

INSURGENCY,
COUNTER
INSURGENCY,
AND
WHATEVER
COMES
NEXT

KRISTIAN WILLIAMS

Introduction: Insurgency, Counterinsurgency, and Whatever Comes Next

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PART ONE: REPRESSION, COUNTERINSURGENCY, AND THE STATE¹

Oppositional political movements inevitably face—and therefore ought to expect—repression at the hands of the state. But, while quick to condemn the most obvious and violent manifestations of this repression, especially when directed against peaceful groups, the left has been slow to grasp the strategy underlying the state's approach.²

We tend to characterize repression as the state's response to crisis, rather than seeing it also as a means to preserving normalcy. Hence, it has been very difficult to recognize it in quiet times, and when it does appear it seems like an exception, an excess, a panicked overreaction.

But repression does not always come dressed up in riot gear, or breaking into offices in the middle of the night. It also comes in the form of the friendly “neighborhood liaison” officer, the advisory boards to local police departments, and the social scientist hired on as a consultant. Repression is, first and foremost, a matter of *politics*: it is the means the state uses to protect itself from political challenges, the methods it employs to preserve its authority and continue its rule. This process does not solely rely on force, but also mobilizes ideology, material incentives, and, in short, all of the tools and techniques of statecraft. We have to understand repression as involving both coercion and concessions, employing violence and building support. That is the basis of the counterinsurgency approach.

SOME DEFINITIONS

One of my objectives in this introduction is to broaden and deepen our understanding of repression. I am not seeking to *redefine* “repression,” but simply to apply the standard definitions with greater consistency; so

I am employing the term in its usual political sense, referring to the “process by which those in power try to keep themselves in power by consciously attempting to destroy or render harmless organizations and ideologies that threaten their power.”³

“Counterinsurgency”—“COIN” in the military jargon—is not simply synonymous with “repression,” but has a narrow, technical meaning, which of course relies on the definition of “insurgency.” U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, explains:

[An] insurgency [is] an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict....

Stated another way, an insurgency is an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control.

The definition of counterinsurgency logically follows: “Counterinsurgency is military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency.”⁴

ENDS AND MEANS: LEGITIMACY AND STATECRAFT

“Counterinsurgency,” then, refers to both a type of war and a style of warfare. The term describes a kind of military operation outside of conventional army-vs.-army war-fighting, and is sometimes called “low-intensity” or “asymmetrical” combat. But counterinsurgency also describes a particular perspective on *how* such operations ought to be managed. This style of warfare is characterized by an emphasis on intelligence, security and peacekeeping operations, population control, propaganda, and efforts to gain the trust of the people.

This last point is the crucial one. As FM 3-24 declares: “*Legitimacy is the main objective.*”⁵

The primary aim of counterinsurgency is political.⁶ That’s why, in the context of the American occupation of Iraq, we heard career officers arguing that “victory in combat is only a penultimate step in the larger task of ‘winning the peace’.”⁷ And it’s the need for legitimacy that they’re referring to when they say that “Military action is necessary...but it is not sufficient. There needs to be a political aspect.”⁸

The political ends rely in large part on political means. As the RAND Corporation's David Gompert and John Gordon explain:

In COIN, the outcomes are decided mainly in the human dimension, by the contested population, and the capabilities of opposing armed forces are only one factor in determining those outcomes. The people will decide whether the state or the insurgents offer a better future, and to a large extent which of the two will be given the chance.⁹

The RAND report is titled, appropriately, *War by Other Means*. War, as Clausewitz observed, is politics by other means; and politics, as Foucault reasoned, is war by other means.¹⁰ But in counterinsurgency, the means are not so "other." In COIN, war-fighting is characterized by the same elements as state-building—establishing legitimacy, controlling territory, and monopolizing violence.¹¹

Consequently, the "newness" of counterinsurgency is in some respects debatable. Clearly there is nothing new about repression. And the combination of force and legitimacy is a lot of what makes a state a state. But, as one participant in a 1962 RAND symposium on counterinsurgency recalled, at that time there was already a distinctive COIN perspective emerging—and it was a minority view:

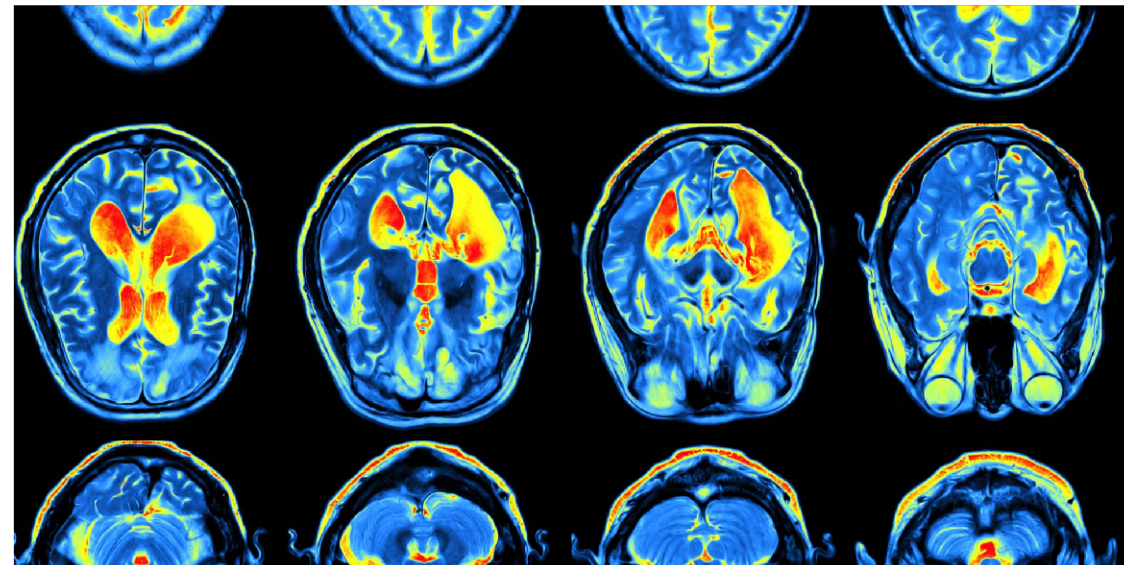
Probably all of us had worked out theories of counterinsurgency procedures at one time or another, which we thought were unique and original. But when we came to air them, all our ideas were essentially the same. We had another thing in common. Although we had no difficulty in making our views understood to each other, we had mostly been unable to get our respective armies to hoist in the message.¹²

Clearly, then, *something* was new.

What sets COIN apart from other theories of repression, I believe, is the self-conscious acknowledgement that the state *needs* legitimacy to stabilize its rule, and that under conditions of insurgency its legitimacy is slipping. In other words, from the perspective of counterinsurgency, resistance is not simply a matter of the population (or portions of it) refusing to cooperate with the state's agenda; resistance comes as a consequence of the state failing to meet the needs of the population.

It is possible, therefore, to see COIN as representing a "liberal"¹³ or even "radical"¹⁴ politics. Yet such apologetics miss the larger point. As a matter of *realpolitik* the authorities have to respond in some manner to

From chapter of the same name in *'Life During Wartime: Resisting Counterinsurgency'* (AK Press)



60 Shulz, "Assessing RNC Police Tactics, Part 2."

61 Ken Lawrence, *The New State Repression*, (Portland, Oregon: Tarantula, 2006) 6.

For an example of the "Communist conspiracy" model in action, see: Ben Jacklet, "'It Should Be Noted,'" *Portland Tribune*, September 17, 2002.

62 David Price observes, concerning FM 3-24: "The *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*'s approach to anthropological theory was not selected because it 'works' or is intellectually cohesive: it was selected because it offers an engineering-friendly, false promise of 'managing' the complexities of culture as if increased sensitivities, greater knowledge, [and] panoptical legibility could be used in a linear fashion to engineer domination. It fits the military's structural view of the world." Price, *Weaponizing Anthropology* 190.

63 Dana Priest and William Arkin offer a stark picture of the bureaucratic woes affecting American intelligence agencies, including: opacity (even to themselves), floods of redundant and useless information, interagency feuds, ignorance of foreign cultures, mission creep, a loss of focus, poor coordination, and a lack of accountability. See: Priest and Arkin, *Top Secret America*, especially Chapter 5, "Supersize.gov," pages 79–103.

64 George Orwell, the former imperial policeman (and then, revolutionary socialist), commented on this fact long ago: "The policeman who arrests the 'red' does not understand the theories the 'red' is preaching; if he did, his own position as bodyguard of the moneyed class might seem less pleasant to him." George Orwell, "The Lion and the Unicorn," in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Volume II: *My Country Right or Left, 1940–1943*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 72.

popular demands; however, COIN allows them to do so in a way that at least preserves, and in the best case amplifies, their overall control. The purpose of counterinsurgency is to prevent any real shift in power.

Counterinsurgency is all about preserving (or reclaiming) the state's authority. Violence and territory are inherent to the project, but it is really legitimacy—"the consent of the governed," "societal support"—that separates the winners from the losers.¹⁵ As Gompert and Gordon put it: "The key in COIN is not to monopolize force but to monopolize *legitimate* force."¹⁶

The strictly military aspects of the counterinsurgency campaign are, of course, necessary; but so are the softer, subtler efforts to bolster public support for the government. Both types of activities have to be understood as elements of political power.

OUTSOURCING COUNTERINSURGENCY

This emphasis on the state may be somewhat misleading, however. Increasingly, the state relies on private entities to do the work of repression.¹⁷ The most controversial aspect of this trend is surely the U.S. government's use of military "contractors"—that is, mercenaries—for security and combat operations.¹⁸ But the government is also, with greater and greater frequency, relying on private companies to collect and store and sometimes analyze vast quantities of data on the individuals in whom it takes an interest—thus handily dodging legal restrictions of government surveillance and any requirements concerning the disclosure of the information it collects.

More subtly, the state has—at least sometimes—advanced its agenda by partnering with nonprofit and non-governmental organizations, even those nominally aligned with its critics. By this process, known as "co-option," the state grants certain types of opponents access, representation, or direct support and, by tacit exchange, gains influence that can help capture, channel, or contain political opposition. The result is that—however imperfectly—the state exercises control not only over the institutions of civil society, but *through* them.

The RAND Corporation's Daniel Byman argues:

The ideal allies for a government implementing control are, in fact, nonviolent members of the community the would-be insurgents seek to mobilize. Strong moderate forces can be interlocutors to the community in general and an alternative for

political action that does not involve violence. If moderates side with the government, they can provide superb intelligence on radical activities.... If regimes can infiltrate—or, better yet, cooperate with—mainstream groups they are often able to gain information on radical activities and turn potential militants away from violence.¹⁹

These privatized efforts are easy to incorporate into the statist understanding of counterinsurgency if we think of the state as a *network* of institutions, rather than as a single unified organization. Authority may extend outward through this network from some nominal center, but power is, to a very large extent, both constituted by and exercised through the network itself; and the constituent parts in turn make demands and help shape the agenda of the whole.²⁰

What's more puzzling, analytically, is the adoption of COIN by private companies pursuing their own autonomous ends. For example: In early 2011, a hacking campaign revealed that a computer security firm, HBGary Federal, along with two other companies, offered to set up a "fusion cell" like those "developed and utilized by Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)" to help the U.S. Chamber of Commerce collect and analyze information on its critics. At the same time, they began tracking the Twitter accounts of union supporters and mapping the relationships between them using specialized software provided by Palantir²¹—a company that produces a similar program, which (they brag) "is broadly deployed in the intelligence, defense, and law enforcement communities...."²²

The use of counterinsurgency techniques to advance a corporate agenda is politically troubling, since it involves private firms using surveillance and repression to create a political climate suitable for their narrow economic interests. In other words, it shows yet another way that corporations use their resources to exercise power to limit political freedom and undercut democracy. Analytically, it also points to larger questions about the current relationship between the state and capitalism, and the tensions between broad developments that have emerged simultaneously over the past 40 years.

COUNTERINSURGENCY AND NEOLIBERALISM

In the U.S., during the period of prosperity following World War II, the main means for achieving control over the workforce was *negotiation*,

44 Martin C. Libicki, et al., *Byting Back: Regaining Information Superiority Against 21st-Century Insurgents*. (Santa Monica: RAND, 2007), 133.

45 Quoted in Price, *Weaponizing Anthropology*, 167.

46 Will Potter, *Green is the New Red: An Insider's Account of a Social Movement Under Siege* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2011), 235.

47 Potter, *Green is the New Red*, 74.

48 United States Department of Justice, "Eleven Defendants Indicted on Domestic Terrorism Charges [press release]," January 20, 2006. http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2006/January/06_crm_030.html, (accessed July 29, 2012).

49 Mike Carter, "Woman Found Guilty of Arson in 2001 University of Washington Fire," *Seattle Times*, March 6, 2008; Mike Carter, "Sentencing Friday for Firebomb Maker in 2001 UW Arson," *Seattle Times*, March 14, 2012.

50 Potter, *Green is the New Red*, 67–8.

51 "Green Scared? Preliminary Lessons of the Green Scare," *Rolling Thunder* 5 (Spring 2008), 30.

52 Potter, *Green is the New Red*, 69–79.

53 Libicki *Byting Back*, 21–23.

54 G.W. Shulz, "Assessing RNC Police Tactics, Part 2 of 2," *Center for Investigative Reporting*, September 2, 2009, <http://centerforinvestigativereporting.org/articles/assessingrncpolicetacticspart2of2>.

55 Heidi Boghosian, *The Policing of Political Speech: Constraints on Mass Dissent in the U.S.* (New York: National Lawyers Guild, 2010).

For more on the RNC 8 case, see: Layne Mullett, Luce Guillén-Givins and Sarah Small "From Repression to Resistance" in this volume.

56 G.W. Shulz, "Assessing RNC Police Tactics, Part 1 of 2," *Center for Investigative Reporting*, September 1, 2009, <http://centerforinvestigativereporting.org/articles/assessingrncpolicetacticspart1of2>; and Shulz, "Assessing RNC Police Tactics, Part 2 of 2"; and G.W. Shulz, "What's the Minnesota Joint Analysis Center?" *MinnPost.com*, September 1, 2009.

Fusion Centers are multi-agency bureaus that compile, analyze, and redistribute information. The ACLU warns that the arrangement can sidestep legal restrictions on data collection and that it monitors the everyday behavior of large numbers of innocent people. Mike German and Jay Stanley, "Fusion Center Update" (New York: American Civil Liberties Union, July 2008); and, Michael German and Jay Stanley, "What's Wrong with Fusion Centers?" (New York: American Civil Liberties Union, December 2007).

57 Boghosian, *The Policing of Political Speech*.

58 Shulz, "Assessing RNC Police Tactics, Part 1."

59 Emily Gornun, "Last RNC 8 Protestors Plead Guilty—But Remain Defiant," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 20, 2010.

33 Joseph D. Cieski, *Policing and Law Enforcement in COIN: Thick Blue Line* (Hulbert Field: The JSOU Press, 2009).

34 Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, Peace-Keeping* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1971), 87.

35 Christopher Paul et al., *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2010), 94.

36 Martin C. Libicki, "Eighty-Nine Insurgencies: Outcomes and Endings," in Gompert and Gordon, *War by Other Means*, 377.

37 Libicki, "Eighty-Nine Insurgencies," 395–96.

38 Libicki, "Eighty-Nine Insurgencies," 394.

39 Gompert and Gordon, *War by Other Means*, 39. It is for this reason that David Price wryly remarks, "once a nation finds itself relying on counterinsurgency for military success in a foreign setting it has already lost." Price, *Weaponizing Anthropology*, 190.

40 Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations*, 67.

41 U.S. Army, FM 3-24, 3-2.

42 To help answer these questions, the Pentagon has invested \$50 million to recruit social scientists to serve as analysts in its "Minerva Program." Hugh Gusterson, "Militarizing Knowledge" in *The Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual: Or, Notes on Demilitarizing American Society*, ed. Network of Concerned Anthropologists Steering Committee (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2009), 51.

The military prefers anthropologists as its in-house advisors, perhaps for historical reasons. But owing to that same deeply problematic history, it has had difficulty finding enough anthropologists to fill its positions.

For a good overview covering the history of militarized anthropology, see Montgomery McFate, "Anthropology and Counterinsurgency: The Strange Story of their Curious Relationship," *Military Review*, March–April 2005. (McFate is a military apologist, and her analysis is almost wholly reactionary. But I believe it is possible to use all of her evidence, and even some of her arguments, to reach exactly the opposite conclusions.)

For an insider's view on the military's training programs for the Human Terrain Teams, with a critical assessment of the program's potential, and an accounting of its failure to draw actual anthropologists, see: Price, *Weaponizing Anthropology*, Chapter 9: "Human Terrain Dissenter: Inside Human Terrain Team Training's Heart of Darkness." In that article, John Allison details the make up of his HTS class: "Though they want to have an anthropologist be the HTT Social Scientist, they are happy to get anyone with what could be remotely considered an 'advanced' degree in a social science. So, although we have five anthropologists, we also have several historians, an economist, an industrial psychologist, etc; and only one for the Iraq group and one (me) for the Afghanistan group has any previous experience in the region of their destination" (Quoted on 160).

43 U.S. Army, FM 3-24, B-47 and B-49.

along with the ameliorating influence of the welfare state. These social benefits were not *gifts* offered by a generous ruling class, but were won through years of struggle and instituted as a means of preserving stability. Since the 1970s, however, these sorts of institutional arrangements have been in sharp decline.²³ Christian Parenti has argued forcefully that the late twentieth-century prison boom and the simultaneous militarization of domestic police forces are the result of shifts in the strategy of capitalism.²⁴

The question this history presents—and to date it remains an open question—concerns the relationship between counterinsurgency and neoliberalism. Both terms are associated with Latin American "dirty wars." But counterinsurgency is largely about expanding government services and offering concessions, while neoliberalism reduces services and imposes austerity. Famously, in Iraq, this contradiction produced a dispute between the Defense Department and the Coalition Provisional Authority, with the backing of the State Department. Paul Brehmer, with his nearly dictatorial powers, advocated privatizing Iraq's state-owned enterprises; Deputy Undersecretary of Defense Paul Brinkley, on the other hand, wanted the occupying authorities to get the state-owned businesses running again in order to provide goods, services, and jobs to the population.²⁵

Is it the role of counterinsurgency to clean up the mess that neoliberalism makes? Or is COIN used to carve out the space in which market conditions can be imposed, to create the requisite stability for neoliberal reforms? And how different are these formulations, either conceptually or practically?

Several hypotheses come to mind: The difference might be ideological, reflecting different assumptions about society, the economy, and the state. Or perhaps neoliberalism is the offensive program, and counterinsurgency the defensive. Or maybe—and this is the account I happen to favor—counterinsurgency prioritizes the state's interest in stability and neoliberalism prioritizes capitalism's interest in maximizing profits, the choice between them being determined by the precise degree to which the state is able to act autonomously.

One rather tantalizing possibility is that the contradiction between neoliberalism and counterinsurgency is less important than the contradictions inherent to each of them. Neoliberalism is premised on a rejection of state intervention, yet it requires a repressive state to overcome popular opposition to its program, especially its austerity measures.²⁶ Counterinsurgency identifies legitimacy as its main objective, but it is often employed as a means to securing ends that are

fundamentally illegitimate—such as maintaining corrupt, exploitative, or oppressive regimes.²⁷

Interestingly, whichever mode is dominant at the moment, the ultimate limit they each face remains the same—popular resistance.

PART TWO: NETWORK ANALYSIS, NOT CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Popular resistance can be understood as the inverse of state legitimacy: as one increases, the other declines.

Because they see insurgency as primarily a crisis of legitimacy, some COIN theorists argue that, conceptually, the “War on Terror” has been a mistake: first, because it identified “terror” as the problem; and second, because it proposed “war” as the solution.

The idea of GWOT [the Global War on Terror] ... has fixed official U.S. attention on terrorists, with insufficient regard for the hostility that exists among vastly larger numbers of Muslims.... The indelible image of jihadists scheming alone in remote mountain caves is less the reality of Islamic insurgency than is far larger numbers of jihadists moving freely among Muslim populations.... [T]error inspired by Islamic extremism is part of a larger pattern of Muslim ‘resistance’ that has significant popular appeal.... [Therefore,] terrorism cannot be defeated unless the insurgencies in which it is embedded are successfully countered.

Thus, the solution requires not just military might but “intelligence, political action, civil assistance, and other nonmilitary means that might curb Islamic militancy more effectively and at less cost and risk” than simple combat.²⁸ The proposed solution, in other words, follows logically from the analysis of the problem. Counterinsurgency, therefore, cannot be understood as a rigid formula to be implemented by rote; it must be sensitive to the details of the particular insurgency it is facing. And as important, counterinsurgency operations have to adapt and develop as the insurgency does.

THE COIN CYCLE

16 Gompert and Gordon, *War by Other Means*, xxxvii.

17 Of the 854,000 Americans with “Top Secret” clearance, 265,000 work for private companies. The number of private contractors working for Homeland Security equals the number of government workers the department employs directly; in its intelligence division, 60% of its workforce are private contractors. Dana Priest and William M. Arkin, *Top Secret America: The Rise of the New American Security State* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2011), 179 and 182.

18 For example: Jeremy Scahill, *Blackwater: The Rise of the World’s Most Powerful Mercenary Army* (New York: Nation Books, 2008). However, Scahill quotes prominent military officers complaining that “Armed contractors do harm COIN” (23). See also, pages 35 and 135.

19 Daniel Byman, *Understanding Proto-Insurgencies* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2007), 24.

20 This analysis may sound very postmodern, but it is in fact the way states were formed historically. See: Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 104 and 117.

21 Nate Anderson, “Spy Games: Inside the Convoluted Plot to Bring Down WikiLeaks,” *Ars Technica*. February 2011, <http://arstechnica.com>, (accessed February 2, 2012). For More on HBGary Federal, see: Evan Tucker, “Who Needs the NSA When We Have Facebook?” in this volume.

22 Palantir, “About Palantir.” <http://www.palantirtech.com/about>, (accessed February 2, 2012).

23 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

24 Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* (London: Verso, 1999).

25 Frank R. Gunter, “Economic Development During Conflict,” *Strategic Insights*, December 2007.

26 Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 21, 69, and 77.

27 David Price observes, “The Manual [FM 3-24] admits that in order for counterinsurgency to succeed, an open acknowledgement of, and corrective action towards fundamental problems must occur ... , but the manual does not say what is to be done if the fundamental causes to be addressed are neo-colonialism, the installation of illegitimate governments, and illegal invasions.” David H. Price, *Weaponizing Anthropology: Social Science in Service of the Militarized State* (Petrolia: Counterpunch, 2011), 185.

28 Gompert and Gordon, *War by Other Means*, 6–8.

29 The report also considers a final possibility—foreign military intervention.

30 Gompert and Gordon, *War by Other Means*, 36–37.

31 United States Army, FM 31-20-3, *Foreign Internal Defense Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Special Forces* (Washington, D.C., September 20, 1994), 3-23.

32 David Galula, *Counter-Insurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965).

The strategy of counterinsurgency has its critics, highlighting its clash with the existing military culture. Military traditionalists see the world, so to speak, through a gun scope—clearly, but narrowly. They want wars, not “nation-building.” And they worry that COIN will make the army soft and its soldiers will forget how to fight. See, for instance: Gian P. Gentile, “Eating Soup With a Spoon,” *Armed Forces Journal*, September 2007; or Edward Luttwak, “Dead End: Counterinsurgency as Military Malpractice,” *Harper’s Magazine*, February 2007.

One thing for certain, though: those who write COIN’s obituaries do so prematurely.

The trajectory of David Petraeus’ career—until it was destroyed by a stupid sex scandal—suggests that COIN is in the ascendancy, and will remain influential for some time to come: Petraeus came to public attention in 2003, when he used counterinsurgency techniques to successfully stabilize Mosul while the rest of Iraq was in upheaval. In 2006, he oversaw the writing of FM 3-24. In 2007, he was appointed head of all combat troops in Iraq. In 2008, he took over Central Command—giving him authority over all U.S. forces from Egypt to Pakistan. In 2010 he took a small step down in the hierarchy to directly manage the war in Afghanistan. And in 2011 he was put in charge of the CIA. John Barry, “Petraeus’s Next Battle,” *Newsweek*, July 25, 2011.

In 2012, however, Petraeus’ career was abruptly derailed by revelations that he had carried on an extra-marital affair with his biographer, Paula Broadwell. The affair was uncovered in the course of an FBI investigation in which, as Glenn Greenwald put it, “based on a handful of rather unremarkable emails sent to a woman fortunate enough to have a friend at the FBI, the FBI traced all of Broadwell’s physical locations, learned of all the accounts she uses, ended up reading all of her emails, investigated the identity of her anonymous lover (who turned out to be Petraeus), and then possibly read his emails as well.” Glenn Greenwald, “FBI’s Abuse of the Surveillance State is the Real Scandal Needing Investigation,” <http://www.guardian.co.uk>, November 13, 2012.

It’s not clear what Petraeus’ downfall will mean for the counterinsurgency approach with which he has become so strongly identified. But even were the military to abandon COIN, it is likely that such a departure will be short-lived. The military swore off COIN after failing in Vietnam, only to pick it up again, in desperation, thanks to Iraq.

13 Hugo Slim, *With or Against? Humanitarian Agencies and Coalition Counter-Insurgency* (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, July 2004), 3.

14 Sarah Sewall, “Introduction to the University of Chicago Press Edition: A Radical Field Manual,” in United States, Department of the Army, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual: U.S. Army Field Manual No. 3-24; Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), xxi.

15 U.S. Army, FM 3-24, 1-113 and 1-115.

According to the RAND Corporation, revolutions (and thus counter-revolutions) go through three stages: a proto-insurgency, a small-scale insurgency, and major insurgency.²⁹ At first, in the “proto-insurgency stage” the movement is

small, narrowly based, vulnerable, and incapable of widespread or large-scale violence. Proto-insurgents may be barely noticeable, not seen as having the potential to inspire insurgency, or dismissed as criminals or inconsequential crack-pots. Therefore, during proto-insurgency, the most important aspect of COIN is to understand the group, its goals, its ability to tap popular grievances, and its potential. In turn, shaping the proto-insurgency’s environment, especially by improving governance in the eyes of the population, may deny it wider support....

In the second stage, as “a small-scale insurgency” the movement begins “attracting followers beyond its original cadre,” and it may “commit more daring and destructive acts against the state, not (yet) with a view toward replacing it, but to demonstrate its capabilities, be taken seriously by the population, and recruit.” For the government, therefore, “shaping political and economic conditions to head off popular support for the insurgency is imperative.” Direct military intervention is *not* recommended at this stage: “As long as the insurgency is still small, action against it can and should remain a police and intelligence responsibility.”

If the movement survives, it may develop into a “major insurgency.” While it is still “essential” that the state collect information about the movement and intervene to shape social conditions, at this point, “forceful action against the insurgents by regular military units may be unavoidable.”³⁰ Both the overt use of force and covert surveillance, infiltration, and disruption will increase. Emergency powers may be granted, civil liberties suspended, and the life of the overall population increasingly restricted.³¹

Of course, the aim of any counterinsurgency campaign is a return to normal—that is, to the lowest level of manageable conflict.³² In effect, this is a return to the proto-insurgency stage: opposition is either channeled into safe, institutional forms, or suppressed through normal police and intelligence activity.³³

The British strategist Frank Kitson summarizes the overall process:

In practical terms the most promising line of approach [in COIN] lies in separating the mass of those engaged in the [revolutionary] campaign from the leadership by the judicious promise of concessions, at the same time imposing a period of calm by the use of government forces....

Having once succeeded in providing a breathing space by these means, it is most important to do three further things quickly. The first is to implement the promised concessions....The second is to discover and neutralize the genuine subversive element. The third is to associate as many prominent members of the population, especially those who have been engaged in nonviolent action, with the government....³⁴

No one pretends that victory comes easily, and many critics within the armed forces point to Vietnam and Algeria as proof that it simply cannot work. COIN advocates, then, have been at pains to show that victory is at least possible, and that counterinsurgency represents the government's best hope. One RAND study, headed by Christopher Paul, analyzed 30 recent counterinsurgency operations and found that the government lost in 22 of the conflicts (73%) and prevailed in eight (27%). Furthermore the researchers found that *in every case* the competence of the counterinsurgency effort was the best predictor of success or failure: A predominance of good COIN practices is correlated with victory, and a predominance of bad COIN practices is correlated with defeat. "[W]ithout exception, COIN forces that succeed in implementing more good practices than bad win, and those that do not lose."³⁵

A separate RAND study, written by Martin Libicki, examined 89 insurgencies spanning the years 1934–2008. It found that in 28 cases the government was victorious, in 25 the government was defeated, 20 had a mixed result, and 16 were ongoing at the time of the study.³⁶ Bracketing the current conflicts, we see that the government won about 37% of the time, lost 34%, and met with mixed results in 27% of the cases. In contrast to those of the Paul report, Libicki's conclusions are more tentative and varied, pointing to factors beyond the competence of the state forces, including: the aims, tactics, and organization of insurgent forces; social factors such as democracy, urbanization, and industrialization; international support for each side; and public opinion.³⁷

Both of these studies, however, only measure the outcomes of insurgencies that have already escalated beyond a certain threshold.

have to correspond with the reality we face, not with an idealized version of some past revolution or some future utopia. And we cannot elevate our own favorite tactics—whether pacifist or insurrectionist—into articles of faith.

The antidote to repression is, simply put, *more resistance*. But this cannot just be a matter of escalating militancy. Crucially, it has to involve broadening the movement's base of support. We have to remember that an insurgency is not just a series of tactical exchanges with the state. It is, instead, a contest for the allegiance of the population. For the rebels, no less than for the authorities, "*Legitimacy is the main objective*."

NOTES

- 1 Parts of this essay appeared previously in Kristian Williams, "The Other Side of the COIN: Counterinsurgency and Community Policing," *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements*, May, 2011, <http://interfacejournal.net>.
- 2 When I speak of "the left," I am speaking broadly of all those forces, from lukewarm liberals to insurrectionary anarchists, seeking to push society in the direction of greater equality.
- 3 Alan Wolfe, *The Seamy Side of Democracy: Repression in America* (Reading, Massachusetts: Longman, 1978), 6.
- 4 United States Army, FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (December 2006), 1-2.
- 5 U.S. Army, FM 3-24, 1-113.
- 6 U.S. Army, FM 3-24, 1-123.
- 7 Justin Gage, et al., "Winning the Peace in Iraq: Confronting America's Informational and Doctrinal Handicaps" (Norfolk, Virginia: Joint Forces Staff College, Joint Combined Warfighting School, September 5, 2003), 1.
- 8 General David Petraeus, quoted in "General Says Iraq Talks Critical," *BBC News*, March 8, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6429519.stm>.
- 9 David C. Gompert and John Gordon IV, et al., *War by Other Means: Building Complete and Balanced Capabilities for Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2008), 76.
- 10 Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 15–6.
- 11 Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 33.
- 12 Frank Kitson, quoted in Stephen T. Hosmer, "Foreword to the New Edition," in *Counterinsurgency: A Symposium, April 16–20, 1962*, by Stephen T. Hosmer and Sibylle O. Crane (Santa Monica: RAND, 2006), iv.

We cannot afford to underestimate our adversaries, but it is just as mistaken to think them omnipotent. There's a debate within military circles as to how often counterinsurgency works, and some argue that it *cannot* work—but nobody suggests that it *always* works. Sometimes governments fall.

The difficulties inherent to counterinsurgency are numerous: it's labor-intensive and resource-intensive, requires vast amounts of localized intelligence, demands both overwhelming force and careful negotiation, and calls for painstaking analysis, strategy, and planning. That's a pretty tall order even for the most competent organizations. And there are also features of our adversaries' institutions and ideologies that add to their troubles.⁶² However good their strategy, in terms of implementation they are constrained by budget difficulties, personnel issues, office politics, inter-agency rivalries, and pure bureaucratic indifference.⁶³ Any organization can suffer from these faults, but authoritarian institutions seem to especially prone to them. Moreover, these agencies tend to foster a particular outlook among their members, which makes it very hard for them to understand the social movements they confront.⁶⁴ Almost as a matter of course, government agents have tended to misunderstand and misinterpret the aims, plans, organizational structures, ideas, and motivations of liberatory movements. Counterinsurgency emphasizes their need to understand these things, but that doesn't mean that they do.

Furthermore, so long as our society remains so starkly unequal, so long as it continues along a suicidal course toward environmental catastrophe, and so long as people lack the control over the conditions of their immediate lives—there will be cause for unrest. Even working together in perfect coordination, the cops, military, and intelligence agencies combined cannot change that fundamental fact, without also changing the entire structure of our society—that is to say, without giving up the one thing, above all others, that they are meant to defend.

INSURGENT THINKING

When facing counterinsurgency, we need to learn to think like insurgents. We have to recognize, and even embrace, political and strategic complexity. Every insurgency is different, and a single insurgency may take very different forms from one year to the next, or one street to the next. There are no set paths or ready formulas, which is not the same thing as saying there are no strategies. But our strategies

Thus they ignore the much larger number of proto-insurgencies that never reach the second or third stage.³⁸ One implication is that, as an insurgency proceeds to the later stages, the chances that it will succeed increase markedly.³⁹

Reflecting on his efforts in Kenya, Cyprus, and Northern Ireland, Kitson observed:

Looking in retrospect at any counter-subversion or counter-insurgency campaign, it is easy to see that the first step should have been to prevent the enemy from gaining an ascendancy over the civil population, and in particular to disrupt his efforts at establishing his political organization. In practice this is difficult to achieve because for a long time the government may be unaware that a significant threat exists, and in any case in a so-called free country it is regarded as the opposite of freedom to restrain the spread of a political idea.⁴⁰

Concerns with liberty aside, that is exactly what Kitson recommended: restrict the spread of ideas, prevent radicals from achieving influence, and disrupt their efforts to establish oppositional organizations.

RAND, too, advocates early, preemptive action short of direct military force. The problem remains that at the first stage subversion is not obvious and the state may not know that a threat exists. Worse, the real threat must be understood as extending beyond the insurgents themselves—the militants, radicals, and subversives—to include the population they appeal to, the grievances they seek to address, and the social conditions that produce those grievances.

THE SOCIAL SCIENCE OF REPRESSION

To meet the challenges of counterinsurgency, the security forces have had to shift their understanding of intelligence. Since the cause of the conflict is not just a subversive conspiracy, but necessarily connects to the broader features of society, the state's agents cannot simply ferret out the active cadre, but need to aim at a broad understanding of the social system. The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Field Manual on Counterinsurgency, FM 3-24, incorporates this perspective, arguing that strategists "require insight into cultures, perceptions, values, beliefs, interests and decision-making processes of individuals and groups."⁴¹

This sort of intelligence work is concerned with questions that are primarily sociological.⁴² And so, a great deal of FM 3-24 is concerned with

explicating basic social-science terms like “group,” “coercive force,” and “social capital.” In fact, the entirety of Appendix B is devoted to explaining “Social Network Analysis and Other Analytic Tools.” It offers this picture of how such analysis is practiced:

[A] social network is not just a description of who is in the insurgent organization; it is a picture of the population, how it is put together and how members interact with one another....

To draw an accurate picture of a network, units need to identify ties among its members. Strong bonds formed over time by family, friendship, or organizational association characterize these ties. Units gather information on these ties by analyzing historical documents and records, interviewing individuals, and studying photos and books.⁴³

The security forces can no longer focus narrowly on the hunt for subversives or terrorists, but must also collect information on the population as a whole. This changes, not only the type of information they’re seeking, but also the *means* they use to collect it. A RAND report on information warfare in counterinsurgency emphasizes:

Even during a security operation, the information needed for counterinsurgency is as much or more about context, population, and perceptions as it is about the hostile force.... [O]nly a small fraction of the information needed would likely be secret information gathered by secret means from secret sources.⁴⁴

HUNTING THE ELF

John Allison, an anthropologist briefly enrolled in the U.S. Army’s “Human Terrain System” program, received a stark education in the military uses of such analyses. Allison resigned in protest amidst war game exercises involving military action in “Lakeland,” an imaginary secessionist state to the northeast of Kansas City. In this training scenario, Human Terrain Teams are sent in to Lakeland in response to unrest—specifically, anti-coal actions by the Sierra Club and more radical groups, including the Earth Liberation Front. The Human Terrain Team students were assigned the following tasks:

1. ‘Find out more details on the criminal activity.’

or counterinsurgency. One of the breakthroughs in the counterinsurgency approach was its shift away from J. Edgar Hoover-style conspiracy theories;⁶¹ our understanding of counterinsurgency, likewise, cannot be rooted in conspiracy thinking. Insurgency and counterinsurgency are not the result of invisible actors and secret plots; they are the predictable result of broad and observable social forces, especially those related to inequality. The secret or conspiratorial aspects are operational decisions made pursuant to a broader strategy, not the strategy itself. One of the remarkable things about COIN is how much it occurs in public view—in fact, how much it relies on the public’s cooperation.

Repression comprises all those methods—routine and extraordinary, coercive and collaborative, covert and spectacular—used to regulate the conflict inherent in a stratified society. Our task is to decipher the politics implicit in these efforts, to discern the ways that they preserve state power, neutralize resistance, and maintain social inequality.

Our further task is to respond. As repression is primarily a political process, any adequate response must take—at least in part—a *political form*. It will not be enough, as is usual, to put the case before a jury, or adopt strict secrecy in the name of some cloak-and-dagger notion of “security culture.” Such things must be done at times, but both these responses, though in very different ways, treat repression chiefly as a legal, and thus technical, problem. They are also entirely defensive. While such devices may protect the individual or small group with greater or lesser efficacy, they do not generally touch—or even attempt to touch—the overall *system* of repression, to say nothing of the social iniquities that system maintains.

Whatever defensive measures may be necessary, an effective response to repression must also involve an *offensive* component—an attack against the apparatus of repression, which will (if successful) leave the state weaker and the social movement stronger. This outcome, of course, should be the aim from the start.

CHALLENGES TO COIN

It is, in a sense, misleading to speak solely in terms of *responding* to repression. Repression exists already. It intervenes preemptively. It forms part of the context in which we act. Oppositional movements cannot avoid repression; the challenge, instead, must be to overcome it.

Network, and most famously, “The RNC Welcoming Committee” (which later produced “the RNC 8” defendants).⁵⁵

Simultaneously, the Minnesota Joint Analysis Center invested more than 1,000 hours coordinating with other “fusion centers” around the country to collect, analyze, and disseminate information on suspected anti-RNC activists. The fusion center drew its information from a staggering array of sources, using law enforcement and Defense Department databases, as well as DMV records, court document, and information provided by private businesses.⁵⁶

In the days before the convention, police used this information to mount raids of activists’ homes and meeting places, seizing banners, political literature, video equipment, and computers.⁵⁷ By the Convention’s close, more than 800 people had been arrested, many rounded up *en masse*.⁵⁸ The majority—584—were released without charges, or had their cases dismissed. Only ten arrests resulted in felony convictions.⁵⁹

But the conviction rate may be beside the point. One commander stated frankly that the police weren’t building prosecutable cases, but were instead acting in “disruption mode.”⁶⁰ The law, in other words, was a secondary concern; politics was primary.

PART THREE: THE COMING COUNTER- COUNTERINSURGENCY

I began this essay by suggesting that a great deal of political repression goes unrecognized, and that the left needs to revise its understanding of repression if it is to resist it effectively. This need has developed alongside—in some respects it is a reflection of—similar changes in the thinking of our adversaries.

With the emergence of the counterinsurgency model, the state has ceased to view subversives in isolation from their surrounding society. Increasingly, it has directed its attention—its intelligence gathering, its coercive force, and its alliance building—toward the population as a whole. Repression, in other words, is not something that happens solely, or even mainly, to activists. And it is not something that occurs only in times of crisis, or in response to a direct threat.

Also, it is not something that necessarily happens in secret. It is worth pausing here to note that, while both sides may use clandestine or illegal methods, there is nothing inherently conspiratorial in either insurgency

2. Find out the best conduits to pass ‘information’ (PsyOps and InfoOps) to the local population....

[3. P]roduce a ‘Research Plan’ to understand the situation at the IATAN power plant—people’s concerns, desires, etc., and identify those who were ‘problem-solvers’ and those who were ‘problem-causers,’ and the rest of the population whom would be the target of the information operations to move their Center of Gravity toward that set of viewpoints and values which was the ‘desired end-state’ of the military’s strategy.⁴⁵

Earth and animal liberationists seem to weigh heavily in the paranoid imaginings of the authorities. A 2009 anti-terror drill at the Cherry Point Air Station in North Carolina centered on a scenario in which environmentalists storm the base, take hostages, and kill Marines. Likewise, a Homeland Security training held on the UC Berkeley campus included an exercise in which animal right activists took hostages and held them at gunpoint.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, in the real world, neither the ELF nor the ALF have ever taken hostages, killed Marines, or formed a breakaway republic. Yet law enforcement agencies have engaged in a decade-long campaign broadly targeting the environmental and animal rights movements. Much of the police action has seemed ham-fisted and ridiculous, as when the FBI sent agents to photograph two people handing out leaflets about vegetarianism.⁴⁷

But the peak of the campaign—thus far—was marked by “Operation Backfire,” a set of coordinated arrests launched in December 2005. The Backfire defendants were accused of a series of Earth Liberation Front and Animal Liberation Front arsons from the late 1990s—activities the FBI characterized as “domestic terrorism.”⁴⁸ Altogether eighteen people were indicted. Two are still at large, fifteen were sent to prison for as long as 13 years, and one—William Rodgers—killed himself soon after his arrest.⁴⁹

The investigation into the ELF started to gain traction in 2001 when a woman in Eugene, Oregon called the police to report her truck stolen. She named her roommate, Jacob Ferguson, as the likely thief, and the police, noticing that the theft coincided with an arson at an SUV dealership, deduced that Ferguson might have started the fire. Both the roommate and the cops were mistaken, but the error proved lucky for law enforcement. Twice Ferguson was called before a grand jury and, in

2004, when the cops finally threatened him with prosecution, he offered them information on more than a dozen Earth Liberation Front and Animal Liberation Front actions, naming the people involved. Ultimately, he would provide details on 22 separate acts of sabotage. Ferguson then spent months traveling the country and wearing a wire to collect evidence for prosecutions. He recorded 88 hours of audio, representing 40 conversations. After each new arrest, the police pressed the suspects for information on others. A few of those arrested fought the charges, or plead guilty without implicating anyone else; most, however, gave evidence against their comrades in exchange for lighter sentencing.⁵⁰

Backfire succeeded largely thanks to a single lucky break, followed by a systematic effort to turn activists into informants. But to be able to take advantage of their good fortunes, the cops needed a substantial amount of more general background information about the community they were investigating. That effort started at least as early as 1999. The anarchist journal *Rolling Thunder* describes the approach:

What we know of the early Backfire investigation points to a strategy of generalized monitoring and infiltration. While investigators used increasingly focused tools and strategies as the investigation gained steam—for example, sending ‘co-operating witnesses’ wearing body wires to talk to specific targets—they started out by sifting through a whole demographic of counter-cultural types.... Police accumulated tremendous amounts of background information even while failing to penetrate the circles in which direct action was organized. The approximately 30,000 pages of discovery in the Oregon cases contain a vast amount of gossip and background information on quite a few from the Eugene community.⁵¹

It’s likely that the documents released in preparation for trial are only one small portion of the information actually collected: circumstantial evidence suggests that at least some of the Backfire defendants were subject to warrantless wiretaps managed by the National Security Agency.⁵²

INTELLIGENCE AND COERCION

The Eugene investigation was in some respects typical.

As one RAND report explains, counterinsurgency requires that the security forces collect both “information on specific individuals” and

“information in which the actions or opinions of thousands, perhaps even millions, of people are highlighted.”

“Why collect such information?” the researchers ask.

The answer they provide is quite revealing. Properly analyzed, the information can be used in five types of activity: (1) police and military operations “such as sweeps, roadblocks, or arrests”; (2) assessments of progress in the counterinsurgency campaign (“How many people have been hurt or killed in the war; what kind of crimes are being committed; who is getting employment and where; and who is staying put or leaving the country?”); (3) “the provision of public services, whether security and safety services (e.g., an efficient 911 system) or social services (e.g., health care, education, and public assistance)”; (4) identifying insurgents (“distinguish those willing to help from those eager to hurt”); and, (5) the coercion of individuals for purposes of winning cooperation and recruiting informants: “information about individuals may be necessary to persuade each one to help the government rather than helping the insurgents.”

This last point shows something of the recursive relationship between intelligence and coercion. In an insurgency, both sides rely on the cooperation of the populace; therefore they compete for it, in part through coercive means. As RAND researcher Martin Libicki writes: “Those uncommitted to either side should weigh the possibility that the act of informing or even interacting with one side may bring down the wrath of the other side.” Whoever is best able to make good on this threat will, Libicki argues, receive the best information: “The balance of coercion dictates the balance of intelligence.”⁵³

“DISRUPTION MODE”

Of course, the better the intelligence, the more effective the use of force can be. And the purpose of identifying the insurgent network is to disrupt it.

Consider the police efforts to frustrate protests against the 2008 Republican National Convention: A year in advance of the demonstrations, police informants began attending protest planning meetings around the country, while local cops and the FBI kept anti-RNC organizers under intense surveillance—following them, photographing them, going through their garbage.⁵⁴ Among the organizations targeted were Code Pink, Students for a Democratic Society, the Campus Anti-War