

Douglas Porch. *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War*. Cambridge, New York, etc: Cambridge University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-11-07-699847. Pp. xiii, 434. Hardcover: £57.00/ Paperback: £20.99.

Thanks in part to the collapse of the Iraqi state and military at the hands of ISIL, the claim that the introduction of counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine in 2007 effectively saved the U.S. occupation of Iraq has been significantly diminished. The wholesale endorsement by the Washington political and media establishment of COIN, with a cult of personality having emerged around General Petraus and a cadre of 'COIN-dinistas', resulted in the belief that 'population-based COIN', with its mantra of 'clear, hold, build', contained the answers to unlocking U.S. military power in dealing with politically complex and fractured societies. The invasion and occupation of foreign populations could also be a moral mission: state building and foreign aid achieved through force. Douglas Porch's historical polemic on counterinsurgency aims to tear down such delusions through placing counterinsurgency doctrine in its historical context.

Porch's analysis is particularly useful in addressing the analytical gaps and the role of political dialectic in the construction of COIN doctrine. Porch argues that COIN doctrine can be defined by a belief in the ability of small unit tactics and operations to outweigh strategic dynamics – a direct attack on the Clausewitzian conception of 'war as an extension of politics'. (p. 177) It is this that has led COIN proponents such as John Nagl, the co-author of the U.S. Army field manual on Counterinsurgency,¹ to argue that COIN doctrine, when properly applied, could have made lost wars such as Vietnam 'winnable' again.

The roots of COIN lie in the theories of 'small wars', born in the experience of British and French empire-building during the nineteenth century. 'Imperial policing' was an openly and explicitly coercive enterprise, aimed at subduing the populace through violence in order to

establish control and force them to comply with western political structures and cultural values. The results were deeply socially destructive, fracturing traditions and cultural practice and upending social, ethnic and tribal relationships. Insurgents against imperial rule where de-legitimised by stripping them of their political agency, characterised as 'bandits, thugs, warlords or fanatics'. Such language has also found its way into the *FM 3-24*, where insurgents are 'characterised by violence, immorality, distrust and deceit'.²

Porch goes further to suggest that military theorists have frequently distorted or misunderstood the historical records of previous counterinsurgency campaigns in order to argue for the success of 'hearts and minds' operations. Historian Thomas Mockaitis has argued that the British Army was able to develop a winning formula in post-Second World War counterinsurgency through the development of more sophisticated methods of imperial policing, following the debacles and massacres in India and Ireland in the 1920s. The 'British school' of counterinsurgency combined a model of civilian-led governance with military cooperation, a minimum force approach rooted in common law and military regiments able to form small, decentralised units with distinct traditions. (p. 124)

In contrast, Porch argues that British imperial police were not made in the 'Robert Peel' tradition of the civilian professional, but were instead highly militarised, recruited from colonial elite minorities and veteran 'hardmen'. In the Kenyan Mau Mau uprising against British colonial rule between 1952 and 1960, the settler-dominated Kenya Police Reserve went on 'killing sprees' in order to collect £5 bounties issued for the liquidation of insurgents. (p. 129) The British response to the Arab Revolt in Palestine between 1936 and

¹ U.S. Army, *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Dpt. of the Army, 2006).

² *Ibid.*, §7-11.

1939 was characterised by reprisals against the larger population, including the demolition of entire villages, the taking of hostages, murder and forcing Arab civilians to walk ahead of military convoys on roads in order to 'de-mine' them. (p. 133) In both cases, counterinsurgency was driven by indiscriminate violence. The French have fared little better; Lt. Colonel David Galula, an early theorist of COIN doctrine who emerged as a critic of French war fighting practice in the Algerian War of Independence between 1954 and 1962, tortured suspects picked up at random from the streets whilst disassociating himself from the brutality of the campaign as a whole. (p. 175)

Where Porch does falter in his critique is in the broad sweep of his narrative. Porch ably describes how COIN proponents have routinely failed to allow for wider political conflicts and societal conditions in the countries they work within. However, by attempting to delve into the reasons for the results of conflicts spanning centuries, Porch's narrative falls into a similar trap, pointing to failures of military strategy as explanations for diverse conflicts. Porch's study of the Northern Ireland 'Troubles' aims to demonstrate where the British Army failed to impart organisational learning from quelling the Malayan Emergency of the 1950s against predominately ethnic-Chinese communists. (p. 268) However, given the qualitatively different colonial relationship of Malaya and Ulster with Great Britain, completely indistinguishable socio/cultural terrain and inherent limits on the use of force in part of the UK, it is inevitable that the security campaign in Northern Ireland would never seek to impart the lessons of strategic kampongs and jungle warfare waged against the Malayan Communist Party (MCP).

Insurgencies, as much as any political struggle, are products of the cultural and social environments within which they form. Porch's study is invaluable in its judgement of the simplistic and historically ignorant understandings of political violence that have come to influence COIN doctrine. As a historical analysis in itself, it arguably gives too much weight to the importance of counterinsurgency in influencing the direction of complex political and colonial conflicts.

Nonetheless, it serves as an essential text in the debate surrounding insurgency and the state's response to it.

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