Review - The Theory and Practice of Irregular Warfare

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The Theory and Practice of Irregular Warfare: Warrior-scholarship in counterinsurgency
Edited by Andrew Mumford and Bruno C. Reis
Routledge, 2013

Speaking of the intellectual and military greatness of general Charles George "Chinese" Gordon[1], William F. Butler – a soldier, adventurer, and writer – observed that the 'nation that will insist upon drawing a broad line of demarcation between the fighting man and the thinking man is liable to find its fighting done by fools and its thinking by cowards' (1889: 85).*The Theory and Practice of Irregular Warfare* is precisely a book about soldiers that both fought and thought about war.

The volume aims to present the state of the art of counterinsurgency through a critical reading of seven central warrior-scholars[2], i.e. military thinkers that fought and reflected on irregular warfare and on small wars, and then advocated counterinsurgency as a military doctrine. By trying to bridge 'the divide between theory and practice' (4), soldiers like Charles E. Callwell, David Galula, Roger Trinquier, Moshe Dayan, Frank Kitson, David Kilcullen, and David Petraeus attempted to find the right balance between the world of action and the one of ideas. Each chapter offers a short professional and intellectual biography of the warrior-scholar at hand and a critical assessment of his work. As rightly stressed by the editors in the introductory chapter, some of these theoretical practitioners are more warriors than scholars (e.g. Dayan) and others more scholars than warriors (e.g. Kilcullen), but all of them had both an active role during military campaigns and systematically theorized on the best way to fight insurgencies.

Let me first state that this is a volume that needed to be written. Indeed this is not another book on counterinsurgency, but rather a collection of essays on the lives and ideas of some of the most important thinkers on counterinsurgenency of the twentieth century. By focusing on persons rather than doctrine, the volume breaks with the traditional habit of presenting counterinsurgency as a coherent and consistent military theory. Although one of the common traits about these figures is a broad and comprehensive view of warfare, which includes in the overall strategy non-military factors such as political propaganda, economic development, health care, and education, the authors of *The Theory and Practice of Irregular Warfare* succeed in showing the diverse origins and the differences that distinguish the approach of each of these counterinsurgents. Indeed while these warrior-scholars all share the idea that the populace is the Clausewitzian "center of gravity" of an insurgency, they draw very different conclusions from such a shared view. For example, Callwell and Trinquier were not shy in suggesting harsh and retaliatory policies against the civilian population. Others like Galula, Kilcullen, and Petraeus instead argued in favour of winning over the population through a variety of non-military policies that include economic and social development. In so doing, the book offers an original entrance into the world of irregular warfare. Moreover, the organization of the chapters makes the book interesting both for those who have familiarity with counterinsurgency and for readers with no prior specific knowledge on the field.

The volume can be faulted only for two reasons. Picking some warrior scholars and excluding some others was certainly both a difficult and inescapable task. The necessity of choice, however, does not justify the decision to exclude from the volume one of the most prominent warrior-scholars of the twentieth century: Robert Grainger Ker Thompson. Because Thompson not only fought during the Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam War, but also wrote important theoretical and historical works on counterinsurgency, such as *Defeating Communist Insurgency* and

Revolutionary War in World Strategy, 1945-1969. Therefore the absence of a chapter on his intellectual and field achievements appears as an awkward and disappointing choice.

Secondly, the essays in the volume are either too generous or too harsh towards counterinsurgents and, in doing so, fail to acknowledge that the main problem with counterinsurgency is with the doctrine as a whole and not with its different versions. If you exclude military campaigns where victory was achieved at an unacceptable human price for today's standards, such as during the Philippine-American war (1899-1902) and the Second Boer War (1899-1902), where ruthless techniques like concentration camps and scorched earth policies were systematically employed by Western powers, the warrior-scholars discussed in the book have all failed in guiding their states and armed forces to victory. Although many of these warrior-scholars were successful in promoting change in organizational culture and warfare, the final result was nevertheless something very different from triumph.

Actually, counterinsurgency might be defined, without the risk of being proved false, as a *dismal doctrine*: not only because it is a strategy devised for armed conflicts 'amongst the people', which has often produced significant harm to civilians, but also because it has rarely worked in practice. On this point military historian Gentile (2010) appears correct, when he argues that the 'simple truth is that we have bought into a doctrine for countering insurgencies that did not work in the past, as proven by history and whose efficacy and utility remain highly problematic today'[3]. Indeed after the war in Iraq and in the final phase of Western military presence in Afghanistan, van Creveld's conclusion on counterinsurgency still holds true: 'the astonishing fact is that almost all of it has been written by the losers' (2006: 229). Counterinsurgency, indeed, seems at best an unproven theory and at worst a catastrophic failure. A point that both the editors and contributors of the volume do not emphasize enough. This is also why James A. Russell appears too harsh in his critique towards General Petraeus. As many of his predecessors in the area of counterinsurgency, Petraeus is a tragic figure who tried to win conflicts that could have been hardly won at an acceptable price for his nation.

Apart from these two limitations, the qualities of the volume make it interesting for international relations theorists, military historians, policymakers, would be warrior-scholars, and anyone else who has an interest in understanding irregular warfare and the origins of counterinsurgency.

Notes

[1] Charles George Gordon (1833-1885) was a British officer who fought in Crimea, China, where he contributed to defeat the Taiping Rebellion, and finally in Sudan where he died after being besieged in Khartoum for one year by the Muhammad Ahmad's militias.

[2] Chapter four is devoted to the contribution of the United States Marine Corps.

[3] See also Gentile (2013).

References

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