In 2003, as resistance to occupation intensified in Iraq, Counterinsurgency re-entered mainstream consciousness for the first time in a generation. In 2005, as the Afghan war escalated, Counterinsurgency also began to dominate the discourse of European, American and allied governments, either openly or under cover of terms like ‘the comprehensive approach’. After decades in the dark, the controversial art of counterinsurgency was suddenly thrust again into the spotlight, provoking a vigorous and rancorous debate.

By 2007, after a remarkable period of rapid adaptation and organizational change in the US military, a re-introduced Counterinsurgency doctrine was making a major difference on the ground in Iraq. The publication of the Army and Marine Corps field manual, FM 3–24 Counterinsurgency, in December 2006, and General David Petraeus’ successful application of methods from that manual during the surge in Iraq in 2007–8, led some commentators to see Counterinsurgency (or COIN) as the solution, or at least as the new dominant paradigm in Western thinking on intervention in complex conflicts.

In this chapter, as I have done elsewhere, I will argue the exact opposite: namely, that not only is classical COIN not the new dominant paradigm for Western intervention, but that it should not be – and that a debate that focuses too narrowly on the efficacy or applicability of a set of Cold War concepts from the late 1950s is both destructive and distracting.

Key issues in the debate: effectiveness, appropriateness, ethics, policy

The key issues in the counterinsurgency debate are easy to enumerate: does counterinsurgency actually work? Does it take too long, and cost too much, to be sustainable for Western democratic governments? Should Western militaries do more to develop counterinsurgency capability? Do processes of competitive adaptation and organizational learning drive success in counterinsurgency? Does improving counterinsurgency capability undermine effectiveness in ‘conventional’ state-on-state warfare, and if so, does this matter? Should civilian organizations (especially diplomatic services and aid agencies) be forced to build their own counterinsurgency capability, whether they want it or not? In the absence of civilian capabilities, should military forces assume the mission of development, stabilization, reconstruction and governance assistance, or does this do more harm than good? Does development assistance in counterinsurgency have a stabilizing, neutral or destabilizing effect? Does the counterinsurgent’s focus on governance
and development assistance hinder and compromise the work of NGOs and humanitarian assistance organizations trying to work in the same space, and does that matter? Is counterinsurgency just a kinder, gentler method of pursuing neo-imperialist goals that are fundamentally harmful to local populations? Is counterinsurgency therefore unethical, even if conducted with respect for human rights? Is counterinsurgency doomed to failure because the enemy will always be more savage than we can be, and because proven methods of suppressing rebellion – involving mass destruction and violence – are unavailable to modern Western democracies? Does the creation of counterinsurgency capabilities make it more likely that governments will choose to intervene in one of the messiest and most problematic forms of conflict? Do we thereby risk locking ourselves into precisely the kinds of conflicts we should avoid? Alternatively, much as Western dominance in conventional warfare has pushed adversaries into other forms of conflict, is mastering counterinsurgency the key to avoiding having to do it?

We might marshal this diverse collection of issues into four debates, over Effectiveness, Appropriateness, Ethics and Policy. And yet the answer to these questions, like the answer to almost any important question when applied to complex adaptive systems in real-world environments, is ‘it depends’. Of course, it primarily depends on what we mean by ‘Counterinsurgency’, and the word can mean several very different things, as the following brief intellectual history shows.

A brief intellectual history of counter-insurrection

Generic, ‘small c’ counterinsurgency – the broadly-defined activity of countering insurrection, suppressing internal rebellion in order to control societies – is an ancient human institution, a traditional (perhaps even a defining) activity of government. It has existed at least as long as the state itself.

In fact, counterinsurgency seems to have been central to the development of the ancient state, and hence of the state as we know it today. Paul Johnston, for example, traces the evolution of counterinsurgency in Egypt under the Ptolemies, following their victory over the Seleucids at the battle of Raphia in 218 BC, a victory that destabilized Egyptian society for more than a century. This instability forced Ptolemaic armies to engage in continual operations against a series of insurgencies, and fundamentally affected the development of the state in Egypt (Johnston 2009). In a similar vein, Barry Strauss’ study of the Third Servile War (73–71 BC) shows that the Roman Republic’s suppression of Spartacus’ slave rebellion, while aiming to preserve the status quo, in fact contributed – through the boost it gave to the political careers of generals like Marcus Licinius Crassus and Gnaeus Pompey – to that Republic’s transformation, through civil war, into the Empire. Both these studies, like others, indicate a link between counterinsurgency and state formation in ancient history (Strauss 2009).

Countering insurrection in the ancient world, of course, bore little resemblance to mid-twentieth-century COIN theory. Indeed, the bitter comment of the British guerrilla leader Galgacus (‘to robbery, slaughter and plunder, they give the lying name of Empire; they make a devastation and call it Peace’ (Tacitus Book 30)), reported in Tacitus, could serve as a universal verdict on the generally ferocious methods of ancient counterinsurgency. As I have remarked elsewhere, in this the Romans seem to have been merely the most systematic and well-developed exemplars of a widespread tendency in the ancient world, but they of course also engaged in political coalition-building, civil governance and economic development programmes, so that highly lethal military operations were only one component of a much more comprehensive approach to counter-insurrection (Kilcullen 2011: 321).

The link between countering insurrection and patterns of state formation is by no means restricted to antiquity however, as Philip Bobbitt showed in The Shield of Achilles, his
comprehensive survey of the interaction of law, economics and strategy in the formation and evolution of the modern state. Bobbitt showed that the very nature of the state has been shaped by the demands of war, and by the need to create and maintain legitimacy through domestic order. While much of Bobbitt’s argument relates to the organization of the state for external or interstate war, many of his examples also demonstrate the effects of internal counter-insurrection on state evolution right up until the end of the twentieth century (Bobbitt 2002). More recently, Ganesh Sitaraman has made the link between counterinsurgency and constitutional (or state) formation explicit for modern conflicts (Sitaraman 2008: 1622). Likewise, the historian Roy McCullough makes a persuasive argument for the role of counterinsurgency (especially in the Languedoc region) as a major shaping element in the evolution of the French state under Louis XIV (McCullough 2007).

Indeed, political theorists including Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and, of course, Karl Marx explicitly define the state, at least in part, via its internal security and counterinsurgency role. Consider, for example, Weber’s famous dictum that a state can be defined as such only ‘if and insofar as its administrative staff successfully upholds a claim on the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence in the enforcement of its order’ (Weber 1946). While this observation is often shorthanded to ‘a monopoly on the legitimate use of force’, the full quotation makes it clear that Weber is referring here to the use of force under certain specific circumstances, namely coercion by the state to suppress internal disorder. He is also pointing to a process whereby the state legitimizes that suppression through success in maintaining order against opposition – in other words, through countering insurrection.

Generic, ‘small-c’ counterinsurgency, then, or counter-insurrection, seems to be an enduring human social institution that has been part of the role of virtually every government in history and perhaps even partly defines what we mean by the word ‘state’.

The methods states have used to suppress insurgencies have been as enormously varied as states themselves, and have also varied according to the nature of a given insurgency, and the nature of the population group within which that insurgency exists. It is therefore difficult to identify a common approach to counter-insurrection throughout the roughly 385 examples of this form of conflict that have occurred in the last two centuries, or in the hundreds of other examples from earlier periods in history. Ethnic or multi-racial empires, colonial powers, occupation authorities, totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, democracies, or indeed private corporations acting in the role of a state (such as the British East India Company in pre-1857 India, or the Honorable East India Company in the Netherlands East Indies) seem to have adopted widely varying techniques. That said, these techniques appear to have been determined in large part by the state’s attitude to the population within the territory it controlled, an attitude that in turn arose largely from the nature of these states or state-like entities themselves. Hence, the nature of the state (in particular, the relationship between the state and its subject population) seems to be one of the few reliable predictors of the types of counterinsurgency techniques it is likely to adopt.

‘COIN’ or ‘big-c’ counterinsurgency

Thus ‘small-c’ or generic counterinsurgency is a longstanding and diverse phenomenon that does not seem to be exclusively associated with any specific content, doctrine or set of core techniques – it simply mirrors the state’s relationship with the population, and may involve a very wide variety of methods. ‘Big-C’ Counterinsurgency, however, is an entirely different matter.

Both the term ‘Counterinsurgency’ (hereafter, ‘COIN’) and the doctrine to which it refers have an extremely specific content, a definite origin, and embody a set of ideas that can be very
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precisely located in time and space: in the late 1950s, in the government-research ‘think-tank’ community, and on the eastern seaboard of the United States. Indeed it is almost impossible to fully understand the implications of COIN as we know it without grasping the very particular intellectual climate from which it emerged.

A RAND Corporation study, Austin Long’s On ‘Other War’: Lessons from Five Decades of RAND Counterinsurgency Research (2006) acknowledges that

the RAND corporation’s ... research is limited in that almost all of it is based on cases that occurred in the context of the Cold War. Some might question the continued relevance of studies centered on conflicts that took place in such a radically different geopolitical context.

(Long 2006: ix)

This is significant because RAND (along with ARPA, the forerunner of today’s DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) can be said to have invented COIN as we know it, sometime between 1956 and 1962, in response to the problems of Cold War low-intensity conflict, under conditions of superpower nuclear confrontation, against agrarian communist insurgencies in the former territories of European empires in Asia and Africa. Veteran RAND analyst Stephen Hosmer remembers first hearing the term ‘Counterinsurgency’ in the mid 1950s, when RAND was first beginning research into the topic, giving some indications that RAND may even have coined the term itself.¹

The RAND Corporation, originally a project of the Douglas Aircraft Corporation to support the United States Army Air Forces during the Second World War, had by 1946 become a government-sponsored operations research institute focusing on aerospace policy and technology, and in particular on nuclear strategy. RAND theorists like Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter, Herman Kahn, Bernard Brodie, William Kaufmann and Thomas C. Schelling were highly influential in the formulation of US nuclear strategy for the Cold War, through important studies on post-nuclear strategy, nuclear deterrence and game theory (Long 2006: 5). RAND’s influence within the priesthood of nuclear strategists who specialized in almost hyper-rational analysis of virtually unthinkable post-apocalyptic scenarios was such that the historian Fred Kaplan described these nuclear researchers as ‘Wizards of Armageddon’ (Kaplan 1991).

By the mid 1950s, however, communist-inspired nationalist insurgencies had emerged across much of Asia and Africa, in the wake of decolonization by the Dutch, British, French, Belgian, Italian and American empires (in the latter case, the Huk rebellion against the newly-independent former US protectorate of the Philippines). RAND was turning its attention to the much messier problems of ground warfare through Project SIERRA, a series of war games for the US Air Force, led by Edward Paxson of RAND’s mathematics department. SIERRA focused in part on the problems of limited war against communist guerrillas in the decolonizing world. According to a recent RAND history of the Vietnam era:

Starting in 1954 and lasting for several years, these war games focused on Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, and on the tactical role that the Air Force might play in such a war in conjunction with the Army and Navy. Among various scenarios, Paxson’s SIERRA simulated guerrilla warfare fighting, such as the struggles then being waged by the Viet Minh against the French in Vietnam and by Chinese insurgents against the British in Malaya. Other scenarios included Thailand and Burma.

(Elliot 2010: 9)
One key outcome of Project SIERRA was a handbook of Viet Minh insurgent strategy and tactics, written by RAND researcher George Tanham between 1954 and 1957, initially as a classified study, later published by Praeger as the very first work on communist insurgency by an American author (Elliot 2010: 10). Another outcome was a sharp critique of the then-prevailing US nuclear strategy of Massive Retaliation, which the COIN analysts saw as inflexible and lacking in credibility in limited wars outside Europe and the United States (Elliot 2010: 9). This critique paralleled that of General Maxwell D. Taylor in his 1960 book *The Uncertain Trumpet*, which called instead for a strategy of ‘flexible response’ (Long 2006: 6). Upon President John F. Kennedy’s election in November 1960, his administration adopted Taylor’s strategy of flexible response, ‘but expanded it to cover insurgencies as well as limited wars such as those envisioned by [RAND in Project] Sierra’ (Long 2006: 6).

Indeed, John F. Kennedy presided over the first great outpouring of research, debate, policy, public commentary and field practice for what was now, for the first time, being called ‘Counterinsurgency’. President Kennedy’s inauguration on 20 January 1961 can thus be considered the beginning of what we might call the ‘Classical’ COIN era.

**Classical COIN**

In January 1961, the month of Kennedy’s inauguration, the National Liberation Front announced its campaign to overthrow the government of South Vietnam, and Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev gave a speech pledging support for ‘wars of national liberation’.

[Krushchev] classified conflicts into world wars, local wars, and wars of national liberation ... National liberation wars began ‘as uprisings of colonial peoples against their oppressors, [then] developed into guerilla wars.’ The Soviet Union would support wholeheartedly and without reservation wars of national liberation, such as the conflicts in Algeria, Cuba, and Vietnam.

*(Welch Larson 1997: 110)*

Although Krushchev’s speech was given on 6 January before a closed Kremlin meeting of party theoreticians and propagandists, the West did not become aware of the speech until it was published on 18 January, two days before President Kennedy’s inauguration (Welch Larson 1997: 110). Kennedy’s reaction was immediate: the very same day, even before the formal inauguration of his new administration, he directed the development of a counterinsurgency capability within the US government, to include the US Agency for International Development, the Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department and the US Information Agency. President Kennedy also ordered the creation of a counterinsurgency school within the US Army Special Forces. In his speech at the opening ceremony of this school (which today bears his name), the president said:

We need to be prepared to fight a different war. This is another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin, war by guerrilla, insurgents, subversives, assassins; war by ambush instead of combat, by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him. It requires, in those situations where we encounter it, a whole new strategy, a wholly different force, and therefore, a new and wholly different kind of military training.²

RAND’s response to President Kennedy’s call to arms was to ramp up its study of counterinsurgency, prompted in part by patriotism – a genuine wish to contribute to a pressing national
security challenge – and in part, according to its own history, by ‘its desire not to be left out of
the policy loop on an issue that was gaining importance in America’s national security consider-
ations’ at a time when new conflicts were emerging in which the Air Force, until now
RAND’s major funder, would play only a supporting role (Elliot 2010: 13).

The state of a controversial art

The 1962 RAND symposium

As part of RAND’s expanded counterinsurgency programme, on 16 April 1962, Stephen
Hosmer convened a critically important week-long symposium in Washington, DC, attended
by civilian researchers and military experts, the results of which were published by RAND in
1963 as Counterinsurgency: A Symposium, April 16–20, 1962 (Hosmer and Crane 1963). This
symposium was a seminal moment in the intellectual history of classical COIN.

The aim was to ‘distill lessons and insights from past insurgent conflicts that might help to
inform and shape the U.S. involvement in Vietnam and to foster the effective prosecution of
other future counterinsurgency campaigns’ – in other words, to study contemporary wars of
national liberation and draw, by analogy, lessons for current and future counterinsurgency
(Hosmer and Crane 1963: iii). This approach depended on reasoning by extrapolation from case
studies, bringing together ‘best practice’ field methods with theoretical insights from RAND’s
existing stable of scientists and nuclear strategists. The case study method, invented by and
beloved of Harvard Business School and the operations research community, achieved a neat
intellectual fit with the worldview of President Kennedy’s new Secretary of Defense, Robert S.
MacNamara, himself a former Harvard professor, Air Force operations research analyst, statisti-
cian, and president of the Ford Motor Company.

In key ways, then, classical COIN represents an outgrowth of the New Frontier mentality of
the early Kennedy administration: an effort by the Washington think-tank community to
support Kennedy’s vision, and his attempt to counter Soviet support for national liberation
movements, by distilling the essence of colonial warfare and updating it for Cold War condi-
tions. The immediate purpose was to develop a scientific, rational, measurable, management-
science approach to the Vietnam War. This is not to criticize COIN, but to acknowledge its
origins: since COIN theory relies on reasoning by analogy from case studies, we are entitled to
ask whether those case studies are representative of the broader phenomenon of guerrilla warfare,
and whether the environment in which COIN emerged resembles today’s conflict environment
sufficiently closely to justify an extrapolation from classical COIN to today’s wars in Iraq,
Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Some of the most influential theorists and practitioners of classical COIN attended the 1962
symposium: David Galula, Frank Kitson and Edward G. Lansdale among them, along with
Charles Bohannan, Wendell Fertig and Napoleon Valeriano. Retired Lieutenant Colonel David
Galula of the French Colonial Infantry,3 in particular, was an active participant in the workshop,
and this led him to further work with RAND, including a detailed account of French pacifica-
tion operations in the Kabylia region of Algeria. This, originally a classified study, remained
unpublished for over 40 years before eventually being released by RAND in 2006 as Pacification
in Algeria, 1956–1958 (Galula 2006). The better known of Galula’s works (indeed, his only
known full-length study until 2006) was his systematic COIN primer Counterinsurgency Warfare: 
Theory and Practice, published by Praeger in 1964, and an intellectual cornerstone of COIN’s
neo-classical revival after 2003.

And here, perhaps, is the first hint of something problematic about classical COIN as theory.
Galula’s longer and more detailed study, Pacification in Algeria is Algeria-specific and focused at
the lower tactical level (Galula had been a captain, commanding a company in two rural districts
of one region, at a specific period in the development of the Algerian War). True, Galula had served in Greece (as an observer), and in Hong Kong (as a military attaché) during the Chinese Civil War. But his only first-hand experience of COIN (an experience which, by definition, heavily informed the case-based COIN theory), indeed his only command experience in any campaign, was as a junior officer in Algeria.

French counter-guerrilla tactics in Algeria were not a popular subject in the United States in the early 1960s: President de Gaulle had announced that Algeria would vote on independence only two weeks before President Kennedy’s inauguration, a process leading inevitably to French withdrawal in defeat from the colony; General Salan⁴ launched a coup against the withdrawal three months later. US popular sympathy was generally on the side of the insurgents, with many Americans seeing them as nationalists rather than communists in orientation, glossing over the extensive atrocities against civilians that followed the French withdrawal. Ann Marlowe, in her biographical monograph on Galula, observes that this sentiment extended to President Kennedy himself:

Then, too, in the United States, sentiment was often on the side of the Algerian rebels. Anti-colonialism was the order of the day. President Kennedy was fashionably anti-colonialist, and while still a senator, spoke in favor of Algerian independence. His July 2, 1957, speech, the longest of his Senate career, was titled, ‘Imperialism—The Enemy of Freedom.’ Kennedy argued that the Algerians deserved freedom on its merits, but he also noted that it would be hard to deny it to them in the long run.

(Marlowe 2010: 8–9)

Galula, as a research associate at Harvard in 1962–3, therefore appears to have set out to write a more concise, generic and theoretical work, incorporating the same insights as Pacification in Algeria, but with minimal explicit reference to Algeria.⁵ The book that resulted – Counterinsurgency Warfare – is thus not really a general theory of COIN, but rather, to some extent, a theory of COIN tactics in Algeria, with Algeria taken out. Counterinsurgency Warfare is essentially an argument (albeit a persuasive one) based on generalization from a single case – and even within this case the method achieved only a 50 per cent success rate: Galula used the same approach in both districts where he operated, but it only worked in one of them. More worryingly, the single-example basis for the theory only became readily apparent some four decades later, when Galula’s two major works could finally be compared for the first time.

Sample size and homogeneity in classical COIN

A similar problem with sample size afflicts classical COIN more broadly, given that the case studies used to formulate the theory seem to have been drawn from a very small subset of examples of insurgency and counterinsurgency, and from a very specific historical period (that of communist wars of national liberation in the immediate post-1945 period). Taking the participants in the 1962 symposium as a group, given that they were asked to share insights from their experiences, it is instructive to examine those experiences as reported in the biographical notes in the symposium report, as these provide an insight into the case studies upon which the theory is built.

Of the symposium’s 12 formal participants, five were American, four were British and there were one each Australian, French and Filipino. Eleven were Army officers; all were men (indeed, except for Sybille O. Greene, the rapporteur, all attendees were male including the RAND researchers). Eleven of the 12 were white. At least eight had fought in the Second
Table 11.1 Case study base for the RAND COIN Symposium 1962

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict: Features</th>
<th>Huk Rebellion</th>
<th>French Algeria</th>
<th>Malaya</th>
<th>Kenya</th>
<th>South Vietnam</th>
<th>French Indochina</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
<td>North Africa</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
<td>East Africa</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year began</td>
<td>1946</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>1946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winner</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Insurgent</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Insurgent</td>
<td>Insurgent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government type</td>
<td>US-dominated former colony</td>
<td>Colonial power (France)</td>
<td>Colonial power (UK)</td>
<td>Colonial power (UK)</td>
<td>US-dominated former colony</td>
<td>Colonial power (UK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurgent type</td>
<td>Communist rural</td>
<td>Communist rural/urban</td>
<td>Communist rural</td>
<td>Nationalist/tribal rural</td>
<td>Communist rural</td>
<td>Communist rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy type</td>
<td>Subsistence/cash-crop</td>
<td>Subsistence/cash-crop</td>
<td>Subsistence/cash-crop</td>
<td>Subsistence/cash-crop</td>
<td>Subsistence/cash-crop</td>
<td>Subsistence/cash-crop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>Tenant farmer</td>
<td>Tenant farmer</td>
<td>Peasant</td>
<td>Tenant farmer</td>
<td>Peasant</td>
<td>Peasant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main terrain</td>
<td>Farm/village and plantation</td>
<td>Farm/village and plantation</td>
<td>Farm/village and plantation</td>
<td>Farm/village and plantation</td>
<td>Farm/village and plantation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second terrain</td>
<td>Jungle</td>
<td>Mountain</td>
<td>Jungle</td>
<td>Jungle</td>
<td>Jungle</td>
<td>Jungle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurgent religion</td>
<td>Animist/Christian</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Buddhist/Confucian</td>
<td>Animist/Christian</td>
<td>Buddhist/Confucian</td>
<td>Buddhist/Confucian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

World War, and at least six had a background in Special Operations or Unconventional Warfare (that is, in the terminology of the time, in leading guerrilla forces in occupied territory). There were no specialists in logistics, transportation, policing or civilian government, no naval, marine or aviation officers, no diplomats and no former or current insurgents or host-nation civilian populations. Most participants had served at the tactical level in command of army combat units, a fact reflected in the rank structure of the group: one captain, eight colonels or lieutenant colonels, two brigadier generals and a civilian.

Their collective experience included the Huk rebellion in the Philippines, the Algerian War, the Malayan Emergency, the Greek and Chinese Civil Wars, and campaigns in Oman, Kenya, Vietnam, French Indochina, Korea and Thailand. This experience appears more diverse than it was, however, since between them Galula and Lansdale brought experience (as observers only) in five of these campaigns. The vast weight of practical experience of the group was in two theatres only: Malaya and Indochina. Indeed, comparing the campaigns in which seminar participants had fought, remarkable commonalities emerge.

Key commonalities include:

- **timeline** (all conflicts began within nine years after the Second World War);
- **duration** (all lasted eight years except Malaya, which lasted 12, and Vietnam, which was ongoing in 1962);
- **region** (all occurred in Southeast Asia and North or East Africa);
- **government type** (all governments were either European colonial powers or US-dominated former colonies);
- **insurgent type** (all but one insurgency was communist, all had nationalist elements, all were predominantly rural);
- **economic type** (all conflicts occurred in subsistence agriculture or cash-crop economies);
- **population type** (all populations were tenant farmers or peasants and primarily Buddhist/Confucian or animist/Christian); and
- **terrain** (principal fighting in all campaigns occurred in farm, village or plantation environments with significant secondary fighting in jungle areas or mountains).

Interestingly, there is less commonality of outcome across these six similar cases: the results are an even split between insurgent victory and government victory. Thus while it is possible to say that there is a high degree of homogeneity among the case studies used to formulate classical COIN theory, it is much harder to say that the application of COIN theory (based on best practices by military participants on the government side in these cases) has a strong correlation with government victory. Methods varied, and only in Malaya can the government as a whole be said to have been consciously and systematically applying a version of classical COIN. In other words, while the environments were similar, the methods differed, as did the outcomes, and because the studies rely on personal experience of tactical operations, it is very difficult to draw a clear correlation between method and outcome.

Needless to say, there were dozens of other seminars, studies, symposia and other analyses as part of the initial development of classical COIN theory, and it would be wrong to see the RAND study as the sole point-of-origin of the theory. On the contrary, it was simply representative of many efforts to distil the essence of colonial warfare, drawing from case studies of the revolutionary warfare of the 1950s, and update it for Cold War conditions, that ultimately resulted in the emergence, by the early 1960s, of classical COIN as we know it. Again, this is not to criticize classical COIN but rather to make explicit the theoretical and case study basis from which it emerges, and to point out that the case studies upon which it draws share certain
very specific characteristics, so that while the techniques it advocates may be effective in environments, or against insurgents, that share these characteristics, its applicability is far more questionable in different circumstances.

**Neo-classical COIN**

The COIN revival of the early post-9/11 period, as the United States and its allies drifted into an insurgency in Afghanistan, and as resistance to occupation in Iraq gradually also assumed the form of an insurgency, drew heavily on classical COIN theory. Galula, Thompson, Fall and other writers of the classical era were highly influential in the thinking of the group (including myself) that devised the reinvigorated COIN doctrine embodied in the Army/Marine Corps Field Manual, FM 3–24 *Counterinsurgency* in December 2006. The RAND Corporation, likewise, played an important role by re-issuing or re-examining many of its classical-era publications, or publishing for the first time key works like Galula’s *Pacification in Algeria* that had remained classified until that time.

In this sense, given the influence of classical COIN over FM 3–24, and its appeal to the authority of historical classics (Galula, Thompson, Mao, Lawrence) the COIN renaissance of 2005–6 can be considered a Neo-Classical Revival, resting on the application and updating of classical precepts for the new campaigns. Clearly, the effort to revisit COIN best practices made eminent sense for a military force that was engaged against two major insurgencies and had not updated its COIN doctrine for more than 20 years. But how applicable is the 1960s version of classical COIN, as a theory, to these modern campaigns? As I have argued elsewhere in detail, and as summarized below, there are significant differences at the strategic, operational and tactical levels.7

**The strategic environment**

Classical COIN theory posits an insurgent challenge to a functioning (albeit often weak) state – the standard situation of a colonial or newly independent state facing a national liberation war, as in the 1960s case studies that form the basis for the theory. The insurgent challenges the status quo; the counterinsurgent seeks to reinforce the state’s legitimacy and capacity, to defeat this internal challenge. This clearly applies to some insurgencies today – Southern Thailand, Aceh, Sri Lanka and Colombia are examples. But in other cases, insurgency today is occurring after state failure. It is not directed at taking over a functioning body politic, but rather at dismembering or scavenging its carcass, or contesting an ‘ungoverned space’. Chechnya in 1994–9, and East Timor in 1999–2002 are examples of this form of insurgency; Somalia (since 1991 but more especially since 2006) is another. This situation is covered in works on colonial small wars (such as those by C.E. Callwell and the US Marine Corps *Small Wars Manual*; Callwell 1996; US Marine Corps 1987) but was not emphasized in classical COIN, and is an example of circumstances outside the parameters of the case studies on which the theory is built.

Similarly, classical COIN assumes that the insurgent initiates. Thus, Galula asserts flatly that ‘whereas in conventional war, either side can initiate the conflict, only one – the insurgent – can initiate a revolutionary war, for counterinsurgency is only an effect of insurgency’ (Galula 1964: 3). Classical theorists therefore pay substantial attention to the problem of recognizing insurgency early enough to respond effectively. Thompson observes that ‘at the first signs of an incipient insurgency … no one likes to admit that anything is going wrong. This automatically leads to a situation where government countermeasures are too little and too late’ (Thompson
But several modern campaigns – Iraq and Afghanistan, for example – were initiated by governments or invading forces, and insurgents were reactive. True enough, in Iraq and Afghanistan, inattention after the end of conventional campaigning allowed the insurgents to regroup and launch the first attacks. But though the insurgents thus gained the tactical initiative, the counterinsurgents held the strategic initiative. Such patterns are readily recognizable in historical examples of resistance warfare, but not in classical COIN theory.\(^8\)

Today, in many cases, the counterinsurgent represents the forces of revolutionary change, while the insurgent fights to preserve the status quo of ungoverned spaces, or to repel an occupying force – a political relationship in reverse of that envisaged in classical COIN. Pakistan’s campaign against the Pakistani Taliban since 2003 is an example of this. The enemy includes not only al-Qaeda (AQ) linked extremists and Taliban, but also local tribal combatants who fight primarily to preserve their way of life against twenty-first century encroachment on their traditional rights and freedoms.\(^7\) The problem of weaning these fighters away from extremist sponsors, while simultaneously supporting modernization on the frontier, does somewhat resemble pacification operations in classical COIN, of the sort described by Galula in 1963. But it also echoes colonial campaigns in the same region, and includes entirely new elements arising from the effects of globalization.\(^10\)

One of the most strategically significant of these ‘globalization effects’ is the rise of a worldwide audience, which gives insurgents a near-instantaneous means to publicize their cause. Globalized Internet communication also enables moral, financial and recruiting support, acting as a strategic hinterland or ‘virtual sanctuary’ that sustains insurgents. Classical COIN theory deals extensively with ‘active’ and ‘passive’ sanctuaries, methods to quarantine such sanctuaries, and their effects on insurgent performance (Thompson 1970: passim; Galula 1964: 38–41) But it treats sanctuary as primarily a physical space (often straddling an international border) in which insurgents can regroup or through which external support flows.

However, today’s Internet-based virtual sanctuary is beyond the reach of counterinsurgent forces or neighbouring governments, and its effects are difficult to quarantine. Insurgents in Iraq were adept at exploiting global media effects, while the ‘Global Islamic Media Front’ and AQ’s as-Sahab media production arm have achieved new heights of professionalism in targeting global audiences.\(^11\) Internet-based methods for financial transfers, training and recruitment, clandestine communication, planning and intelligence collection capabilities allow insurgents to exploit virtual sanctuary for more than just propaganda. Classical COIN theory has, of course, little to say about such virtual sanctuary, since the modern electronic environment did not exist in the 1950s cases upon which the theory is built.

The transnational character of modern insurgency is another new feature. Classical-era insurgents copied each other (for example, the Algerian FLN consciously copied the Viet Minh, and EOKA and other insurgent and terrorist movements copied the Jewish Irgun Zvai Leumi and Lehi in Mandated Palestine) (Hoffman 2006: 45–53). But such emulation typically happened after the event, and direct real-time cooperation between movements was rare. Thus classical COIN typically regards insurgency as something that occurs within one country or district, between an internal non-state actor and a single government (Kilcullen 2005). This is reflected in definitions of insurgency used today in official doctrine.\(^12\) By contrast, today we see real-time cooperation and cross-pollination among movements. AQ and its loose confederation operate across many countries in several continents (Kilcullen 2005; Barno 2006). AQ operatives pass messages from Pakistan and Afghanistan, through Iran to Iraq.\(^13\) Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that first appear in Palestine or Iraq rapidly proliferate to Chechnya and Afghanistan. Iranian IED technology appears in Iraq (AFPS 2006) or Afghanistan, and Pakistani extremist groups operate in Afghanistan.\(^14\) Insurgents in Iraq mounted operations in response to events in...
The state of a controversial art

Lebanon, and conducted attacks in Jordan. Insurgents in Southeast Asia apply methods developed in the Middle East that circulate via the Internet or on CD-ROM. This transnational pattern of cooperation is part of a deliberate AQ strategy, but these materials are also available to other movements and there is evidence that non-AQ groups (including environmentalist extremists) are noting and copying AQ methods.

Classical COIN also tends to assume a bilateral struggle between the insurgent and counter-insurgent: both Galula and FM 3–24 posit two theoretical actors in this type of campaign, the ‘insurgent’ and the ‘counterinsurgent’ (Galula 1964). Thompson speaks of the ‘insurgent’ and the ‘government’. But another distinctive characteristic of modern insurgency is its multilateral character. Insurgencies today, including those in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, Chechnya, Pakistan and the Horn of Africa involve multiple diffuse, competing insurgent movements. In contrast to traditional movements these conflicts lack a ‘united front’ or umbrella organization that directs the insurgency. Rather, dozens of competing groups pursue their own, frequently conflicting agendas. Field experience from Iraq, particularly, suggests that it may be harder, not easier, to defeat such a complex and disorganized swarm of opponents.

Operational art

At the operational level, there are of course many similarities between today’s insurgencies and those of the classical era. Insurgent movements remain popular uprisings that grow from, and are conducted through pre-existing social networks (village, tribe, family, urban neighbourhood, political or religious party). Thus the insurgent operational art remains fundamentally a matter of aggregating dispersed tactical actions by small groups and individuals, and orchestrating their effects into a strategically significant campaign sequence. Similarly, the operational art of COIN remains fundamentally concerned with displacing insurgent influence from these social networks, supplanting insurgent support within the population, and manoeuvering to marginalize the enemy and deny them a popular base of support. Thus, while the strategic ‘competition for government’ may be less relevant today than in the past, at the operational level COIN remains a competition between several sides, each seeking to mobilize the population in its cause.

But today’s environment (especially the ‘globalization effects’ of virtual sanctuary, global audience and cyber-mobilization) ensures that this operational art develops in ways that differ substantially from classical methods. Indeed, modern insurgencies operate more like a self-synchronizing swarm of independent, but cooperating cells, than like a formal organization. In many cases, even the fashionable cybernetic discourse of ‘networks’, ‘vertices’ and ‘nodes’ implies more structure than exists.

Classical COIN theorists considered the aggregated effect of many small incidents – Robert Taber’s ‘war of the flea’ – as a key operational driver even though they recognized the impact of well-publicized single dramatic incidents. By contrast, modern decentralized media capabilities have driven a compression of the operational level of war, so that almost any tactical action by any individual can have immediate strategic impact. This increases the unpredictability and non-linearity of COIN campaigning, rendering statistical trends (Cordesman 2006: 3) less important than public perception. Again, this was accounted for in classical COIN theory, but ‘globalization effects’ have dramatically increased its influence. In circumstances of pervasive media presence, the demeanour of a single soldier, diplomat or aid official instantaneously communicates more about the success or failure of a campaign than can any public information operation.
Urban insurgent tactics

At the tactical level, one obvious difference between classical COIN and today’s campaigns is their urbanized quality. All of the case studies in the 1962 symposium, for example, were primarily rural. Classical insurgencies actually included several campaigns with urban components, such as Algeria, but COIN theory treats the rural component of each campaign as decisive. The reason was straightforward – classical-era insurgencies in ‘colonial or independent underdeveloped territories’ (Thompson 1970: 21) were indeed primarily rural. But this is often not so today, as is apparent when flying over Afghanistan or Iraq. Incidents in Iraq cluster in urban centres or areas of suburban sprawl around Iraq’s major cities. The insurgent, as in classical theory, continues to hide amongst the population. But in urbanized societies (like Iraq) the cover is in the cities.

This urban environment has very significant tactical implications – engagement ranges are short and contacts are fleeting as in traditional insurgencies, but bystanders are now always present and often exploited by the insurgent. Media presence is also greatest in cities, fuelling propaganda-based tactics that target the population to generate shock and provoke sectarian unrest. Traditional COIN tactics like fencing villages, cordon and search, curfew, and food control (accepted as routine in Malaya) have drawn sharp criticism in Iraq and Afghanistan because of the disruption they cause in urban neighbourhoods, combined with the negative propaganda effect of enhanced media coverage (Ricks 2006: 330–5).

Internet, cell phone and television coverage in insurgent areas enables web- and cellphone-based coordination, changing insurgent tactics and countermeasures. Most houses in Iraqi cities have at least one satellite dish, for example, while a recent study found that more than 24 per cent of residents in Mogadishu access the Internet at least once a week (Ledgard 2011). Underground newspapers, pirate radio stations and insurgent posters are still a factor in places like Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas, which lack the Internet coverage and urbanized population of Iraq or of settled districts in Pakistan. But perception management is vastly more complex when the population has instantaneous access to media broadcasts intended for third nation audiences.

Modern insurgent tactics centre on the urban bomb rather than, as in classical COIN, on the rural ambush. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs), particularly suicide attacks, generate ‘good copy’ for insurgent propaganda and ensure sponsorship from donors and supporters. IEDs also overcome the lethality ‘self-limit’ of classical insurgencies, whose rifle-based tactics meant that they had to field a greater number of fighters, and so risk more casualties, in order to generate greater lethality (McCormick et al. 2006). The Irish Republican Army developed this approach 20 years ago, but unlike Northern Ireland (where acquisition, storage, transport and caching of IEDs were so difficult that insurgent quartermasters were key players (Dillon 1999)) modern-day theaters like Iraq are awash with military-grade ordnance.

Post-classical COIN

In key respects, then, many of the assumptions that were carried across from specific case studies into the general, classical theory of COIN do not transfer well to today’s conflicts, making a straight copy of classical COIN (essentially, the neo-classical approach) problematic. This is, of course, very well understood by practitioners in the field, so that neo-classical COIN is already giving way to a post-classical period, in which techniques and doctrine are based more on empiricism (a data-driven or evidence-based understanding of what is happening on the ground) rather than on appeal to the authority of historical cases, or exegesis from the classical canon of COIN theorists.
This can be seen in two features of the environment since the publication of FM 3–24 in late 2006: the emergence in the field of new techniques not envisaged in doctrine, and the development of new paradigms that explain reality at least as well as classical COIN.

### Field innovation: accelerated COIN

As noted earlier, all the case study campaigns in the 1962 RAND symposium lasted eight years, except for Malaya which lasted 12, and Vietnam which eventually took nine years of US direct combat involvement (1965–73). As one of many studies during the same era, this similarity of duration may have contributed to the accepted wisdom that COIN inherently takes a long time (9–12 years is an often-quoted yardstick), and that therefore a long-term, whole-of-government effort, successfully maintaining both the support of the population in theatre, and US domestic public support, is the sine qua non of successful COIN. The neo-classical version of this can be seen in FM 3–24:

I-134. Insurgencies are protracted by nature. Thus, COIN operations always demand considerable expenditures of time ... people do not actively support a government unless they are convinced that the counterinsurgents have the means, ability, stamina, and will to win.... The populace must have confidence in the staying power of both the counterinsurgents and the HN government. Insurgents and local populations often believe that a few casualties or a few years will cause the United States to abandon a COIN effort. Constant reaffirmations of commitment, backed by deeds, can overcome that perception.

(US Army 2006: 1–24)

Interestingly, this idea is somewhat foreign to colonial warfare or small wars theory, which recognized that conventional armies are tactically stronger than irregulars, whereas local guerrillas are strategically more resilient than intervening outsiders. Thus, in small wars theory, quick, decisive, often violent action to knock out a nascent rebellion is favoured over protraction, on the theory that this is ultimately cheaper, kinder and more likely to succeed.

In any case, whatever the doctrine, campaigning in Iraq and Afghanistan has been subject to much tighter time constraints than envisioned in classical or neo-classical COIN theory. In January 2007, one month after the publication of FM 3–24, its principal author (General David Petraeus) assumed command in Iraq with nowhere near the length of time that one would expect in a classical COIN paradigm. The ‘surge’ was slated to last 18 months, giving a total time for the Iraq campaign of only five years (2003–8). Even on the assumption that some units had begun applying COIN as early as 2005, the timeline for the campaign was radically truncated to about three years. What was needed was a dramatically accelerated COIN effect in order to buy time for a political settlement.

The approach that emerged could not easily have been found in FM 3–24. It combined coercive and persuasive elements into a political strategy that sought a peaceful solution to the sectarian conflict that was driving the insurgency — thus, less of a COIN approach, and more civil war termination or heavy peace enforcement. The aim was to marginalize extremists on all sides (including those aligned with the government of Iraq) while co-opting anyone, from any political orientation whatsoever, who proved ready to reconcile, support a peaceful settlement and cease fighting. To do this, the planners recognized that we needed a lengthy period of confidence building to convince people they were safe enough to engage in a political accommodation. We also recognized that, to lift the pall of fear that was preventing all sides from
feeling safe enough to negotiate, we would need to kill or capture a substantial number of irreconcilable extremists: the plan must have a ‘hard’, lethal, coercive component directed against terrorists like al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) and Iranian secret cells, as well as a ‘soft’, peaceful component of reconciling with anyone willing to put down the gun. The two worked in symbiosis – the more effectively we eliminated the irreconcilables, the more willing others would be to reconcile, and the further we progressed in peace-building the easier it would be to identify and eliminate the irreconcilable minority.

This resulted in what might be called ‘accelerated COIN’, with population-centric operations across Iraq providing a framework of security, upon which two additional layers rested: highly lethal counter-network targeting (primarily using special operations and air power, supported by an intensive intelligence effort) to destroy the irreconcilable network of terror cells, plus reconciliation and reintegration to make peace with reconcilable elements, bringing them into alignment with the coalition and (ultimately, in theory) the government. Ultimately the decisive aspect of the reconciliation strategy was the Awakening, a tribal revolt against AQI, which spread rapidly across the Sunni part of the country in 2007 and combined reconciliation and peacemaking with direct military action against irreconcilables and public safety in threatened communities.

The synergy achieved by this reconciliation/counter-network/security cycle had a flywheel effect, accelerating progress while creating an impetus towards reform and capacity building for civil government. Meanwhile the dramatic drop in Iraqi civilian casualties in mid 2007, and a similar drop in coalition casualties from late summer, restored a certain amount of public confidence (both in Iraq and in the United States) and bought enough political space to allow the coalition to eventually withdraw under a negotiated status of forces agreement. All this occurred within three years, dramatically faster than envisaged in COIN theory.

Likewise, in Afghanistan in 2010, General Stanley McChrystal (soon to be followed by General Petraeus) was saddled with what classical COIN theorists would have considered a hopelessly unrealistic timeline, when President Obama announced in December 2009 that US forces would begin a complete withdrawal by July 2011. This had a massively destabilizing effect on the Afghan people, validated Taliban propaganda that the coalition was an unreliable long-term partner, and provoked Afghan elites (most notably, the Afghan president himself) to begin balancing against the international community. Once again, on the most generous possible interpretation, some elements of the force in Afghanistan had begun practising neo-classical COIN in 2006–7, while COIN only became widespread in 2008. Thus the timeline for Afghanistan was again radically truncated to between two and four years, vastly less time than envisaged in COIN theory, and in extremely difficult circumstances due to the loss of confidence provoked by the self-imposed timeline.

Again, the approach taken has been ‘accelerated COIN’, combining extremely intensive counter-network targeting with intensified efforts at reconciliation (of senior Taliban leaders) and reintegration (of lower-level foot-soldiers). This rested on a framework of population and area security operations which looked, on the ground, much like traditional COIN, and on enhanced efforts to create a viable Afghan police and military, supported by an additional, time-limited troop surge.

Again, there have been several attempts to create an ‘Awakening-like’ uprising against the Taliban. While this has not taken the self-sustaining large-scale form of the Iraqi Awakening, it has resulted in a similar programme, the Village Stability Operations/Afghan Local Policing initiative, which is having similar effects at the local level in some insurgent-affected areas. Thus, once again, in the absence of anything like enough time for traditional COIN, and without the resources (especially troops) traditionally considered necessary for effective COIN, commanders...
have been forced into a risky attempt to dramatically accelerate COIN effects. The method chosen is, again, to generate a synergy between highly kinetic counter-network targeting of irreconcilables, and a peace-building programme to win over any member of the insurgency who proved willing to reconcile. This approach – not discussed in classical COIN theory and not to be found in FM 3–24 – can therefore be considered to be a field innovation, a form of post-classical COIN. It can be illustrated graphically, as shown in Figure 11.1.

The implications are two-fold. First, in a practical sense, the methods that succeeded in Iraq and that are currently being applied in Afghanistan differ significantly from those of classical COIN, or indeed from FM 3–24 and other neo-classical theories. Second, the intellectual approach to each campaign is profoundly empiricist – identifying techniques and methods that work on the ground, then developing and extending these methods through a series of limited ‘field experiments’, to form a bottom-up tactically driven campaigning style rather than a doctrinaire approach based on the historical, 1960s theory of insurgency and counterinsurgency.

**Beyond COIN: new paradigms**

It is dangerous to be prescriptive about these new models, since they are so field-based and pragmatic, and since the outcome of both the Afghan and Iraqi campaigns remains in doubt. But we can discern, in broad outline and with varying degrees of confidence, some emerging paradigms that move beyond COIN.

**Method: 3 mutually reinforcing elements**

1. **Counter-network targeting (Direct Action)** eliminates irreconcilable elements of insurgency
2. **Reconciliation and reintegration (Peace-Building)** wins over ‘soft core’ reconcilable elements to coalition and (eventually) government
3. **Population security measures (traditional COIN)** provides framework for (1) and (2) and builds public confidence (domestically and abroad) to maintain support for campaign

*Figure 11.1 Accelerated COIN – Afghanistan and Iraq 2007–11.*
A competition to mobilize, not to govern

In today’s campaigns, the side may win which best mobilizes and energizes its global, regional and local support base – and prevents its adversaries doing likewise. Most fundamentally, it may be appropriate to move beyond the classical conception of COIN as a competition for legitimate government, seeing it instead as a competition to mobilize, interpreted in the broadest sense. Modern guerrillas may not seek to seize control of an existing government, relying instead on their ability to mobilize sympathizers within a global audience and generate local support. Thus the legitimacy of local government may be a secondary factor. Likewise, intervening security forces must mobilize the home population, the host country, the global audience, the populations of allied and neutral countries, and the military and government agencies involved. Success may have less to do with governmental legitimacy than with the ability to energize and mobilize support, and to deny energy and mobility to the enemy’s support base.

Beyond ‘single-state’ COIN

In modern counterinsurgency, the security force ‘area of influence’ may need to include all neighbouring countries, and its ‘area of interest’ may need to be global. The classical single-state paradigm for COIN may no longer apply, since insurgents operate across national boundaries and exploit a global ‘virtual sanctuary’. Thus, while legal and political considerations will probably prevent military activity outside a single-country ‘area of operations’, a COIN force must be able to influence the behaviour of neighbouring states. Border security, money transfers, ungoverned areas, ethnic minorities, refugee populations and media in neighbouring states may all play a key operational role for the insurgent – hence the counterinsurgent must be able to influence these. Similarly, the insurgents’ propaganda audience, and their source of funds, recruits and support may be global. So the counterinsurgent’s parent government must be able to work globally to counter propaganda and disrupt funding and recruiting. This implies a vastly increased role for diplomacy, global intelligence liaison and information operations.

Beyond ‘binary COIN’

In modern campaigns, the security force must manage a complex environment, including multiple friendly, enemy and neutral players – rather than defeating a single insurgent adversary. Classical COIN tends to be ‘population-centric’, focusing on securing the population and gaining its support rather than on destroying the insurgent enemy. But it still fundamentally views the conflict as a binary struggle between one insurgent (or insurgent confederation) and one counterinsurgent (or counterinsurgent coalition). Modern campaigns belie this binary approach, since there are often multiple competing insurgent forces fighting each other as well as the government, and since the ‘supported’ government’s interests may differ in key respects from those of its supposed allies. Hence, as I have argued elsewhere, it may be best to conceive of the environment as a ‘conflict ecosystem’ with multiple competing entities seeking to maximize their own survivability and influence. The counterinsurgent’s task may no longer be to defeat the insurgent, but rather to impose or maximize its own interests in an unstable and chaotic environment.

This approach aligns well with recent thinking in the US military, as embodied in FM 3–07 Stability Operations, which conceives of modern campaigns as an attempt to neutralize and deal with sources of instability, and to build community resiliency, in a complex environment, rather than – as in classical COIN – to neutralize and deal with an insurgent enemy, strengthening the
government and connecting it more closely to its people. In fact, this approach recognizes that efforts to strengthen or extend the reach of a corrupt, abusive or exploitative government may in fact have seriously destabilizing effects.

**Beyond ‘unity of effort’**

In today’s campaigns a common diagnosis of the problem, and common enablers for collaboration, may matter more than unity of effort across multiple agencies. A key principle of classical COIN is unity of effort – in the purest case, unified control of all elements of power, vertically at every level from local to national, and horizontally from district to district. Even ‘unity of effort’ is a watered-down version of the military’s preferred ‘unity of command’. But in modern campaigns international aid organizations, global media, non-government organizations and religious leaders are all critical for success, but lie outside the military’s control. Many of these entities will not accept direction from the military, yet their actions can deny success unless cooperation is achieved. Since one cannot command what one cannot control, ‘unity of effort’ (let alone ‘unity of command’) may be unworkable in this environment. Luckily, international relief organizations have developed methods of collaboration and information sharing, designed to build a common diagnosis of ‘complex emergencies’, which enable collaboration in precisely this type of situation. A similar approach is beginning to be applied in several contemporary campaigns.

**Beyond the ‘80/20 rule’**

General Sir Gerald Templer, the British commander in Malaya, famously asserted that ‘the shooting part is only 25% of this business’, while Galula described counterinsurgency as ‘80% political, 20% military’ (Galula 1964: 89). This concept certainly remains relevant to modern campaigning, in the sense that non-military elements of national power are more significant (though, in most cases, far less well resourced) than military forces. But it could be misinterpreted as implying that there remains an area – albeit only 20 per cent of the problem – that lies outside political leaders’ purview and subject to conventional norms of combat. In modern campaigns, as we have seen, this may not be so. Given the pervasiveness of media presence and the near-instantaneous exploitation of all combat action for propaganda, today’s counterinsurgencies may be 100 per cent political. Commanders, even at the lowest tactical level in the most straightforward combat engagement, may need to conceive of what they are doing as a form of ‘political warfare’ in which perception and political outcomes matter more than battlefield success. COIN specialists are already comfortable with this approach, but broadening it to conventional combat units and ‘big army’ commanders would be a true paradigm shift.

**Beyond ‘victory’ in counterinsurgency**

Classical COIN defines victory as the military defeat of the insurgents, the destruction of their political organization, and their marginalization from the population (Galula 1964: 77). Typically, destruction of the last remnants of an insurgent movement can take decades, but once permanently marginalized they are no longer considered a threat. (For example, the Malayan Emergency ended in 1960. But MCP leader Chin Peng and the last band of MPLA guerrillas surrendered only in 1989.) Yet this paradigm may not apply to today’s campaigns, in which cell-based organizations, bomb-based tactics, global communications and vastly improved insurgent lethality make it relatively easy for marginalized insurgent movements to transform
themselves into terrorist groups. Pursuing classically-defined victory over insurgents, particularly those linked to AQ, may simply help create a series of virtually-linked, near-invisible ‘rump’ terrorist movements in former insurgent theatres. Since terrorists do not need a mass base to be operationally effective, this may perpetuate rather than end the broader conflict. Thus, in modern campaigns, victory may need to be re-defined as the disarming and reintegration of insurgent cells into the parent society, combined with popular support for permanent, institutionalized anti-terrorist measures that contain the risk of terrorist cells emerging from the former insurgent movement.

Certainly, in the specific case of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the objective may not be to defeat the insurgency and establish a viable democracy in Afghanistan (something the truncated timeline may not allow), but rather to create a stable enough environment to allow the permanent or near-permanent suppression of AQ and other transnational terrorist organizations in the region. This is not classical or even post-classical COIN: in doctrinal terms, it might be considered stability operations, an effort to create stable enough conditions for a long-term regional counter-terrorism posture.

**COIN and its critics**

What then of the current COIN debate? As the foregoing history has shown, it is possible to mount a thoroughgoing intellectual critique of classical COIN as a theory. Its case-study basis draws on an extremely limited, and perhaps unrepresentative, sample of conflicts, from a very specific and peculiar set of historical circumstances, and thus may not be applicable in differing circumstances today. Its social-scientific component is based on post-war thinking about development, governance, information and the nature of colonial or post-colonial societies in what was then called the ‘Third World’ — thinking that is almost certainly out of date due to the effects of globalization, modern mass media, transnational proliferation, virtual sanctuaries, and so on. Thus both classical COIN and its neo-classical revival have some serious intellectual limitations as a basis for contemporary campaigns.

One might argue that this lack of intellectual applicability does not particularly matter in any case, since neither classical nor neo-classical COIN bears much resemblance to the methods that are actually being used today in Afghanistan, or were applied in Iraq. Not only do these methods diverge from classical COIN, they are barely considered in the neo-classical COIN literature such as FM 3–24. Thus, while one could criticize COIN as an inappropriate paradigm for today’s wars, this matters less because it is not actually being applied as such.

Interestingly, however, these are not the comments one commonly hears from critics of COIN. Rather, as discussed at the start of this chapter, those criticisms fall into four key areas: effectiveness, appropriateness, ethics and policy. In each debate, some key critics of COIN often seem to be criticizing strawmen of their own creation, to be radically misinformed about the nature of current operations, or to be arguing from a position of institutional self-interest rather than intellectual openness. Some examples follow, but the obvious implication is that this debate misses the point about what is problematic about COIN as a theory, while equally missing the point that this COIN theory is being applied in only an extremely limited way in today’s campaigns. A debate that focuses narrowly on the COIN concepts of the late 1950s is therefore both distracting, and potentially very unproductive.

Key critics of COIN in the current debate include Colonel Gian Gentile, a professor at the US Military Academy at West Point, whose argument seems to be that COIN is not appropriate for modern conflicts, has had little to do with any success that was achieved in Iraq, and runs the risk of undermining future US military capability for conventional war against peer adversaries.
Gentile, who served in Baghdad in 2006 during a period when AQI extended its reach and the environment was spiraling out of control, is not an impartial critic (though neither, of course, are the COIN advocates he criticizes) and he has sometimes been regarded unsympathetically, due to the extremely sharp personal animosity that he shows in many of his writings. However, to the extent that a consistent position can be identified, he seems to be offering a critique based on effectiveness (COIN techniques do not work), appropriateness (the US military as currently constituted and trained is incapable of executing COIN techniques, and therefore these are not appropriate for American forces), and policy (the danger that re-orienting the Army, in particular, towards COIN for today’s conflicts will undermine its effectiveness in theoretical future conflicts against as-yet-unidentified adversaries).

The academic anthropology community, with some exceptions, has generally been extremely negative towards COIN in its neo-classical form, regarding it as a soft form of imperialism, as a means to the oppression of occupied peoples, as a perversion of social science research on the characteristics, incentives and culture of populations in affected areas, and (perhaps most saliently) as compromising the work of academic anthropologists, who may be mistaken for intelligence or Human Terrain Team operators and thus be put at risk or lose research access to communities. Much of this critique has been dismissed by some commentators as simply anti-American or Left politics, as opposition to the invasion of Iraq by the Bush administration and therefore a desire to see the occupation fail, or (perhaps more accurately) as based on misinformation about the humanitarian benefits of COIN as opposed to counter-terrorism or conventional warfare. One might also argue that the academic community is expressing a perfectly legitimate professional concern about the impact of COIN on research programmes, but that this must be balanced against bigger issues at stake in today’s conflicts. Some may also see it as rather disingenuous to express such criticisms as moral or ethical concerns with COIN, when in fact they have more to do with academic or professional self-interest, and when the application of COIN in Iraq and, to some extent, in Afghanistan has coincided with a drop in civilian casualties, so that it arguably has been a moral positive in these campaigns.

Some humanitarian NGOs have mounted a similar critique of the use of development methodologies, humanitarian spending and community stabilization initiatives in today’s conflicts, arguing that these programmes – even when undertaken by civilian government aid agencies, but even more so when done by the military – erode the humanitarian space within which NGOs operate, compromise their impartiality, cause them to be identified associated with occupying forces, and put them at risk. These concerns are justified to some extent as a commentary on actual practice in the field today, but are not strictly a critique of COIN theory per se, since similar concerns exist in any stability operation or peacekeeping deployment, as well of course as in conventional war, whether or not COIN is the dominant approach used. Thus this is more properly considered as an issue in NGO–military relations in general, rather than for COIN in particular. One might also argue that NGOs (especially Western-led NGOs focusing on social or gender issues in conflicts like Afghanistan or Sudan) are in fact not impartial in any meaningful sense, and that therefore concepts such as humanitarian space have limited applicability in these types of conflict.

A critique by development NGOs, as well as some academics and aid agencies, has argued that high rates of development assistance in COIN campaigns (including programmes like the US Army’s Commander’s Emergency Response Program, CERP, as well as larger-scale stabilization programming by aid agencies) contribute to instability, corruption and abuse (Wilder 2009). By creating streams of poorly-supervised cash income, monetizing elements of the rural subsistence economy that are not traditionally cash-based, creating incentives for exploitation
and corruption, and advantaging aid recipients over neighbouring populations who may then be driven to violence through a sense of relative deprivation, development assistance can indeed destabilize COIN environments. Such assistance can also create inflationary pressure, undermine local markets and producers, and exacerbate local dependency on outside actors. Again, however, although these criticisms are entirely valid, they are not really criticisms of COIN theory as such – similar debates and criticisms attach to the whole construct of Western development assistance generally, whether or not this happens in a COIN environment. And, in fact, the idea that development spending creates stability is actually not a generally accepted concept in classical COIN – theorists like Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf were arguing a similarly sceptical position on this issue in the early 1960s (Wolf 1965; Leites and Wolf 1970).

Other critics, including the historian Edward Luttwak, have mounted passionate attacks on COIN, based on the notion that it is somehow ‘malpractice’ or intellectually dishonest (Luttwak 2007). Luttwak argues that there is, in fact, a universally effective method in countering insurgency, and this is to out-terrorize the insurgent, to so terrify and cow the population through salutary acts of violence that the insurgents can no longer gain support. To support this argument he adduces the Roman Empire and Nazi Germany as examples of successful counterinsurgency using this method. This critique seems to be simply ill-founded in fact: Roman counterinsurgency technique included very significant non-lethal, political, governance and economic development components and applied violence in ways that were in step with contemporary norms in the ancient world, and to apply Nazi approaches on the Eastern Front would be to copy an army that failed dramatically, despite an initially welcoming population, to control the area under its occupation. Luttwak’s argument (advanced early in the Surge period in Iraq in 2007, and arguing that since the United States could never be as violent as the insurgents, the Iraq effort was doomed) turned out to be a radical misreading of the situation, which was beginning to turn significantly in the coalition’s favour even as Luttwak’s article came out, and this criticism of COIN seems to have now been thoroughly discredited by events on the ground.

Ralph Peters, a retired army officer who served as a military intelligence analyst during the Cold War, has mounted a similar personal attack on some advocates of COIN, arguing in essence that COIN is not a ‘manly’ approach to warfare, that its advocates are soft, gentle, or even defeatist or treacherous in their attitude, and that COIN not only cannot work (the effectiveness critique) but that developing COIN capabilities undermines the military’s warlike ethos (appropriateness) in ways that will be extremely dangerous in a future all-out war against an unspecified possible future enemy (policy) (Peters 2006, 2007). Peters has argued that it would have been better to invade Afghanistan, destroy the Taliban in a conventional military campaign, then simply leave – rather than assuming the expense and trouble of post-conflict reconstruction or counterinsurgency. He has argued that it would be cheaper and more effective to simply re-invade if the Taliban or AQ were to re-establish a safe haven, rather than to occupy territory on a permanent basis. This argument makes a great deal of sense, but is perhaps impractical in that it is, in fact, not proven that periodic re-invasion (on the model of colonial punitive expeditions) would in fact be cheaper or more effective than long-term stabilization, and since such a policy would in fact be in breach of international law which imposes certain obligations on an invader to administer conquered territory and protect populations within it. Moreover, given the downside risk that failure to prevent the re-emergence of a safe haven would only be noticed in retrospect following another major international terrorist attack, such a strategy would be quite risky. And, in any case, this was not the strategy adopted – so, like it or not, we are now engaged in a long-term struggle against an insurgency in Afghanistan and must seek an appropriate way out. In this sense, Peters’ critique is as useful as that of the proverbial farmer.
who gives directions that begin ‘well, if I were going there, I wouldn’t start from here…’. And again, whatever the merits of COIN as a theory, current practice in Iraq and Afghanistan does not in fact bear a particularly close resemblance to that theory, and thus such criticisms, while highly relevant to the Afghan campaign, are less relevant as critiques of COIN.

Some policy critics of counterinsurgency sometimes take another view, suggesting that the acquisition of counterinsurgency capabilities by the military will make it more likely that political leaders will commit the US military to a series of far-flung, unsustainable interventions with little chance of success – in other words, that having the capability for COIN will make COIN more likely. Would that this were so – as Dr Janine Davidson has pointed out, in practice, lack of an effective doctrine for COIN and lack of key capabilities has not typically stopped misguided political leaders from committing to such conflicts, Iraq being only the most recent case in point (Davidson 2010).

**Conclusion**

In summary, this chapter has examined the state of the controversial art of counterinsurgency from the standpoint of intellectual history. As this history shows, counterinsurgency in its generic format is one of the oldest and most diverse forms of conflict, having existed at least as long as the state. The specific concepts, techniques and tools used to counter insurrection have varied dramatically over time, usually reflecting the nature of the state or government involved, and in particular its relationship with the population groups residing in its territory. This means that, while there is a very large body of historical data on counter-insurrection, there is little commonality between examples and it is difficult to pinpoint a specific set of core concepts or mainstream techniques.

By contrast, ‘big-C’ Counterinsurgency, the specific set of concepts developed by the US government-sponsored think-tank community, in the late 1950s, does embody a very definite set of ideas about how to counter insurgencies. As we have seen, however, this theory emerged through a process of reasoning by analogy from a very small number of case studies, all of which had very similar features associated with the immediate post-1945 wars of national liberation and the decolonization of European and US empires in Asia and Africa. Thus, to the extent that similar conditions obtain in any particular conflict today, these ideas (which I describe as ‘classical COIN’) may be quite relevant. Unfortunately, as explained earlier, modern conditions in fact vary quite significantly from the standard assumed conditions that underlie classical COIN, and thus these techniques may not be particularly applicable.

I have criticized what I call ‘neo-classical COIN’ for attempting to apply classical COIN without due attention to these differences, but in practice this is something of a hollow criticism, since in current campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, the methods actually being applied (reconciliation, local irregular forces, high-intensity targeting of irreconcilables and so on) bear little resemblance to either classical COIN theory or to its neo-classical revival.

Thus, it is possible to mount a reasoned critique of COIN as theory – based on limited sample size and extrapolation of general principles from too few case studies – or as practice, since it has so rarely been applied in full in the real world that there are few genuine opportunities to validate the theory. Interestingly, however, this critique is rarely heard in the current debate over COIN, which is generally dominated by ill-informed commentary, or institutional interest, rather than open inquiry. For this reason, as I have argued, COIN (in its classical, 1960s sense or in its neo-classical version) is not only *not* the dominant paradigm for contemporary conflict, it arguably should not be: and a debate that focuses too narrowly on the applicability of a set of Cold War concepts from the late 1950s has the potential to be both distracting and destructive.
Notes

2 Transcribed by the author from a plaque at the US Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, during a visit in March 2010.
3 Misidentified in the symposium report (p. xi) as a member of the French Marine Corps, Galula was in fact an officer of the Colonial Infantry, a branch of the French Army whose badge was, somewhat confusingly for some non-French observers, a naval anchor. In point of fact, he had actually retired from the French Army by this time, and was working as a research associate at Harvard University’s Center for International Affairs.
4 General Raoul Salan, last French commander in Indochina and a former Commander-in-Chief in Algeria, was one of four organizers of the Algiers putsch of 1961 and went on to found the reactionary terrorist group, Organization de l’Armee Secrete (OAS).
5 The Algerian campaign is in fact mentioned only eight times in the book.
6 As noted earlier, although Galula was misidentified as a Marine officer he was an Army officer of the colonial infantry.
7 The following section draws partly on an updated version of portions of (Kilcullen 2006–7).
8 For examples of this pattern in resistance warfare see (Asprey 1975; Beckett 1988; Laqueur 1977; Orlov 1963).
9 Discussion with Mahsud informant, Northwest Frontier Province, June 2006. The informant noted that each Mahsud family has contributed one fighter to the anti-government insurgency in order ‘to protect their traditional ways’, while Waziri tribesmen have joined in a less organized but more fanatical manner. These patterns of behaviour are closely consistent with tribal characteristics.
10 For a discussion of these effects in relation to Indonesia, see Kilcullen (2006).
11 See ‘Al Qaeda Takes Media Jihad Online’ at www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=14500.
12 See US Joint Publication 1–02 which defines insurgency within a single-state, single-insurgent paradigm, as ‘an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through use of subversion and armed conflict’.
13 For example, see the transfer of letters between Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (noted below), and other correspondence between AQ leadership in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and insurgents in Iraq and Southeast Asia.
14 Interview with Pakistan government official, North-West Frontier Province, Pakistan, June 2006.
15 For example, in July 2006 Shiite militias in Iraq conducted operations in sympathy with Hizballah fighters engaged in conflict with Israel, while in 2005 AQ in Iraq conducted a hotel bombing in Amman, possibly in an attempt to disrupt support for coalition forces in Jordan.
16 See materials captured in the possession of Jema’ah Islamiyah (JI) operative Dr Azahari in November 2005, and the so-called ‘Camp Hudaibiya manual’ used by JI and ASG insurgents in the Philippines, which drew on AQ source materials produced in South Asia.
17 CIA analyst, unclassified personal communication, July 2006.
18 Personal observation, Taji, January 2006 and discussions with US military intelligence officers, Baghdad and Kuwait, January–February 2006.
19 I am indebted to Dr Gordon McCormick of the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey and to Colonel Derek Harvey for insights into the ‘small world, scale-free’ aspects of insurgent social networks and the enduring influence of the pre-war Iraqi oligarchy on the current Iraqi insurgency.
20 See McCormick et al. (2006) for comments on this discourse.
21 For a good example of this perspective, see Fall (1965).
22 Cordesman (2006) and interview with Multinational Force Iraq intelligence officer, January 2006.
23 Personal observation, Baghdad, Taji and Basra, February 2006.
25 Interview with senior Iraqi government national security official, Green Zone, Baghdad, January 2006.
26 The following account is based primarily on the author’s participant observation as a member of the Iraq Joint Strategic Assessment Team, and then as Senior Counterinsurgency Advisor to Multinational Force Iraq, based in Baghdad, during 2007.
27 See smallwarsjournal.com for an extensive selection of commentary by COL Gentile.
28 For example, Thomas Barfield, Montgomery McFate and Carl Philip Salzmann.
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30 See, for example, extensive commentary by the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office, available online at www.afgnso.org.

Recommended readings


References


Tacitus, Publius Cornelius De Vita et Moribus Iulii Agricolae.