

*Counterinsurgency:
Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War*
Douglas Porch

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This is a ferocious book. The author, Douglas Porch, has written a number of very good books over the years (*The French Secret Services, The Conquest of Morocco, The Conquest of the Sahara* and more), but nothing quite like this. It was conceived, he tells us, 'in the classrooms of the Naval Postgraduate School where I teach company and field grade US and international officers'. Here he encountered officers newly returned from Iraq and Afghanistan who were

'not only unsettled by their experiences in these countries, but also persuaded that the hearts and minds counterinsurgency doctrines they were despatched to apply in 2007 were idealistic, when not naïve, impracticable, unworkable and perhaps institutionally fraudulent. In short, they had been sent on a murderous errand equipped with a counterfeit doctrine'.

What Porch has set his sights on is the US school of counterinsurgency, associated with David Petraeus, that came to prominence in 2007 when the extent of the Iraq fiasco could no longer be concealed. Petraeus and his associates claimed to have developed a formula that, if applied with enough determination, resources, time and political will, could defeat insurgency anywhere. As Porch shows, this supposed formula had more in common with alchemy than chemistry.

Counterinsurgency (or COIN to use the US acronym), according to Porch 'consists of the application of petty war tactics that its advocates since the 1840s have puffed as infallible prescriptions for effortless conquest, nation-building and national grandeur'. He goes on to insist that claims that counterinsurgency has produced success in small wars,

'at least at a reasonable strategic, financial, and moral cost, have relied on a mythologized version of the past too often supported by shoddy research and flawed, selective analysis of cases. History cooked as COIN

folklore can lead to people getting killed because it fails to convey that each insurgency is a contingent event’.

This is absolutely crucial. Even a cursory survey of British post-1945 counterinsurgency campaigns proves the point: success in Malaya and Kenya because of contingent circumstances and failure in Palestine, Cyprus and South Yemen, once again because of contingent circumstances. And yet nevertheless the British Army claimed to have discovered an infallible methodology for the defeat of insurgency that could be implemented anywhere. Even the Americans fell for this, at least until the British performance in Basra and Helmand.

One problem for the COINdinistas, as Porch labels them, is that whereas once armies could inflict frightfulness on civilian populations without any domestic consequences, this became more difficult with the coming of representative government. Even in the 1840s, ‘the litany of cruelty, pitiless violence, and human misery inflicted by Bugeaud on the Muslim population of North Africa’ had to be dressed up for French domestic consumption as something noble. Governments and armies began to systematically lie about the methods they used in crushing insurgency and rebellion. Out of this came the ‘hearts and minds’ approach that the British laid particular claim to in the post-1945 period. As Porch points out, these new humanitarian concerns could sometimes have ironic consequences! At least one of the pretexts for the US war with Spain in 1898 was revulsion at the brutal counterinsurgency methods used by the Spanish General Valeriano Weyler in Cuba. The methods which the Americans went on to use to suppress insurrection in the Philippines were so brutal that they ‘made Weyler seem like a pacifist’.

Porch is especially good on the French influence on modern US counterinsurgency thinking. He discusses the influence of David Galula, a veteran of the Algerian War. Galula, he writes, ‘is acceptable to modern COINdinistas’, but only because ‘he sanitised his account of the Algerian war’, portraying his activities ‘as “armed social work” among grateful Muslims’. This was a travesty. More honest was the account of General Paul Aussaresses ‘with his descriptions of

the torture and disappearance of Muslims by the French army, collective reprisals and summary executions that were integral to French COIN' and were sanctioned at the highest political level. Interestingly, Aussaresses actually taught at Fort Bragg in the early 1960s and went on to advise both the Chilean and Brazilian military in the 1970s.

But what of the British? Surely we were different from the French and the Americans? For many years it was successfully insisted that the watchwords of British counterinsurgency were 'hearts and minds' and 'minimum force'. It was this approach that had produced victory in Malaya and Kenya (although it was best not to dwell on Kenya too much!) and later on in Northern Ireland. A substantial literature celebrated British counterinsurgency prowess with the likes of Robert Thompson, Richard Clutterbuck and Frank Kitson being accorded the status of counterinsurgency gurus. Attempts to challenge this consensus were batted away without too much difficulty.¹ Until that is, the New Labour decision to provide military support for the US adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. Certainly, the British record was most vulnerable in Kenya where it was always clear that terrible atrocities had been carried out by the military and the police. Two particular books, David Anderson's *Histories of the Hanged* (2005) and Caroline Elkins' *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (2005) made it impossible to argue with any credibility that the Kenya campaign showed any real concern for either 'hearts and minds' or 'minimum force'. Both these books should be read by anyone concerned with the history of modern Britain.

A more general reassessment of the British Army's counterinsurgency reputation was prompted by the defeats that were inflicted by insurgent forces in Basra and Helmand. In Basra, the British 'failed in plain sight'. By early 2007 the British force 'had all but surrendered its primary base in the southern city of Basra, and, according to Thomas Ricks, was "hiding in the airport"'. The British 'combined brutality toward the population.....torture of suspects à la Kenya, Aden, and

¹ My own *British Counterinsurgency: From Palestine to Northern Ireland* (2002) is a good example of this.

Belfast with tactical and operational lethargy'. British failure was particularly galling for the Americans 'who had endured for some time British swaggering about their COIN superiority'. While the performance of the Army in these campaigns might have been disastrous, its public relations has been superb, indeed positively triumphant, because most British people have no idea whatsoever of the humiliation inflicted by the insurgents and, indeed, regard the Army as having been 'successful'.

Defeat in Basra and Helmand certainly made it easier to question both the successes achieved and the methods used in earlier campaigns. This critical reassessment of British counterinsurgency has achieved the status of a new consensus² – at least in academic circles – although there are still a few desperate holdouts at Sandhurst.

As for Porch's extremely erudite and immensely valuable book, it has to be said that he is really beating a horse that has already died. The COINdinstria triumph in the US was extremely short-lived and in retrospect can be seen as having more to do with public relations than with any substantial military reorientation. It was intended to disguise the extent of the US failure in Iraq rather than usher in a new era of global counterinsurgency. Although the Obama administration at least initially appeared to endorse a counterinsurgency approach in Afghanistan, this was soon abandoned. Instead what we seem to have emerging as the new US strategy is a determination to disengage itself from direct military involvement regardless of the consequences on the ground. Libya, Syria, Iraq and soon Afghanistan will bear testimony to this strategy. Obama has chosen instead a strategy of supposed precision intervention by special forces and drone assassins together with the use of proxy armies. We British, faithful as always, are, of course, busy reconfiguring our shrinking military to fit in with the new US approach.

John Newsinger

² David French's *The British Way in Counterinsurgency 1945-1967* (2011) is the cornerstone of this critical consensus.

John Newsinger is a semi-retired academic working on a new edition of his book, British Counterinsurgency.