is only to argue that decisions to counter or not to counter an insurgency should not gravitate precipitately to essentially tactical matters of COIN

method, at the likely expense of strategic reasoning and direction. To be blunt, the most effective strategy to counter an insurgency may be one that makes little use of COIN tactics. It will depend upon the circumstance (context).

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This is not to deny that there are some well-identified items of typically good practice in the countering of an insurgency with its necessarily guerrilla style of operations.¹⁹ The good practice manual is not quite a set of principles or rules, but it always provided that policy (politics) and strategy demand that insurgent guerrillas—and terrorists, often the same—be opposed tactically in directly effective, combat-style matching mode. Then there is no structural difficulty with the endeavor. Strategy has political effect through the strategic effect of its enabling tactical action. We need to accept the reality of the wide diversity in character among phenomena that fit the definition of insurgency and the extensive range of grand strategic methods and means that may be employed in opposition to it. Such acceptance should lead to an appreciation that the strategic and political contexts must not be conceptually demoted to walk-on sponsoring roles as the inadvertent consequence of an inappropriate privileging of COIN tactics.

Insurgents can lose the warfare, but still win the war. In contrast, if the political incumbents lose the warfare, they lose the war. There is a well known, though apocryphal, maxim (often attributed to Sun Tzu) that claims, “Strategy without tactics is the slowest



Afghan students listen to town elders at shura about growth of education in Garmisr District

DOD (Reece Lodder)

route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.” It would be imprudent to assert that a state can never win a war against insurgents by virtue of winning the warfare—*hardly ever* would be the way to modify the claim—but it is safe to predict that if the state loses the warfare, it will have lost the war. There is much more to war than its warfare, or fighting, but the insurgents’ cause is more permissive of military setbacks than is that of the state. This argument, which may seem a little convoluted to some, even perverse perhaps, targets an important issue in recent COIN debate and speaks to an enduring matter of the greatest significance to counterinsurgents. Today, it is orthodox to endorse the mantra or chant “we cannot kill our way to victory,” though the targeted killings and assassinations in recent years of insurgents and terrorists in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan cast some doubt on the operational authority of this still popular thesis. Variants of the chant claim that counterinsurgency is really all about protecting the people, *not* killing insurgents. After all, live insurgents can be a source of vital intelligence, and if “turned” and apparently apostate, they help generate strategic effect for COIN. The rather polarized debate about the relative importance of the military, as contrasted with the political contribution to effective COIN, has not been especially enlightening. This is one of those difficult cases where both rival core arguments are right. Can they be reconciled is the pertinent question.

Even though war and its warfare are about politics, it does not (quite) follow that the winning of (most of) the warfare guarantees the winning of the war. Such winning can be understood to mean that the victorious side largely dictates the terms that it prefers for an armistice and then a

peace settlement, and is in a position to police and enforce a postwar order that in the main reflects its values and choices. History tells us that it can be as hard, if not harder, to make peace than it is to make war successfully. Former belligerents do not always receive and enjoy politically the postwar conditions that they would seem to merit for their relative efforts and degree of success or failure, let alone for the moral worth of their sacrifice (a dubious characterization if ever there was one, notwithstanding its popularity). It is nearly always strategically harmful to lose in the fighting, though it is true that a heroically suicidal blood sacrifice (the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, for one example, or Thermopylae, more arguably) can help propel a cause.

With respect to COIN, military setbacks and a growing public conviction that ever greater defeats loom in the fairly near future are likely to be much more deadly to established authority than to its armed foes. If insurgents are beaten in the typically small-scale combats of largely guerrilla-style warfare, if they suffer damaging loss of political agents to the security services, they usually have the strategic option of retreating, repairing, recovering, and returning when time has wrought its hoped-for magic by improving the context for violent action, and they will try again, bloodied but possibly wiser. The insurgents' political cause, or causes, can survive a period of strategic weakness promoted by military defeats whereas the government cannot. Political legitimacy is in part a matter of public confidence earned by providing credible evidence that the future is "ours and not theirs."

This is not to claim crudely that all people bandwagon with those who are anticipated with confidence to be the winners, but it is to argue that a prime way in which public support is lost

is by looking like the loser in the fighting. For incumbent political authority, there is no way back from an unfolding military defeat, excepting foreign intervention that often only postpones the evil hour (as in South Vietnam in 1965). Insurgents who are beaten are not usually literally annihilated. If the fighting has been guerrilla in style, the defeats are likely to be tactically painful and certainly strategically and politically damaging to reputation, but nonetheless not fatal to the prospects for ultimate victory. We might recall with advantage these words by Mao Zedong: "The strategy of guerrilla warfare is manifestly unlike that employed in orthodox operations. There is in guerrilla warfare no such thing as a decisive battle."²⁰

if we are not willing to pay what winning is expected to cost, then we ought not to be fighting at all

Population-centric COIN will not succeed if the politics are weak, but neither is it likely to succeed if the insurgents can retreat to repair, rally, and recover in a cross-border sanctuary. Insurgency and its countering inalienably are simultaneously both political and military—and social-cultural, inter alia—projects. There is some porosity between the political and the military, but fungibility is not unbounded. Military success should fuel political reputation, but we ought not to expect military failure to find adequate compensation in residual political commitment. Because of the extraordinary difficulty that regular armed forces tend to have bringing to battle insurgents who usually are obliged prudently to fight in guerrilla mode, it is close to essential that guerrilla fighters be denied cross-border sanctuary. It can be argued, in theory, that since COIN is war

about the people, primarily it has to be effective “amongst the people,” where they live.²¹ COIN effort that is succeeding need not, therefore, chase insurgents into distant and sparsely populated areas because there the guerrillas will be strategically marginalized and politically irrelevant. This reasoning is not without all merit, but nonetheless it is not thoroughly convincing.

By analogy, an insurgency that has cross-border sanctuaries is akin to a cancer that is either in temporary remission or only lightly active. Afghanistan in the 2000s offers what has to be a candidate classic object lesson in why cross-border sanctuaries ought not to be tolerated strategically in COIN. There should be no need to reemphasize the point by citing North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in the 1960s and 1970s. Of course, there are always reasons, typically good ones, why it would be costly to strive seriously to foreclose on insurgent sanctuaries. However, to anticipate and even predict some

much more political than it is military, that it is not really war with warfare, set themselves up for strategic ambush by the dynamics and “grammar” of the military dimension to strategic history.²² There is an integrity to military strategy and tactics that is not idly to be mocked by the adjectival modifiers with which some theorists attempt to corral and control violence. Irregular war is still war, as is limited war and the countering of insurgents in war with some warfare. Sanctuary denial is no guarantee of victory, but nothing else is either. However, seemingly politically prudent decisions to tolerate cross-border sanctuaries are plain evidence of strategic weakness and are more often than not a fatal mistake.

COIN requires tactical competence, but it is hugely subordinate to politics, policy, and strategy. Tactical challenges must have some strategic effect, but tactics comprise a problem-set with which armed forces and other agencies of state should be well enough trained and equipped to cope. Adequate defense planning provides forces that are sufficiently adaptable and flexible—perhaps not for current needs, though certainly for tomorrow, not excluding challenges that are neither anticipated nor predicted. The principal and driving issues for the United States with respect to counterinsurgency are when to do it and when not, and how to attempt to do it strategically. Policy and strategy choices are literally critical and determinative. The choice of strategy has to be (or perhaps *should* be) driven, certainly shaped, by the political goals of policy that yield meaning to the project. Similarly, the tactical means and their behavior as an agency for strategy have to be directed by the character of political ambition in the policy goals. All too often, COIN effort is debated in its tactical particulars, while the political and strategic assumptions that

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adverse consequences of sanctuary denial is not to close the strategic issue. Should the benefits of antisubsanctuary action not be judged sufficient to offset the probable costs, then it is likely to be the case that the insurgency ought not to be countered. The logic in this argument is to the effect that if we are not willing to pay what winning is expected to cost, then we ought not to be fighting at all. Obviously, this logic applies to contexts of conflict wherein sanctuaries are believed to be a critical asset for the insurgents. Those who persuade themselves that COIN is

ultimately are responsible for many of those particulars persist unprobed and unchallenged. Because the future cannot be foreseen in detail, it is only reasonable to anticipate that the course of events will reveal some weakness in extant assumptions, strategy, and tactical practices. Nonetheless, much that ought to be determined by choice of policy ends and strategic ways, instead, by default, is addressed at the tactical level. Tactical errors or setbacks enforced by a clever enemy should be corrected or offset tactically and need not menace the integrity of policy and strategy. COIN may not be rocket science or quantum theory, but no one has ever argued that it is easy.

If success in COIN requires prior, or at least temporally parallel, success in nation-building, it is foredoomed to failure. Nations cannot be built. Most especially they cannot be built by well-meaning but culturally arrogant foreign social scientists, no matter how well intentioned and methodologically sophisticated. A *nation* (or *community*) is best defined as a people who think of themselves as one. Nations build themselves by and through historical experience. Cultural understanding is always useful and its absence can be a lethal weakness, but some lack of comprehension is usual in war.²³ War, warfare, and strategy are transcultural in their natures and typically are substantially transcultural in their variable characters also. Common humanity, common situation, and fairly common technologies unsurprisingly yield thought, policy, and behavior that is notably similar.²⁴ It is not characteristically culturally very American to be modest and strongly respectful when dealing with more than marginally alien societies and cultures. In the very early 2000s, I was appalled by the excessive ambition that I detected in the constructivist mood of some American nation-builders. This

is an old, old story; some of us recall the hopes based on unsound assumptions that helped thwart the American social scientific project in South Vietnam.

nations cannot be built by well-meaning but culturally arrogant foreign social scientists, no matter how well intentioned and methodologically sophisticated

My argument is strictly practical and strategic; it is not normative. The issue is not whether Iraq, Afghanistan, or anywhere else either needs to be, or should be “improved.” Instead, the issue is whether or not the job is feasible. Even if it would be well worth doing, if it is mission impossible or highly improbable at sustainable cost to us, then it ought not to be attempted. This is Strategy 101. However, such a judgment does not mean, ipso facto, that a particular insurgency must be ignored by the United States. All it means is that a COIN effort strategically intended to reconstruct and deliver an (alien) society markedly different from that currently extant is bound to fail. If insurgents, terrorists, or pirates are a serious threat to international order and American national security, they must be neutralized by tactics that will produce the required effect, even if only for a while. Truly lasting solutions may well be beyond us, but since societal reconstruction is certainly not a practicable option, we have to settle for what is good enough for today and the near-term future. This is very much the Israeli attitude toward Hamas in Gaza and Hizballah in Lebanon. It is not pretty and it is certainly not definitive, but in an imperfect world that poses some wicked problems, states do what they can and must.

Conclusion

This article has ranged ambitiously over contested conceptual terrain and has raided promiscuously, probably slaughtering and certainly endangering a few innocent bystanders along with the villains. Notwithstanding its occasionally roguishly combative tone, the argument here is one that attempts cohesion, integration, and even consensus, not further division. The dominant claim in the article is that much of the debate of recent years among rival tribes of scholarly warriors over COIN and counterinsurgency doctrine could be rendered more coherent and useful if it were conducted in the intellectual context of strategy's general theory. When COIN is placed properly in its conceptual setting as a thought and activity set necessarily housed under the big tent of the general theory of strategy, truly helpful perspective and discipline apply. Whether or not we prefer to view COIN far more as armed anthropology/social work than as war with its warfare, still it is essential to understand that it is war and also that it is ruled by the dicta of strategy.

Disputes among scholarly warriors over the desirable balance to be struck in COIN endeavors between military and extramilitary efforts are healthy and indeed essential when they pertain to specific matters with potential consequences in desired strategic effect. However, they are neither healthy nor essential when they are fueled by the assumption that COIN projects are either principally military or principally political ventures. As behavior in a war, countering an armed insurgency, COIN necessarily is about politics and is conducted ultimately for political reasons. But armed insurgents have to be defeated, and more to the point, credible evidence of their prospective, if cumulative, defeat has to be provided to fearful yet prudently skeptical local civilian bystanders. If or when COIN argument strays into what amounts to an either/or mode in considering the political and the military, it is in want of conceptual navigational correction. COIN is war and it involves some warfare, but it is conducted for political reasons. This logic is absolute. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 578.

² A distinction between COIN and counterinsurgency is argued forcefully in Sebastian L.v. Gorka and David Kilcullen, "An Actor-centric Theory of War: Understanding the Difference Between COIN and Counterinsurgency," *Joint Force Quarterly* 60 (1st Quarter 2011), 14–18. My argument does not require me either to endorse or reject Gorka and Kilcullen's distinction between COIN and counterinsurgency, so I will not enter a debate when I need not do so. The two are deployed in this article as alternative terms for the same phenomenon. The choice of one or the other is simply a matter of style and convenience for me and is not intended to carry any implied rebuke to Gorka and Kilcullen.

³ Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Preparing for One War and Getting Another* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, September 2010); Gorka and Kilcullen; and David H. Ucko, "Counterinsurgency after Afghanistan," *PRISM* 3, no. 1 (December 2011), 3–20.

⁴ See Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Beatrice Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁵ Clausewitz, 141.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁷ Brian McAllister Linn, *The Echo of Battle: The Army's Way of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1–2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹ Colin S. Gray, *Schools for Strategy: Teaching Strategy for 21st Century Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, November 2009).

¹⁰ Harold R. Winton, “An Imperfect Jewel: Military Theory and the Military Profession,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 6 (December 2011), 857.

¹¹ Gray, *The Strategy Bridge*, chapters 1–2.

¹² Colin S. Gray, *Strategy and History: Essays on Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2006), 81–87.

¹³ Clausewitz, 75.

¹⁴ Gorka and Kilcullen.

¹⁵ Clausewitz, 85, 119–121.

¹⁶ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 77.

¹⁷ The demand for study and understanding in width, depth, and context was articulated at its most persuasive in Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars and other Essays* (London: Counterpoint, 1983), 215–217.

¹⁸ Historical experience can be unreliable as recovered by historians, but nonetheless it is the only empirical basis for theory and practice that we have. The would-be counterinsurgent's library, at a minimum, should contain Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Classic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Persia to the Present* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984); Walter Laqueur, *Guerrilla Warfare: A Historical and Critical Study* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998); Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy*, chapters 15–16; and Heuser, *The Strategy Makers: Thoughts on War and Society from Machiavelli to Clausewitz* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010). Some of the COIN debaters of recent years have pointed correctly to the somewhat novel character of Islamist insurgency and terrorism, though in doing so they risk neglecting much of the rich history of such strife. Religious motivation combined often confusingly with tribal and other loyalties, with the high calorific addition of antiforeign sentiment, inter alia, truly has been a persisting brew making for violent discontent over millennia, not merely the 2000s. Modern technology—the cell phone and Internet—makes some difference, but not really that much for a phenomenon that is ancient in provenance.

¹⁹ There is no great mystery at the level of general principles, precepts, and lessons about good practice in counterinsurgency or insurgency. The classic list is T.E. Lawrence's “Twenty-seven Articles” that was published in the *Arab Bulletin* (April 20, 1917), available at <[www.wsma.edu/dmi/IWmsgs/The 27Articles of T.E.Lawrence.pdf](http://www.wsma.edu/dmi/IWmsgs/The%2027Articles%20of%20T.E.Lawrence.pdf)>. A modern variant, from the perspective of a counterinsurgent company commander, is David Kilcullen's list of 28 Articles in his *Counterinsurgency* (London: C. Hurst, 2010), chapter 1. Since lists are favored in COIN literature, I offer my own 28 “lessons from an irregular war” in “The Anglo-Irish War, 1919–1921,” *Comparative Strategy* 26, no. 5 (October–November 2007), 388–392.

²⁰ Mao Zedong (attrib.), *On Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1961), 52.

²¹ To quote Rupert Smith, who has taken out an intellectual patent on the phrase, in *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).

²² To expand by implication, at least, on Clausewitz, 605.

²³ Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom, Helm, 1979), is a small book with large lasting value.

²⁴ This ambitious thesis is supported eloquently in Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War Through Western Eyes* (London: C. Hurst, 2009); and also in John France, *Perilous Glory: The Rise of Western Military Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 4–5.