Counterinsurgency after Afghanistan

A Concept in Crisis

BY DAVID H. UCKO

S ix years have passed since the publication of Field Manual (FM) 3–24, *Counterinsurgency*. Embraced by sections of the military and civilian defense community seeking a fresh approach to the conflict in Iraq, the new field manual gained a political significance and profile unlike previous doctrinal publications. When General David Petraeus was able to incorporate some of the manual's core precepts into the new U.S. strategy for Iraq, and casualties and instability in Iraq declined over the following few years, both counterinsurgency doctrine and the people associated with it gained unprecedented influence.

Since then, the buzz that counterinsurgency acquired has worn off—for several reasons. Most fundamentally, there is widespread frustration over the attempt to use counterinsurgency doctrine to stabilize Afghanistan. Second, there are now several counternarratives to the popular notion that U.S. counterinsurgency theory pulled Iraq back from the brink: key here is that local factors, not U.S. inputs, explain what happened during the period that Americans like to call *the surge*. Third, large-scale and protracted military operations to build nations, unify states, and establish legitimate and competent governments are undertakings that, even if workable, run counter to the fiscal realities facing the West today. In the end, the critics pile on, counterinsurgency is naïve in its assumptions, unworkable in its requirements, and arrogant in its unfounded claims of prior success.

Based on the rise and decline of counterinsurgency over the past few years, this article seeks to assess the utility of this concept and its future as a defense priority and area of research.[1] It concludes that the discussion of counterinsurgency is marred by the polarizing effects of the term itself, which have encouraged a bandwagon effect, both in favor of and now in opposition to the term. Lost in this heated and overly personalized polemic is a necessary and more careful analysis of what can and cannot be expected from this concept and its associated doctrine. By teasing out its contribution to military thinking, its limitations, and its proper use, this article seeks to identify those aspects of counterinsurgency

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theory that should be retained even if the term itself is once again cast aside. This conceptual discussion has more than mere academic import, as it will shape the way recent counterinsurgency campaigns are remembered and the likelihood of past mistakes being repeated.

## Contribution of Counterinsurgency Theory in Iraq

The discussion of counterinsurgency and Iraq now tends to focus on the degree to which the new doctrine helped U.S. forces stabilize the country during the so-called surge of 2007–2009. The instant wisdom on this issue suggested a stark discontinuity in strategy following General Petraeus's redeployment to Iraq in February 2007, this time as commander of Multi-National Force–Iraq (MNF–I). Before that, so the argument goes, most U.S. troops were confined to large forward operating bases and left their compounds only for discrete operations, typically to find, capture, and kill suspected insurgents. In changing course, General

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Petraeus relied on some of the principles in the counterinsurgency manual that he had published 2 months before arriving in-theater. The focus thus shifted toward providing security to the population, which required a dispersion of newly reinforced U.S. forces throughout their respective areas of operation, their partnering with local Iraqi forces, and sustainment of stability through the establishment of a fixed and combined presence in Iraq's most contested cities, towns, and neighborhoods. Along with

other counterinsurgency practices—careful intelligence work, close partnering with Iraqi security forces, greater attentiveness toward issues of local governance—the shift in strategy produced a country-wide decline in violence.

There have been many efforts to discredit this account, recounted here in its most threadbare form. One argument centers on the nature of counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and suggests that the new approach succeeded due to *increased* use of violence rather than softer notions such as "population security" and "hearts and minds." A second argument claims that U.S. forces in Iraq were peripheral to the change in security and that the real reason for the decline in casualties was the completion of ethnic cleansing across much of Baghdad, which obviated further violence. A third albeit related counternarrative ascribes the decline in violence to the evolution of the civil war in Iraq: by this argument, the contest between al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), various Sunni tribes and rejectionist elements, and the Shia-dominated death squads operating out of the Ministry of the Interior had by 2007 evolved to a point where a drop-off in violence was to be expected regardless of U.S. actions. In other words, U.S. forces were simply bystanders, later erroneously credited with a trend with which they had little to do. This last argument is sometimes supported by a fourth claim, namely that U.S. forces had implemented the tactics and techniques apparently "introduced" by General Petraeus prior to his return to Iraq, which again "proves" that it was the coincidence of his arrival with local phenomena, not the new strategy itself, that accounts for the drop in casualties during the ensuing 2 years. Finally, of course, there is the argument that the appearance of stability in Iraq is illusory and that the country's worst years still lie ahead—that the counterinsurgency campaign failed.
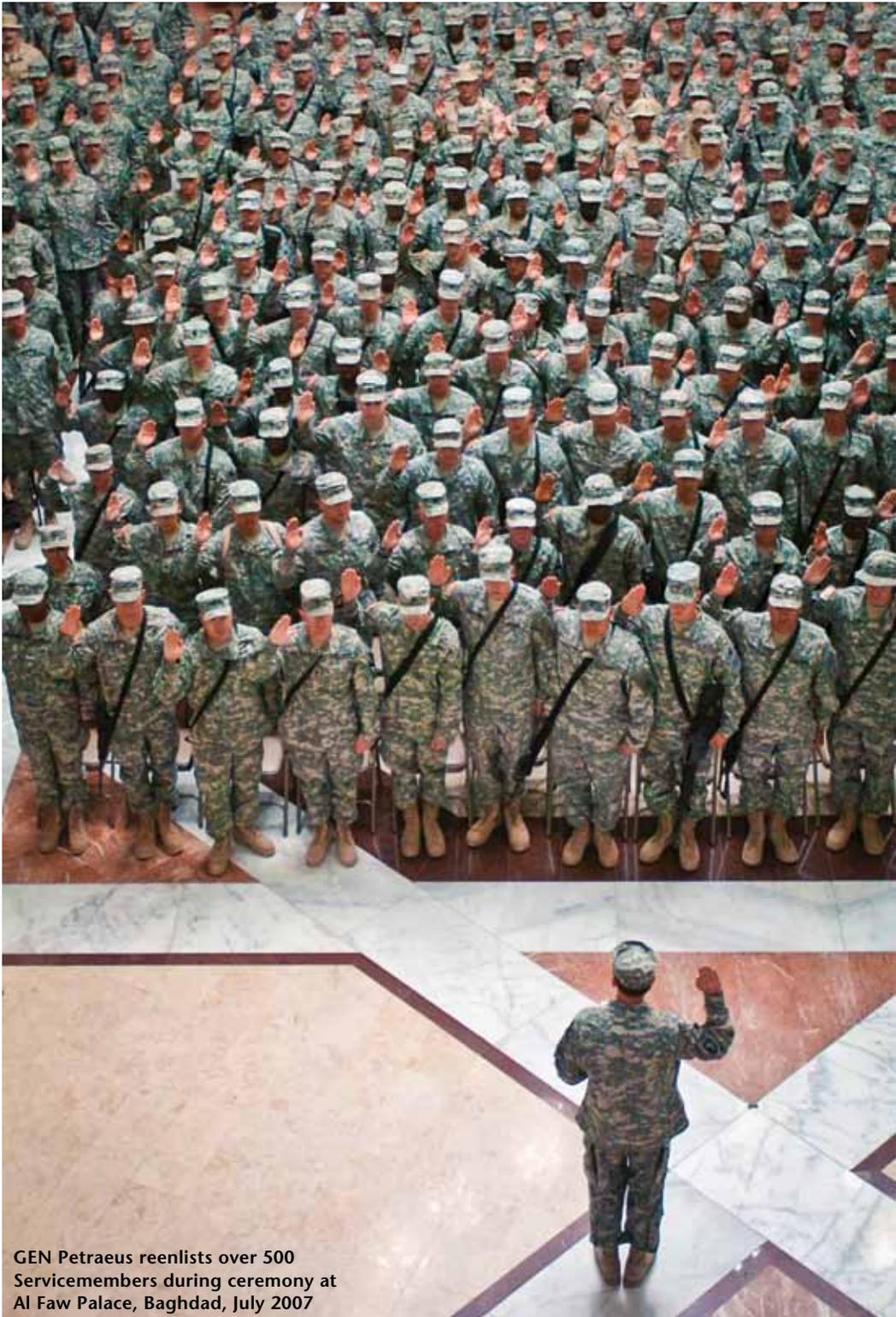
U.S. Army (Jon Soucy)

GEN Petraeus reenlists over 500 Servicemembers during ceremony at Al Faw Palace, Baghdad, July 2007

There is good cause to challenge the initial accounts of what happened during the surge, particularly as many of these paid insufficient attention to the Iraqi perspective on the events of this period. At the same time, there is something febrile about the flurry of efforts seeking to discredit what was achieved by General Petraeus and the troops under his command. Often this is more than a well-meaning attempt to learn more about a critical period of the Iraq War and descends into more parochial concerns, both within the American political scene and within the American military. Politically, the surge is significant for the fact that it was pushed onto a reluctant yet ultimately compliant Democrat-dominated Congress by a bullish and vehemently disliked Republican President who, to many observers, could do no right. To acknowledge some level of success in this endeavor, particularly when the benchmarks insisted upon by Democratic lawmakers were so unashamedly ignored, would be to show political weakness; better to insist the surge had nothing to do with it or that its results were disheartening.[2]

Within the U.S. military, the strategy behind the surge was driven by a group of officers inspired by the theory and principles of counterinsurgency against the backdrop of an institution resistant to such ideas. The accolades that these officers earned during and immediately following the change of course in Iraq may have antagonized those who either represented earlier (and by association "failed") strategies, or who simply resented the quick ascendance of a new cabal of purported "warrior-scholars." Lastly, within the think-tank circuit and academia, the increased interest in counterinsurgency has turned the field into something of a fad, which was bound to provoke dissent—particularly given the inevitably uneven quality of much of the associated scholarship. Most

aggravating here is the perceived collusion among officers, pundits, and politicians in weaving a tale of success from which they all prosper.

The ulterior motives for revisiting the surge do not necessarily diminish the potency of the overall charge. However, as with most matters academic, the issue is rarely one of being right or wrong but rather one of balance and context. Take the argument that the surge relied on *increased* violence and civilian fatalities rather than any specific adherence to counterinsurgency principles. While there are statistics to support this claim, it would be premature to look at the spike in casualties during the initial months of the surge and conclude that counterinsurgency rhetoric about civil security is mere cant. Various estimates from Iraq show that whereas civilian casualties, security incidents, and recovery of weapons all increased in 2007, they then diminished fairly dramatically in the ensuing years.[3] Unless all of these estimates are wrong, the notion that the surge produced and relied on more violence is quite easy to counter, or at least to contextualize: while the infusion and sustained presence of U.S. forces in areas previously denied to them caused increased casualties, the long-term effect of the shift in strategy was undeniably stabilizing. This also explains the concrete walls, barriers, checkpoints, and other population-control measures imposed as part of the counterinsurgency campaign. While these may seem repressive, specific case studies from particular areas of Iraq show that they were introduced and placed to prevent armed attacks and halt cycles of violence—and there is evidence that it worked.

There is a second, deeper bone of contention here, namely that the authors of FM 3–24 deliberately misled their readers with promises of a "kinder, gentler war," in which populations would be secure, hearts and minds would be won, and no one would get hurt.[4] The increased

use of force during the surge is therefore brought up to "prove" the hypocrisy of counterinsurgency theorists who prescribe one form of war in their field manuals but conduct a far bloodier campaign on the ground. There is merit to this charge; some counterinsurgency experts arguably oversold the more pleasant-sounding facets of these types of operations when speaking to the press and civilians, perhaps to obtain the necessary buy-in for a campaign that, by 2006 and 2007, was deeply unpopular.[5]

More generally, the accusation against the counterinsurgency community tends to ignore the vital context in which the doctrine was written. The 2006 field manual was an antithesis to the previous approach toward operations in Iraq, an approach more concerned with rooting out individual terrorists than with local perceptions of legitimacy, the preferences of the population, and the deeper causes of violence. It was also an antithesis to previous understandings of counterinsurgency within the U.S. military, which emphasized a narrow range of security-related tasks geared toward the destruction of the enemy rather than the political drivers of instability.[6] This context explains any overemphasis in the manual on the softer or nonlethal instruments of counterinsurgency, though it should be added that the manual never refutes the importance of coercive operations as part of a counterinsurgency campaign. Given this context, the surge did not depart from the principles of the field manual, but reflects its delicate balance between coercion and co-option. Violence initially increased, but its purpose was to set the conditions for longer term civil security. This is not to say that coercion did not continue to feature as an important component of the overall strategy; reflecting the balance in the field manual, the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) continued to launch precise

and intelligence-enabled operations against those adversaries deemed irreconcilable.

If agreement can be reached that the change in U.S. strategy at least coincided with the gradual stabilization of Iraq, to what degree was it the U.S. military's doing? Most efforts to downplay the U.S. role point to local developments with supposedly greater explanatory value. One intriguing hypothesis is that ethnic cleansing in Baghdad had come sufficiently close to completion as to obviate any further violence.[7] Thus, rather than signifying a U.S. success, the declining levels of violence actually speak to a gross *failure* to prevent violence, which had simply burned itself out. It is difficult to evaluate this argument fully with the information

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available today. At the same time, adherents to this hypothesis face some challenges. First, even if ethnic cleansing had petered out by 2007, U.S. units deploying in 2006 witnessed sustained death squad activity and, importantly, were able to arrest such violence through practices that would later characterize the surge. Then-Colonel J.B. Burton's Dagger Brigade was based in northwest Baghdad from November 2006 and witnessed a cycle of violence generated by Shia death squads infiltrating the Sunni community, which as a defense mechanism sided with AQI for protection or retribution. By partnering with Sunni community leaders, Dagger Brigade was able to interpose itself—with concrete barriers, combined outposts, and checkpoints—between the two communities and thereby deny the death squads access to their would-be targets. Casualties in northwest Baghdad diminished as a result.[8] Put simply, this specific case reveals how counterinsurgency practices

actively helped arrest ethnic cleansing rather than just react to its final dividend—and there are other similar cases to go on.[9]

Second, the ethnic cleansing argument would need to explain why this process was not in itself destabilizing, given the forced population movements, seizure of property, and large-scale death toll involved. It seems odd that none of this would have provoked revanchist tendencies. At the very least, may it be claimed that the surge helped hold such tendencies in check? Going further, it may be conceivable that casualties would decline due to the forced separation of combatants, but this phenomenon can hardly explain the economic, political, and security-related progress seen in Iraq since 2007 or the nearly 160,000 internally displaced Baghdadis who had returned to the city by 2009.[10]

Third, the ethnic cleansing argument fails to explain the stabilization of much of Anbar Province in 2006 and 2007, where the vast majority of the population is Sunni. Here, as then-Colonel Sean MacFarland observed, the fear of a Shia central government and security forces had pushed the Sunni tribal leaders into the arms of AQI.[11] While this partnership had given these tribes greater clout, the alliance was by 2005 beginning to fray given the tribes' growing desire to participate in formal politics and the stark differences between their national goals and AQI's transnational and extremist agenda.[12] When the rift led to violent attacks and clashes between tribal and AQI forces, the United States was able to partner with the former to help target a common enemy. In other words, ethnic cleansing was neither a driver nor a solution to the violence in Anbar; in contrast, the careful implementation of various counterinsurgency practices played a major role in supporting one side against another.

On this point, a second factor used to downplay the achievements of the U.S.

military in Iraq is precisely the role played by the Anbar tribes and the predominantly Sunni militias (also known as Sons of Iraq) that allied themselves with the U.S. military against more extremist organizations. The argument here is that the Sunni groups took the fight to AQI and U.S. forces were acquiescing bystanders. The only way the United States could have done wrong, in other words, was by obstructing these Sunni groups as they went about their business. Some might argue that this in itself represents something of an achievement given the U.S. active marginalization of Iraq's Sunni political leaders in previous years.[13] But there are two more fundamental points to be made.

First, the notion of the U.S. military as the "accidental hero" of Iraq belies the active measures taken by its forces to enable and consolidate the gains made by its local allies on the ground. As critics of U.S. 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 U.S. and local forces work together toward the same end. Also important in this regard are the aforementioned checkpoints, concrete barriers, and other resources brought to bear by the U.S. forces, 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 in all likelihood, 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,"

with the geographic variation suggesting a need for greater micro-level analysis of specific towns and areas to truly get at the root of the problem.[14] Such an analysis would also reveal the full range of U.S. actions included under the unfortunate rubric of the "surge," all of which were grounded in a political strategy designed to break the cycle of sectarian violence, move Iraq's communities toward sustainable political accommodation, and remove their sponsorship for extremist organizations and militias.

There is a second and broader 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. Douglas Ollivant makes the point that in counterinsurgency, "success is deeply dependent upon the alignment of local interests with U.S. goals."[15] Indeed, partnering and relying on political structures and forces that share one's agenda, either in part or in full, does not represent an abdication of control or loss of initiative; it is in fact what a third-party counterinsurgency force *must do* to have effect. Yet working with local partners is not easy; it reflects proficiency in counterinsurgency for foreign forces to be able to read the local environment, identify opportunities for local partnerships, and build on these opportunities to further joint objectives. As emphasized in counterinsurgency doctrine, this requires a deep understanding of the local environment, its people, and 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.

What about the argument that many of the counterinsurgency practices related to the surge had already been adopted prior to

General Petraeus's return to Iraq in February 2007? This argument has less to do with the merits of counterinsurgency as an operational approach and instead concerns the general's status as an innovator. Whether we speak of the joint security stations or the partnerships with Sunni tribes, it is true that these counterinsurgency practices predate General Petraeus's arrival, but this fact does not in itself devalue either approach. The suggestion has been made that because they had been tried before, it was not the practices themselves but the context in which they were implemented post-2007 that made the difference. This is problematic because it is largely impossible to assess a strategy in isolation from the context for which it was devised and in which it was implemented. Still, it is important not to undervalue General

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Petraeus's influence. As commander of MNF–I and with an additional five brigades, he was able to consolidate the approaches that he deemed successful, integrate them as part of the MNF–I campaign plan, ground that campaign plan in a political strategy that reflected the character of the conflict, and sustain and amplify the tentative security gains enabled theretofore.

Finally, of course, there is the argument that the appearance of stability in Iraq was illusory and that the country's worst years still lie ahead. Many problems remained following the surge: the substandard electricity output had not improved, terrorist attacks remained a regular occurrence, and, more recently, the formation of a new government has been hugely problematic. Still, the

outcome of the counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq cannot be judged with rose-colored glasses. First, it is worth noting the starting conditions in Iraq in 2006, a time in which insurgent attacks, roaming death squads, and military operations contributed to 1,000 to 2,000 casualties per month.[16] Second, there is the hackneyed but nonetheless valuable point that counterinsurgencies take a long time and that the surge in Iraq lasted merely 3 years. Third, even the relative stability gained in these years continues to have effects. U.S. security forces now play an advisory role, yet large-scale violence has not returned. In the 2 years following the surge, the daily output of electricity doubled (and the demand for electricity skyrocketed).[17] And finally, even though the situation in Iraq remains tense, the aim of General Petraeus's campaign plan was to create space in which political reconciliation could occur. That this process stalled can be pinned in part on inadequate political engagement following the withdrawal of U.S. troops—perhaps the focus shifted too precipitously from Iraq to Afghanistan—but the main cause is of course the Iraqi government itself, a partner over which the United States only has so much leverage.

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A measured analysis of the use of counterinsurgency principles and doctrine in Iraq, from 2006 onward, reveals that they did inform the U.S. approach, which in turn helped stabilize the country. Much relied on the opportunity to partner with local armed groups sharing key objectives, an opportunity skillfully harnessed by U.S.

commanders. It would be untrue to state that U.S. conduct of counterinsurgency operations *began* under General Petraeus in February 2007, but even so, his campaign plan helped consolidate various operational approaches and elevate them to the strategic level. Clearly, U.S. inputs were not the only or the main factor contributing to the decline in violence, and analysis must be sensitive to other developments on the ground. Still, the evidence strongly suggests that the United States was more than an opportunistic bystander claiming credit for something it did not help shape.

Afghanistan and the Limits of Counterinsurgency

If the introduction of counterinsurgency principles in operational planning helped turn the tide in Iraq, why has the same process not led to strategic success in Afghanistan? After all, General Petraeus was made commander of U.S. Central Command partly so that his remit would include Afghanistan and the regional conflagration driving the conflict there. Meanwhile, General Stanley McChrystal, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commander appointed in 2009, was part of the "Petraeus team," having commanded JSOC in Iraq. The counterinsurgency guidance issued by General McChrystal strongly echoed the counterinsurgency principles of FM 3–24 and the guidance provided by General Petraeus in Iraq. Proponents of counterinsurgency therefore face a seemingly challenging question: why did counterinsurgency apparently work in Iraq and fail in Afghanistan? More fundamentally, what does this patchy track record say about counterinsurgency's credibility as a concept?

These seemingly poignant questions belie a gross misunderstanding of counterinsurgency—one that explains the heated polemic that the term has provoked. Counterinsurgency offers a

collection of insights and guidelines collected from past operations, which, if used and adapted in a manner sensitive to local context, can help in the design and execution of a specific campaign plan. Yet counterinsurgency is not a strategy. To the degree that the principles and practices of counterinsurgency worked in Iraq, it was because they were tied to a campaign plan informed by the specific enabling factors relevant to that operation. Few of these were in place in Afghanistan, yet this did not inform the attempted implementation of similar techniques and approaches. To put it succinctly, best practice is not best strategy.[18]

First, the coalition in Iraq had at least a moderately cooperative host-nation partner in Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who by 2007 was recasting himself as a national rather than sectarian leader.[19] It is true that much of what the United States did in Anbar Province was done without the outright support of the central government, resulting in a problematic reintegration process for the Sunni forces that fought against AQI. Still, despite such difficulties, the situation in Iraq still compares favorably to that in Afghanistan, where Hamid Karzai proved either unable or unwilling to move against the warlords and other actors who had established themselves (often with coalition assistance) during the previous years. Furthermore in Iraq, the coalition was far more invested in reforming those ministries that had been penetrated by Shia radical elements, transformed into fiefdoms of sectarian power, and used to target and deny services to Sunni communities.[20] Specifically, the 2007 campaign plan stipulated working with Maliki to remove or ideally prosecute "highly sectarian and/or corrupt leaders within his government's senior ranks"—and pressure was applied to this end.[21] Until recently, there has been no similarly focused sidelining

of obstructionist elements within the Afghan government, partly due to a lack of leverage. As a result, the central government is still seen as corrupt, illegitimate, and incompetent, which unsurprisingly has fueled the insurgency.

Second, the U.S. military in Iraq was able to make full use of the emerging rift between AQI and the Sunni tribes of Anbar. The causes of the rift are in contention: suggestions include a clash in illicit business interests, visions for the future of Iraq, and cultural mores; others claim the Sunni tribes designated AQI as an enemy in order to earn U.S. support and establish a better position for themselves politically.[22] Regardless of motive, the coalition has found no similar partner in Afghanistan, so its counterinsurgency practices on the local level have had to be conducted in isolation. Attempts to stand up an equivalent to the Sunni Awakening and Sons of Iraq in Afghanistan have stuttered because whereas the latter were based on preexisting structures, each with its own interests, grievances, and aspirations, the Afghan "replicas" have had to be manufactured from scratch. As such, these local defense forces typically lack the necessary unity of command, training, and purpose, which has in turn resulted in poor discipline, accountability, and effectiveness.[23]

Many other divergences obtain: the level of presidential commitment to the respective campaign, financial realities underpinning each operation, regional context, and respective level of unity of command. On this last point, it bears noting that whereas the United States controlled the vast majority of coalition forces in Iraq, the overall effort in Afghanistan has been hampered by the disparate interests and commitment of various North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners. Similar problems expressed
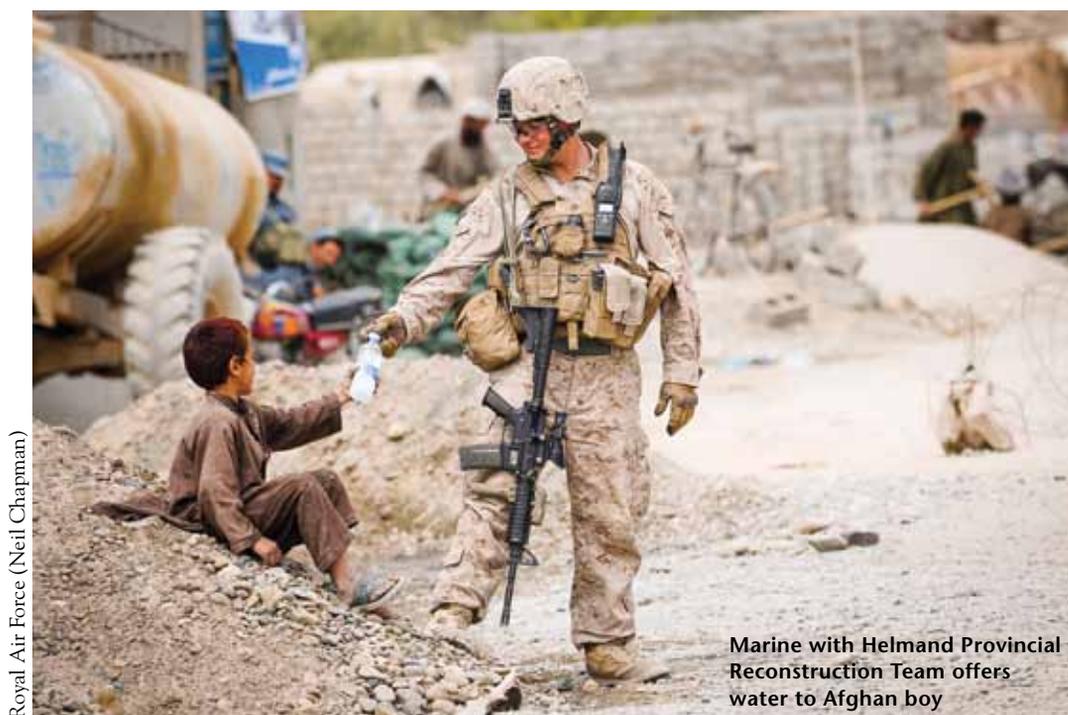
Royal Air Force (Neil Chapman)

Marine with Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team offers water to Afghan boy

themselves in Iraq, with the United States ramping up in 2007 while the United Kingdom withdrew its troops. Even so, the scale of the problem in Iraq was far less serious with a mere two countries involved rather than the 47 currently contributing to ISAF. Only a handful of these 47 countries have authorized their troops to operate at an intensity appropriate for the campaign; others have imposed caveats on where and how their troops can be deployed. This in turn has further reduced the number of usable NATO forces—a number that despite substantial U.S. reinforcements has never reached the levels seen in Iraq.[24]

The broader point is that intervening troops need a strategy that makes full use of available means and existing opportunities in ways that help reach stated objectives. In Iraq, the objective was to stop the cycle of violence and create sufficient space for a possible process of bottom-up and top-down political accommodation, a difficult but achievable objective given the proper exploitation of the opportunities on the ground. In Afghanistan, the strategic objective has been to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future."[25] This aim is far more ambitious than that governing the surge in Iraq; it also conditions a counterterrorism operation against a transnational entity on an ambitious state-building effort based in one country.

U.S. policymakers are not blind to the ensuing dilemma and have sought to downgrade the plan's ambition by lowering the bar for how capable and accountable Afghan institutions should be before NATO troops can withdraw. Thus, in recent years, we have heard several times that there is no "objective of turning Afghanistan into Switzerland" and that Afghanistan will not "be a model Jeffersonian democracy."[26] These qualifications may help shape expectations but they also raise the question of

what indeed is being aimed for and how it will be achieved with the means and time available. Furthermore, even with ambitions officially downplayed, foreign occupation of Afghanistan remains formidably challenging given the country's terrain, size, geostrategic location, and history. Finally, as al Qaeda is constrained neither to Afghanistan nor Pakistan, it would subsist even if the counterinsurgency campaign was successful and the region was radically transformed.

For all of these reasons, counterinsurgency is often seen as an ill-suited and overly grandiose response to the problem of al Qaeda and is judged accordingly as a bad policy option for Afghanistan, rather than as a collection of principles and practices detached from any one campaign and operating below the realm of strategy. In part, this misperception is due to a dearth of substance and thought at the strategic level, which has sucked the operational and tactical precepts of counterinsurgency upward to fill the gap.[27] Some counterinsurgency proponents and operators have reinforced this tendency: in the absence of a clear strategy, the catchwords of counterinsurgency (*population security*, *governance*, *legitimacy*) are confused with strategic ends and pursued all at once, with no prioritization or clear end in mind. Missed in this hurried embrace of newly rediscovered theory is the need to adapt its premises and principles to meet specific political goals.[28] This is something far beyond the capacity of a field manual or an operational concept, though these can prove valuable in tying carefully defined strategic aims to the design of operations.

A Corrective Antithesis

By scaling back the expectations of what counterinsurgency as a concept can do, its value may be more fully appreciated. Counterinsurgency doctrine does not envisage or allow for painless foreign interventions;

it does not provide a formulaic solution to the problem of political violence. Moreover, it does not substitute for a comprehensible *strategy* with which to tackle insurgencies, al Qaeda, or the threat of global terrorism. Finally, to value the theory and doctrine of counterinsurgency does not imply support for counterinsurgency campaigns around the world or for the use of this concept wherever political instability may arise.

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What, then, does counterinsurgency do? In general terms, its main contribution lies in its various principles, which touch on the importance of achieving a nuanced political understanding of the campaign, operating under unified command, using intelligence to guide operations, isolating insurgents from the population, using the minimum amount of force necessary to achieve set objectives, and assuring and maintaining the perceived legitimacy of the counterinsurgency effort in the eyes of the populace. Most important, perhaps, is the exhortation to adapt and arrive at a tailored response rather than fall back on templates.[29]

These principles may seem commonsensical, even trite. For instance, there is nothing controversial about linking good intelligence to effective strike operations, and it is also clear that where adversaries and civilians look alike, obtaining good intelligence requires a special understanding of and with the local population. Similarly, it is difficult to fault the notion that understanding the environment, its people, and

structures presents external actors with more and better options, or that controlling and influencing key populations first require that they are adequately isolated from the intimidation and coercion of others. As to the focus on the legitimacy of the intervention itself and of the actors it seeks to support, this is a fairly obvious corollary of the need to establish political and military control over select populations.[30]

What then is the worth of these principles? The key lies partly in what precedes counterinsurgency dialectically: the thesis to which counterinsurgency provides the antithesis. In the last half century, counterinsurgency theory and principles have repeatedly helped illustrate the complexity of intrastate violence and its distinctiveness from the "conventional" types of military campaigns for which most Western armed forces are structured and trained. In the U.S. context, this pattern is particularly clear: interest in counterinsurgency has spiked when senior civilian and/or military leaders realize the limitations of conventional military force in managing the security problems of the day.

In the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy grew concerned that the U.S. policy of "massive retaliation" was too inflexible to address the rising threat of political subversion. Reacting to the ascendance of communism in Vietnam and Laos, the instability of decolonization in Africa, and the communist revolution in Cuba, Kennedy pushed U.S. forces to learn about counterguerrilla warfare.[31] In the following years, the U.S. military developed new tactics and training exercises, expanded its special operations capacity, and increased its understanding of counterinsurgency. The most well known (but by no means only) application of the new knowledge was in Vietnam, a campaign whose unhappy history again served to relegate counterinsurgency to the margins of military priorities.

In the 1980s, a combination of international incidents, operational setbacks, and congressional pressure forced the military to return to the topic of counterinsurgency. Along with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian revolution and hostage crisis, U.S. policymakers noted with some alarm the ascendance of left-leaning regimes in several countries: Ethiopia in 1974, Mozambique in 1975, Angola in 1976, and Grenada and Nicaragua in 1979. The conclusion drawn was that the U.S. military needed to master *low-intensity operations*, a new term for counterinsurgency and other "irregular" activities.[32] Once again, new doctrine was issued, training exercises were adapted, and new centers and commands were opened (notably U.S. Special Operations Command). This time, the new knowledge was practiced in El Salvador, a testing-ground for a vicarious form of counterinsurgency that was fought with U.S. advisors rather than combat troops.

The U.S. military's most recent "counterinsurgency era" was also motivated by a previous failure to grapple with the political complexities of war.[33] Throughout the 1990s, U.S. military thinking was marked by a highly conventional and apolitical understanding of war, epitomized by the program of "defense transformation." Resistance to the peacekeeping operations of the Clinton-era dovetailed perfectly with a growing fascination with information technology and precision-strike capabilities: The future of war lay not with the infantry rotating in and out of seemingly endless peace operations, but with airstrikes, drones, computers, and satellites dispensing force swiftly, precisely, and decisively. Yet this understanding of war provided scant preparation for the insurgency created by the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. In the effort to understand and respond to the escalating violence, counterinsurgency came to experience its most recent peak. In that sense, the study

of counterinsurgency again brought a welcome departure from prior false expectations; it was a much-needed antithesis to a thesis that had not withstood its encounter with practice. Specifically, the concept instilled the idea that while wars are easy to begin, they are difficult to end, and that doing so requires a firm understanding of what causes violence in the first place. In reaffirming the political essence of war, it also forced a greater understanding of the local population and recognition of social and economic context, which in turn brought concepts such as legitimacy and governance to the fore.

"Counterinsurgency Is Dead; Long Live Counterinsurgency"

The (re)discovery of counterinsurgency represents a step forward from the conventional narrow-mindedness that dominated American defense thinking in the 1990s. Despite this important function as an antithesis, one that is still being served, it looks almost inevitable that the term *counterinsurgency* will fall out of use. A main factor is the gradual drawdown of NATO troops from Afghanistan, which will remove the primary impetus for studying and preparing for counterinsurgency. Those wishing to justify a continued focus on this form of warfare will then need to appeal to the possibility of future counterinsurgency campaigns, which will strike most audiences, whether governments, militaries, or electorates, as a singularly unattractive proposition. Counterinsurgency has not been a happy experience, and there will be no desire to prep for an encore.

Dropping counterinsurgency, however, would be to forfeit the functions that the term plays, first in grouping nominally similar types of operations into one helpful category for insight, comparison, and analysis, and second in providing the often-needed antithesis to the type of thinking on war and peace that has tended to dominate within Western militaries. It will be important to consider how these functions will fare should counterinsurgency, as a term and a priority, again be pushed off the table.

Upon further review, the grouping function can be useful but is probably dispensable. There are certainly as many risks and dangers as there are benefits in bringing together operations from different epochs and geographical settings just because they share the epithet *counterinsurgency*, a term whose meaning has evolved over time. Furthermore, the selection of operations for inclusion in this category is somewhat arbitrary and excludes from consideration many interventions and armed campaigns that have relevant traits, but that were referred to by different terms: *stability operations*, *small wars*, *robust peacekeeping*, or *postconflict peacebuilding*. It is better to group past and current campaigns based on their shared characteristics than by what they are called.

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Indeed, the study of counterinsurgency may even benefit from going beyond this one term and considering a far broader canvas of military interventions. To date, scholarship on counterinsurgency has been rather self-referential and inward-looking, rehashing the same case studies or obsessing over the intricacies of theory (such as the seemingly endless discussion of what is truly meant by "hearts and minds"). Indeed, it would be fair to say that counterinsurgency fares better as an antithesis—as a critique of what

preceded it—than as a thesis. Partly as a result of this, and because of the quick rise of counterinsurgency as a mainstream topic, outsiders often come to view the whole field as a fad, unworthy of serious academic attention. Looking beyond the confines of counterinsurgency and taking a broader interest in the dynamics of military intervention would provide fresh fodder for a field whose scope is often too narrow.

It is less certain whether the term's second function, as a useful antithesis, has been fully served. For that reason, abandoning counterinsurgency would need to be done with two critical caveats in mind. First, this should in no way signify a return to the status quo ante, that is, to an understanding of war as a conventional and decisively military confrontation occurring on an isolated, unpopulated battlefield. This archetype, entrenched in Western military thinking, stems from a grossly simplified recollection of just a few wars that disproportionately shape our understanding of this phenomenon, predominantly World War II. Yet it is an understanding of war that is blind not only to the history from which it borrows, but also to the real *purpose* of war, to wit, the consolidation of a political compact that is preferable to what came before it, and a compact that is also *sustainable*.[34] This means that even predominantly conventional wars will usually bleed seamlessly into a less conventional phase because the gains made in combat require consolidation through stabilization, political support, capacity-building, or reconstruction.[35]

Instead of returning to conventional war as an alternative to counterinsurgency, the point would be to arrive at a more integrated understanding of war that is informed by the experiences and campaigns of recent years, but dispense with the divisive and vague jargon that they have provoked. Ideally, this would also put an end to the bifurcation of wars as either conventional or irregular. In the American experience, each reencounter with counterinsurgency and similar missions has provoked such a dichotomy: in the 1960s, it was termed general versus limited war, in the 1980s, it was high- versus low-intensity conflicts, and in the 1990s, perhaps most awkwardly, it was war versus military operations other than war. While the cruder distinctions have since been abandoned,[36] it is still common to hear of irregular versus what must be presumed to be regular wars, and of asymmetric challenges as if there are conventional adversaries out there who would prefer to fight wars symmetrically.

At first, such distinctions are helpful, as they rightly frame stabilization and counterinsurgency as problems that require a different mindset and skills and that deserve independent study. At the same time, the theoretical dichotomies encourage an unspoken belief that these types of operations have rarefied equivalents in practice. In so doing, they suggest that states have that unlikely luxury of being able to pick and choose between conventional and irregular wars and that they can tailor their forces and interventions accordingly. Missed here is an appreciation for war as a complex political phenomenon, one that typically encompasses both irregular and conventional challenges and whose operating environment is rarely static but instead difficult to control.

This gives rise to the second caveat that must be taken onboard if counterinsurgency were to be pushed off the table: eschewing the term does not mean that the operational challenges associated with it will be avoided. Importantly, this remains the case even if we do not see another counterinsurgency campaign or stability operation in the near future. The bitter truth is that future land-based operations, whatever character they may take, are likely to involve a similar range of tasks as seen in today's campaigns. With the global

trend of urbanization, most operations will be conducted in built-up and inhabited environments where the local population cannot be ignored but, more often, must be co-opted and even protected against attack. Given U.S. expeditionary ambitions, operations will typically be conducted in foreign polities, languages, and cultures. While U.S. politicians may once more try to avoid future nation-building, most military operations occur in environments where the state's reach and institutions have suffered significant damage or destruction: either it is the lack of state control that prompts intervention (as in Afghanistan), or it is the intervention itself that removes the state (as in Iraq). In either case, U.S. forces will be operating in areas with weak formal structures, where criminality, informal networks of patronage, proliferation of small arms, and substate politics are all common and need to be understood. If one couples all this with the near inevitability of operating within a local population with whom the foreign forces will enjoy at best transient legitimacy, the broader relevance of experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan becomes clear.

Critically, this type of forecasting speaks not of conventional or of counterinsurgency operations, but relies on a broader conception of military intervention based on political purpose and likely challenges. At the same time, what this analysis suggests is that the lessons learned in recent counterinsurgency operations must be retained even if the term falls into disuse. This would also involve exporting the principles commonly associated with counterinsurgency to a broader realm of military scenarios where they are often equally applicable.[37] For example, while counterinsurgency is purportedly primarily political, the same holds for all military operations. Similarly, the exhortation in counterinsurgency theory to understand the environment is equally critical in wars of territorial conquest—though

what it means to understand the terrain will naturally depend on its dominant features, one of which is the absence or presence of civilian populations. As to the requirements for effective counterinsurgency—in terms of troops, knowledge, and time—this has far broader validity, touching upon the need to support and resource operations to meet set objectives. Finally, the emphasis on the local population as a potential partner should not be a concern lodged exclusively within the domain of counterinsurgency, much as the need to adapt and learn faster than the enemy is a cardinal requirement for all warfare, not just wars conducted against irregular adversaries. These are principles of war, not of counterinsurgency, but it has taken the rediscovery of counterinsurgency, and difficult campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, to give them new meaning.

The final exhortation would be that even with this broader understanding of war, the deployment of armed forces will lead to disappointment unless intervening governments devote more energy and resources toward the formulation of strategy. This touches upon the seriousness and sincerity with which the states that engage in expeditionary operations approach these endeavors. In turn, this raises the issue of whether and how convincingly foreign military interventions are linked to the national interest of the states involved. Further intellectual investment on this end may be the most useful first step in addressing the down-river problems of commitment, capability, and performance, and in transforming the armed forces and other relevant government departments accordingly.

Conclusion

Counterinsurgency has experienced a rapid rise and an equally rapid fall. The process has happened so quickly, within such a politicized and personalized context, that the initial reasons

for rediscovering this approach to operations tend to be lost. Instead, there is a loud polemic as to why counterinsurgency was a bad idea to begin with. Some of these arguments have merit; others are tendentious and lacking in context. Almost all of the polemic ignores two fundamental points. First, counterinsurgency theory does not advocate ambitious interventions in foreign countries, but provides guidelines and principles that have worked in similar settings and that may again be leaned upon if and when soldiers are deployed to stabilize war-torn countries. Careful study and research is needed to determine how best to apply these principles to ongoing and future operations, and it is fair to say that the theory is better at raising the right questions than in providing the answers.

Second, counterinsurgencies are not always optional and future interventions are therefore likely to occur, even after the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq draw down. This is not to say that these campaigns should be entered into carelessly, or that they would even take the form of a counterinsurgency or stability operation per se. Instead, given the nature of the contemporary operating environment, most land-based campaigns seem likely to reproduce many of the challenges faced in today's counterinsurgencies: those of operating in an urban environment, in the midst of a civilian population, in a different language and culture, all while countering irregular or hybrid adversaries. In the face of this enduring complexity, the principles and doctrine of counterinsurgency still have salience and a role to play.

After years of operational involvement in counterinsurgency, many of these principles may seem commonsensical if difficult to honor in practice. Even so, they still appear necessary in illustrating the logic of counterinsurgency and its distinctiveness from the types of campaigns for which most Western militaries train and prepare. This touches on the second function of counterinsurgency doctrine: its use as a powerful corrective to the unhelpful tendency not only in the U.S. military but also elsewhere in the West to divorce military affairs from political considerations.

It is on these grounds that the decline of counterinsurgency would be regrettable, if through this process the associated knowledge and learning of the last few years are also forgotten. The one good reason to abandon the term, and one that merits careful consideration, would be precisely because of its divisive and distorting connotations. The aim would then be to talk more plainly about the nature of war, peace, and war-to-peace transitions. This requires a shift from a myopic focus on the mechanical aspects of fighting (warfare) and the illusion that war can be detached from politics and policy. In itself, this would be a revolutionary step away from artificial delineations between conventional and irregular operations and toward a defense posture based on the purposes and most likely character of tomorrow's operations. It would signify the intent, at long last, to understand and study war on its own terms. **PRISM**

Notes

[1] In so doing, it builds on David H. Ucko, *Counterinsurgency and Its Discontents: Assessing the Value of a Divisive Concept*, SWP Research Paper 6 (April 2011). See also "Whither Counterinsurgency: The Rise and Fall of a Divisive Concept," in *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, ed. Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn (New York: Routledge, 2012).

[2] This helps explain Nancy Pelosi's assessment that the surge "did not accomplish its goal" and that its success resulted from "the goodwill of Iranians" who "decided in Basra when the fighting would end." See

"House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on the Presidential Race, Her Legislative Agenda and Iraq," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, May 28, 2008.

[3] From 2006 to 2009, the Brookings Institution's Iraq Index estimates total casualties at 1,778, 3,500, 750, and 455, respectively. See Michael E. O'Hanlon and Jason H. Campbell, *Iraq Index Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2008), 4–5. Iraq Coalition Casualties puts the number of conflict-related civilian casualties at 3,000 per month in autumn 2006; 1,500 in April 2007; and 300 to 600 from September 2007 onward; available at <http://icasualties.org/>.

[4] Michael A. Cohen, "The Myth of a Kinder, Gentler War," *World Policy Journal* 27, no. 1 (2010), 75–86.

[5] Polls showed 59 to 68 percent of Americans opposed the surge. See Dana Blanton, "FOX News Poll: Most Think Troop Surge is Bush's Last Chance in Iraq," *FoxNews.com*, January 18, 2007; Brian Braiker, "Dirge for a 'Surge,'" *Newsweek,* January 20, 2007.

[6] See David H. Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the U.S. Military for Modern Wars* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 68.

[7] Patrick Cockburn, "Who Is Whose Enemy?" *London Review of Books*, March 6, 2008, 14–15. See also John Agnew et al., "Baghdad nights: evaluating the US military 'surge' using nighttime light signatures," *Environment and Planning A* 40, no. 10 (2008), 2285–2295.

[8] Following the introduction of these measures, security incidents in northwest Baghdad declined from 600+ in November 2006 to 380 in February 2007 and to 100–200 for August–October 2007. See J.B. Burton, "Dagger BCT Update," slides prepared for Institute for the Study of War, November 14, 2007.

[9] See, for example, the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) role under then-Colonel H.R. McMaster, USA, in stabilizing Tal Afar in 2005.

[10] 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," *International Organization for Migration (IOM) IDP and Returnee Assessment* (Geneva: IOM, 2009), 5–7.

[11] Neil Smith and Sean MacFarland, "Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point," *Military Review* 88, no. 2 (March–April 2008).

[12] Austin Long, "The Anbar Awakening," *Survival* 50, no. 2 (2008), 77.

[13] David H. Ucko, "Militias, Tribes and Insurgents: The Challenge of Political Reintegration in Iraq," in *Reintegrating Armed Groups after Conflict: Politics, Violence and Transition*, ed. Mats Berdal and David H. Ucko (New York: Routledge, 2009), 89–102.

[14] The International Crisis Group (ICG) continues: "Had [U.S. troops] remained mired in past conceptions, propitious evolutions on the ground notwithstanding, the situation today would be far bleaker." See ICG, *Iraq after the Surge I: The New Sunni Landscape*, Middle East Report 74 (Brussels: ICG, April 2008), I.

[15] Douglas Ollivant, "Countering the New Orthodoxy: Reinterpreting Counterinsurgency in Iraq," National Security Studies Program Policy Paper, June 2011, 2.

[16] See <http://icasualties.org/Iraq/index.aspx>.

[17] Iraq's subsidy on electricity also means that usage can be difficult to distinguish from waste. See Nayla Razzouk, "Iraq to Award Electricity Contracts by Early 2011," *Bloomberg.com*, November 28, 2010.

[18] I am grateful to Frank G. Hoffman for this phrase.

[19] Ollivant, 4–5.

[20] ICG, *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, Middle East Report No. 52 (Brussels: ICG, 2006), 10; Ucko, "Militias, Tribes and Insurgents," 98–100.

[21] Internal Multi-National Force–Iraq planning document, 2007.

[22] Ollivant.

[23] See Quil Lawrence, "Afghans Wary of Building Up Local Policing Forces," *NPR.com*, January 13, 2011; Refugees International, "Afghanistan: Responsible U.S. Transition Must Address Displacement Crisis," *Field Report*, June 28, 2011.

[24] At its peak, the force deployed to Iraq numbered 182,668 for a population of 31 million. In Afghanistan, the peak was just below 131,000 for a population of 30 million.

[25] "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan" (Washington, DC, March 27, 2009).

[26] Respectively, David Petraeus, as cited in David Jackson, "Petraeus: We're trying to keep Afghanistan from becoming a terrorist sanctuary (again)," *USA Today*, August 16, 2010; Barack Obama, as cited in "Afghanistan can't be a model democracy: Obama," Reuters, August 2, 2010.

[27] Hew Strachan, "Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War," *Survival* 52, no. 5 (2010), 168.

[28] A foundation for doing so is laid out effectively in H.R. McMaster, "Effective Civilian-Military Planning at the Operational Level: The Foundation of Operational Planning," in *Commanding Heights: Strategic Lessons from Complex Operations*, ed. Michael Miklaucic (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2009), 105–114.

[29] For some enumerations of these principles, see Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1966); or Frank Kitson, *Bunch of Five* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977).

[30] Though cynics will point out that control can be achieved without any sense of legitimacy, the political and media environment of most Western interventions rarely allows for raw coercion.

[31] Michael McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: U.S. Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Counterterrorism, 1940–1990* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), ch. 6.

[32] See Richard Downie, *Learning from Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1988).

[33] For more on this, see H.R. McMaster, "On War: Lessons to Be Learned," *Survival* 50, no. 1 (2008), 19–30.

[34] On the reoccurrence of military governance in U.S. wars throughout history, see Nadia Schadlow, "War and the Art of Governance," *Parameters* 33, no. 3 (Autumn 2003), 85–94.

[35] See Nadia Schadlow, "A False Dichotomy: Critics of the Army's COIN Focus Ignore World and War Realities," *Armed Forces Journal*, September 2010.

[36] U.S. doctrine now talks of a "continuum of conflict" whereby "the level of violence may jump from one point on the spectrum to another" within one campaign. See Field Manual 3–0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, 2008), ch. 2.

[37] I am grateful to William F. Owen for this insight.