

Counterinsurgency: The Graduate Level of War or Pure Hokum?

Written by Gian Gentile

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GIAN GENTILE, AUG 3 2013

The authors of the American Army's Counterinsurgency field manual, *FM 3-24*, tell their readers that counterinsurgency is the "graduate level of war."^[1] Implicit in this bombast is that conventional war—wars such as World War II, the American Civil War, and the Russo-Japanese War—is the undergraduate level of war and therefore easier to conduct. American Army Colonel Robert Cassidy summed up the mindset of many counterinsurgency (COIN) experts when he stated, quite bluntly, that counterinsurgency warfare is "more difficult than operations against enemies who fight according to the conventional paradigm."^[2]

With Cassidy's and *FM 3-24*'s logic, the World War I Battle of the Somme in 1916 was easy, as compared to COIN, despite the deaths of 7,000 British infantrymen who went over the top in the first hour of the attack, and the fact that as many as 20,000 British men had lost their lives by the end of the day. In other words, Somme was the undergraduate level of war. But Iraq in 2007, according to the logic of COIN experts, with General David Petraeus and the Surge, that was more difficult because it was counterinsurgency, or the graduate level of war.

This notion of counterinsurgency warfare requiring a special martial skill set because of its so-called difficulty that conventional armies by nature do not have is nothing new in modern history. Starting in the 19th century, the French and British armies began to treat small wars (an earlier moniker for counterinsurgency) as a special form of war requiring officers with unconventional skills who can transform the hidebound conventional armies that were resistant to change.

Counterinsurgency experts, especially since the Vietnam War, have written histories of various cases of counterinsurgency warfare with the idea that a special form of war requires special skills as a foundational premise. For example, in *The Army and Vietnam*, Andrew Krepinevich argues that the American Army lost the war because it could not break out of its conventional war mindset that focused on the abundant use of firepower instead of the correct and special methods of COIN designed to win hearts and minds.^[3]

Unfortunately, counterinsurgency is not the graduate level of war, it is simply war. Moreover, the notion that counterinsurgency wars require the soldiers who fight them to possess special skills is not supported by historical evidence. And contrary to what writers like Krepinevich and Cassidy say, counterinsurgency wars have not been won or lost by the tactical methods of the armies that have fought them. Instead, as historian Douglas Porch argues, they were won or lost "because the strategic context in which the wars were fought defied a tactical remedy."^[4]

Yet Porch's fundamentally correct point has been missed by the bevy of writers on the recent American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We are hearing the same lament with these wars as we heard after Vietnam, that if the American Army only got its tactics of counterinsurgency right, the wars could be put on a path to success. Writer of popular history, Victor Davis Hanson, is emblematic of this line of thinking when he labels General Petraeus (given his Surge of troops in Iraq) as the "maverick savior of Iraq" who turned the war around in 2007, taught his army the classic tactics of counterinsurgency, and put the war on the path to success.^[5] Considering the levels of destruction wrought on Iraq, the huge investment of American blood and treasure, and the fact that Iraq currently burns in sectarian civil war, however, it is hard to take Hanson seriously.

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Savior generals were one possible tactical remedy for solving intractable strategic problems, but another way that popped up early in the conduct of both wars was the idea of using anthropologists to provide a better cultural understanding of the societies and cultures in Iraq and Afghanistan. What came to be known as the Human Terrain Team (HTT) was really just another outgrowth of the notion that counterinsurgency requires specially trained soldiers with special skills, and militarized civilian action intellectuals to fight them.

With the HTTs, cultural and social knowledge could be weaponized in counterinsurgency warfare since commanders on the ground could use the knowledge that, in theory, was provided by the HTTs to understand their areas better, to ultimately defeat the insurgent fighters. In practice, however, the effectiveness of the HTTs was dubious at best. Often times, an HTT would be made up of anthropologists with graduate degrees, but not necessarily with an emphasis on Middle Eastern culture let alone detailed knowledge of Iraq or Afghanistan. It was not uncommon to have HTT specialists deployed in Iraq who received their training on Latin American cultures, or in one extreme case, an HTT action intellectual held a PhD in theology.[6]

But even if the HTT program was able to match specialists to the areas in Iraq and Afghanistan in which they were expected to operate, it still would not have made any kind of significant difference in the outcome of these wars. Why? Because the idea that COIN is the graduate level of war requiring graduate “professors of war” like David Petraeus to win them was pure hokum from the beginning. Instead, what mattered most were the strategic, political, and social contexts in which these wars were fought.

Scholar Victoria Fontan, who recently completed an extensive period of research in the city of Fallujah on Al Qaeda in Iraq, sums this insight up best. After talking to Al Qaeda leaders who were involved with fighting the American occupation and who witnessed the Surge and the purported radical changes in tactics that Petraeus supposedly brought about, she said that “COIN was like a bad antibiotic on an infection... it only made [the civil war] stronger, more resilient.”[7]

Yet the hokum of enlightened counterinsurgency generals who turn failed wars around by making their armies fight them better simply won’t go away. The hokum helps to prolong the fantasy that American wars in foreign lands can always be made to work as long as the “professors of war” at the graduate level are put in charge. Sadly this is a recipe for perpetual conflict.

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The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

[1] US Army Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2006): 1-1.

[2] Robert M. Cassidy, “Winning the War of the Flea: Lessons from Guerilla Warfare,” *Military Review* 83.5 (September-October 2003): 41.

[3] Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986): 4-16.

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[4] Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 162.

[5] Victor Davis Hanson, "Winning in Afghanistan: We Have Everything but a Confident Commander in Chief," November 6, 2009.

[6] I am referring to AnnaMaria Cardinalli, whose biography is available online at her personal webpage (<http://www.annamaria.ws/bio.php>).

[7] Email from Victoria Fontan to Gian Gentile, July 29, 2013.

About the author:

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