Whose Hearts and Whose Minds? 
The Curious Case of Global Counter-Insurgency

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ABSTRACT Traditionally regarded as a secondary activity in military thinking and practice, the notion of counter-insurgency (COIN) has undergone a remarkable renaissance. This analysis traces the origins of this renaissance to two distinctive schools: a neo-classical school and a global insurgency school. The global insurgency school critiques neo-classical thought and presents itself as a more sophisticated appreciation of current security problems. An examination of the evolution of these two schools of counter-insurgency reveals how the interplay between them ultimately leaves us with a confused and contradictory understanding of the phenomenon of insurgency and the policies and strategies necessary to combat it.

KEY WORDS: Counter-insurgency, Insurgency, Strategy

‘I’ll shoot the bastard who says this emergency is over’.1
General Sir Gerald Templer

Since 9/11, Western military thinking has witnessed a ‘cultural revolution’.2 The site of this revolution is the theory and practice of ‘counter-insurgency’ – the attempt to confound organised armed challenges to established authority. Prior to the Iraq War and its aftermath military studies treated counter-insurgency (COIN) disdainfully as a secondary activity. Implicitly disparaging labels like ‘unconventional war’ and ‘irregular war’ permeated military and strategic discourse. These terms inferred that insurgencies were abnormal, and of lesser importance, than actions requiring high-tempo force-on-force concentration. This prejudice persisted despite the fact

that insurgencies and ‘low intensity small wars’ have, in terms of their incidence, constituted the norm of war – the convention – since 1945. Thus, the revolution this article examines is the new military thinking about counter-insurgency that radically questions the prevailing military orthodoxy that has favoured the concept of ‘major battle’.

In 2007, Lieutenant General Sir John Kiszley of the British Army summated the reasons traditional military thought evinced an ingrained antipathy towards insurgencies. Kiszley maintained that counter-insurgency comprises ‘features with which the pure warrior ethos is uneasy: complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty; an inherent resistance to short-term solutions; problems that the military alone cannot solve, requiring cooperation with other highly diverse agencies and individuals to achieve a comprehensive approach; the need for interaction with indigenous people whose culture it does not understand; and a requirement to talk to at least some of its opponents, which it can view as treating with the enemy’. He continued:

Such a military sees its task hedged about with unfair constraints; over-tight rules of engagement, negating the use of its trump card – firepower; perceived overemphasis on force protection and its disciplinary consequences; the need to accommodate the media. Moreover, in the eyes of the warrior, counterinsurgency calls for some decidedly un-warrior like qualities, such as emotional intelligence, empathy, subtlety, sophistication, nuance and political adroitness. Armies that find difficulty with these unwelcome features tend to view counterinsurgency as an aberration, look forward to the opportunity of returning to ‘proper soldiering’, and see subsequent training as an opportunity to regain their warfighting skills rather than to learn the lessons of counterinsurgency.

In the United States, the armed forces, scarred by memories of the Vietnam War, demonstrated an even greater reluctance to address these characteristics of insurgency. The failure of military establishments, as well as academics and policy-makers, to evaluate the complexities of the Vietnam experience reinforced the assumption that counter-insurgency constituted a form of warfare from which no good could

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3 For example Holsti’s statistical assessment indicates that 75 per cent of the 164 cases of warfare identified since the end of World War II involved armed conflict within state boundaries, while only 18–20 per cent of cases could accurately be termed inter-state wars. See K.J. Holsti, The State, War and The State of War (Cambridge: CUP 1996), 22–4.

come. ‘After the Vietnam War’, according to General Jack Keane, ‘we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war.’ Yet, as David Ucko argued, the US military’s post-Vietnam ‘aversion to counterinsurgency and stability operations’, in fact, ‘confused the undesirability of these missions with an actual ability to avoid them’. The aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks upon New York and the Pentagon, which dictated a policy of pre-emptive intervention to forestall emergent threats to US security resulting, *inter alia*, in the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, only served to reinforce this confusion.

The United States-led Coalition’s failure to stabilize Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion prompted a radical re-evaluation of traditional military priorities. The breakdown of civil society, the descent into lawlessness, and the tenacity and brutality of organized resistance to both the occupying forces and the fledgling Iraqi government has been extensively documented and analyzed. From the military perspective, Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl observed that the US Army’s difficulty in dealing with the evolving chaos in Iraq stemmed from a failure to identify ‘a common understanding of the problems inherent in any counterinsurgency campaign’. This in turn reflected the Army’s institutional culture and orientation which discouraged the study of such conflicts. Consequently, the military establishment ignored both the lessons of such wars and the ‘ways to achieve success in contemporary counterinsurgency campaigns’. Nagl asserted: ‘It is not unfair to say that in 2003 most Army officers knew more about the US Civil War than they did about counterinsurgency.’

The Department of Defense’s eventual recognition, in 2004, that in Iraq a deep rooted insurgency prevailed constituted the prelude to an

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7David C. Hendrickson and Robert W. Tucker, ‘Revisions in Need of Revising: What Went Wrong in the Iraq War’, *Survival* 47/2 (Summmer 2005), 7–32.


9Nagl, ‘Foreword’, xv.
impressive learning process within the American military establishment. Ucko noted that ‘an uncommon level of humility and lack of chauvinism’ informed this learning process. In the course of 2004–5 the US armed services, and coalition partners like the British, undertook a critical examination of American conduct in Iraq. This process of critical re-evaluation culminated in 2007 in the publication of the joint US Army/Marine Corps manual on counterinsurgency, FM 3-24. The Counterinsurgency Field Manual stands as probably the most comprehensive operational document for COIN operations ever produced. More importantly, the new thinking was reflected in operational practice and along with more general shifts in military policy in Iraq associated with the so-called surge resulted in significant improvements in the security situation.

This extraordinary renaissance of counter-insurgency thinking within US military institutions attracted academic and analytic comment. This military ‘cultural revolution’ in fact produced two distinctive schools of thought about counter-insurgency. Writers like Frank Hoffman termed one of these schools ‘neo-classical counter-insurgency’. Re-discovering and refining a traditional view, this school understood the insurgent problem as one bound by time and place. It locates insurgency within a revolutionary framework of Leninist-Maoist provenance. From this perspective the practice of counter-insurgency demands a profound understanding of the social and political conditions that pertain in a given territorial space, and a strategy that tailors this knowledge to specific military and socio-economic policies.

By contrast, a second school of thought reflects an ambitious attempt to draw connections between the specifics of local insurgencies and broader currents at work in the international system after 9/11. This school views de-territorialised Islamist jihadism as a ‘global insurgency’. It further perceives such insurgency as ‘post-Maoist’, unbounded by space, where the local and global interact to produce a transnationally networked resistance movement. In other words, this second school presents a radically different appreciation of insurgency from those who offer a neo-classical view of the phenomenon. It requires a different perception of the threat and a different, more complex, set of strategic responses.

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11 Ucko, ‘Innovation or Inertia?’, 294.
Taken together, we might describe both schools as neo-counter-insurgency or ‘neo-COIN’ for short. Although the distinction we make between the neo-classical and global counter-insurgency schools of thought may appear somewhat artificial given that they involve elements of overlap, our subsequent analysis will show that it constitutes a useful heuristic device. More precisely, it permits us to reveal that differing perceptions of the nature of the current threat subsumed under the category ‘counter-insurgency’ conceal degrees of analytic and practical incoherence. Consequently, via an examination of the evolution of these two schools of counter-insurgency thinking we shall explore how their complex interplay ultimately leaves us with a confused and contradictory understanding of the phenomenon of insurgency and the policies and strategies necessary to combat it. To demonstrate this incoherence we shall first examine the assumptions informing neo-classical COIN thinking to which we now turn.

Necessity is the Mother of Re-invention – The Neo-Classical School

The rise of neo-COIN thought, in fact, preceded the 2003 invasion of Iraq and its re-invention towards the later 1990s offers an interesting insight into the evolution of current thinking about counter-insurgency. If the immediate cause of a revival of interest was the evident failure of the Coalition’s occupation of Iraq, those reviving this interest drew upon evidence derived from a variety of sources. In particular, a renewed interest in issues related to insurgency in the post-Cold War epoch initially stemmed from the analytic attempt to understand why the Northern Ireland conflict ended in the manner it did. The settlement of this seemingly intractable insurgency inspired numerous scholarly and journalistic studies from the mid-1990s onwards.\(^{14}\)

The American anthropologist Montgomery McFate was one of the more influential commentators to emerge from this background.\(^{15}\) McFate had lived and studied in Northern Ireland’s republican


community in the early 1990s whilst conducting fieldwork for her doctorate. Early on she recognised the importance of acquiring ‘cultural knowledge’ as a means of ‘enhancing military prowess’. In a series of important papers published in the years following the invasion of Iraq, McFate reiterated the need for the nuanced appreciation of the social milieux from which insurgencies arose. In the Iraqi context this meant understanding the nature of Sunni tribal networks. She argued that US ‘military operations and national security have consistently suffered due to lack of knowledge of foreign cultures’, and urged the development of specialist centres in the Department of Defense to ‘produce, collect, and centralize cultural knowledge, which will have utility for policy development and military operations’.

Somewhat differently, a literature deriving from an interest in what might loosely be characterised as ‘asymmetric’ challenges in the post-Cold War, constituted another source for the post-Iraq focus on counter-insurgency. This concern, which developed in the late 1990s, focused upon the nature of conflict as it seemed to evolve in the decade following the Gulf War of 1990/91. Military and strategic thinking after the Gulf War concentrated upon the Revolution in Military Affairs and Fourth Generation Warfare, the technology of precision

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20 There was, of course, always a residual academic interest in matters of insurgency even during the years of the Cold War as represented by the writings of those like Charles Townshend, Ian F.W. Beckett and others located ostensibly around the British Army’s officer training academy and staff college at Camberley, Surrey. See for example, Ian F.W. Beckett and John Pimlott (eds.), Armed Forces and Modern Counterinsurgency (New York: St Martin’s Press 1985); Ian F.W. Beckett, The Roots of Counterinsurgency: Armies and Guerrilla warfare (London: Blanford 1988); Charles Townshend, Britain’s Civil Wars: Counterinsurgency in the Twentieth century (London: Faber 1986). In the United States, the study of insurgency/counter-insurgency also retained a marginal following. On the one hand, a handful of scholars like the historian Thomas Mockaitis showed an interest in the British experience of counter-insurgency, while other analysts produced studies on the subject framed within the context of conducting inquests into the American performance in Vietnam. See for example Thomas Mockaitis, British Counter-Insurgency, 1919–1960 (London: Macmillan 1990); Andrew Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 1986).
guided weapons and integrated all-arms combat. Some analysts, however, criticised this approach. They questioned whether it represented the most likely form of confrontation in which major Western states would be involved. Sceptical commentators felt that those wishing to test the resolve of the major powers would be unlikely, and indeed extremely foolish, to confront Western, or, more precisely, American military and technological superiority through conventional force of arms. Instead, an enemy would attempt to mount assaults below the level of conventional combat operations, avoiding open confrontation with materially superior opponents.

Influenced by the wars of dissolution that befell the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union, along with the increasing number of civil wars and violent non-state actors in failed and failing states, which sometimes compelled Western forces to intervene in humanitarian and peacekeeping/peace enforcement roles, these analysts contended that accepted understandings of military power required radical re-thinking. In particular, they perceived a need for a more flexible military capable of adapting quickly to multiple and diverse roles in ‘out of area’ operations, and this implied, amongst other things, the necessity of contemplating tasks that fell into the category of counter-insurgency.

The key texts on asymmetric warfare, out-of-area operations, and the changing nature of military power were published from 2001/2002 onwards, although almost all of their research data derived from source material of pre-9/11 origin. If Montgomery McFate’s work epitomised the renewed interest in insurgency/counter-insurgency deriving from the latter stages of the Northern Ireland conflict, then John Nagl’s *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (2002) exemplifies this second trend in the literature evolving before the invasion of Iraq. Nagl’s principal concern was how military institutions innovate and adapt, or sometimes fail to adapt, to low intensity challenges. Contrasting the very different organisational cultures of the British and American armies, Nagl observed that the British preference for patient adaptive learning, small-unit forces, decentralised command and willingness to embrace civil-military cooperation could explain the relative success they enjoyed in the Malayan Emergency compared with the American army’s rigid adherence to ‘big unit’

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concepts in Vietnam that invariably emphasised firepower to resolve what were essentially deeply entrenched political problems.\(^{23}\)

From these two distinct lines of inquiry arose a growing admiration for the British approach to COIN, which in historical terms emphasised ideas of proportionality and long term commitment.\(^{24}\) Nagl argued that the British Army’s institutional culture, forged over centuries of colonial war, ‘reflected varied experiences outside conventional conflicts on the European continent’ and explained its capacity to adapt to new challenges. ‘The leadership of the British Army’, he stated, ‘shared a common belief that the essence of the organization included colonial policing and administration.’ Thus, when ‘conventional tactics and strategy failed in Malaya, the British Army had few problems creating an internal consensus that change was needed and that political rather than purely military solutions were well within the purview of the British Army’. Nagl concluded that: ‘An innovative and varied past created a culture amenable to the changes in organizational process required to defeat a complex opponent in a new kind of war.’\(^{25}\) Only for the British, of course, it was not an especially new kind of war.

By contrast, McFate’s emphasis was slightly different. For her, respect for British methods derived primarily from the British Army’s ability to acquire deep cultural knowledge of its adversary. In her attempt to persuade the American armed forces to take anthropological approaches seriously, McFate related ‘an epiphany’ that she experienced while living in Belfast. ‘The common view of the Troubles as a battle between Catholics and Protestants, or Loyalists and Republicans, or even terrorists and the government was not how the warring sides saw it.’\(^{26}\) Irish republicans legitimised their campaign of violence out of a belief that they were part of a resistance movement against 800 years of British military occupation. Yet, rather than deny this perspective, the British Army understood the Irish republican myth that inspired IRA actions. ‘They may think that these people are terrorists and despise them, but they understand what’s motivating it’, McFate reflected. ‘They could not have built an effective strategy in Northern Ireland as they did without having a very full understanding of their enemy, which by the way, it took them 30 years to get.’\(^{27}\)


\(^{25}\)Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup*, 216.

\(^{26}\)Stannard, ‘Montgomery McFate’s Mission’.

\(^{27}\)Quoted in ibid.
Overall, then, this school of neo-COIN developed in the United States. It had its origins before 9/11, and had already established an interest in the practice of counter-insurgency. Those associated with this school of thought came to prominence in the aftermath of the Iraq War. Indeed, they were at the forefront of the deliberations on how to improve Coalition strategy in the face of what was, by 2005, increasingly seen as an intractable insurgency. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that John Nagl, a serving officer in the armoured divisions of the US Army and with firsthand experience both of the original invasion of Iraq during Operation ‘Desert Storm’ and later with occupation forces in Khalidiyah province, came to play a leading part in shaping the debate over US counter-insurgency doctrine, eventuially writing one of the forewords to FM 3-24. Analogously, Montgomery McFate was undoubtedly influential in promoting the view that ‘cultural and social knowledge of the adversary’ should be on the American counter-insurgency agenda. As she argued: ‘in a counterinsurgency situation such as the United States currently faces in Iraq, “winning” through overwhelming force is often inapplicable as a concept… Winning on the battlefield is irrelevant against an insurgent adversary because the struggle for power and legitimacy among competing factions has no purely military solution.’

For some commentators the fact McFate and others had to re-state the established maxims of counter-insurgency represented an indictment of the inertia in Western armed forces. The Western armies’ neglect of insurgent warfare meant that even the British Army, with its ‘repeated engagement in counterinsurgency, has historically found it difficult to internalize the lessons drawn from these campaigns necessitating quick adaptation on the ground [rather than being able to draw upon a strong institutional memory and systematic operational doctrine] with each new engagement’. The problem was even more acute for the US military steeped in an institutional culture that predisposed it towards thinking almost exclusively in conventional terms. Such institutional insouciance demanded the re-statement and constant reiteration of the basic principles of counter-insurgency.

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31 Ibid., 27.
33 Ucko, ‘Innovation or Inertia’, 308.
In the context of the failure of the Coalition’s policies in Iraq, necessity was the mother of re-invention. The analysts who developed this school of thought exercised a profound influence, in effect, re-inventing COIN studies as a core rather than a peripheral focus of military strategy. Given its provenance, this school may be considered ‘neo-classical’. It promoted and re-invigorated traditional counter-insurgency principles. The influence and authority of this neo-classical school was first evident in military and scholarly research that re-discovered the major counter-insurgency campaigns of the later twentieth century. Much of the research in this area highlighted the largely successful British campaigns in Malaya (1948–60) and Northern Ireland (1969–98), and the failed but no less instructive French efforts in Algeria (1954–62). American military commentators in particular drew inspiration from the overarching strategies adopted by the British in their campaigns, while admiring aspects of French doctrine and operational technique. The re-publication of classic texts from the 1960s, ranging from Lieutenant Colonel David Galula’s reflections on the Algerian War in *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, originally published in 1964, to Colonel John McCuen’s seminal 1966 publication, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary Warfare*, indicated this growing interest in colonial-era insurgencies.

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Significantly, those with pre-existing interests in such matters sometimes considered this resurgence in classic counter-insurgency doctrine derivative and even trite. As Colin Gray captiously observed: ‘In the history of strategic ideas, the contemporary American fascination with asymmetry comprises the rediscovery of the stunningly obvious.’ Nevertheless, the re-statement of the obvious constituted a necessary stage in raising awareness within the US armed forces from what was a very low base of knowledge. More importantly, from this intellectual renaissance, a series of thoughtful monographs about how to develop US counter-insurgency practice emerged that established the terms for a critical analysis aimed at ‘[b]reaking the conventional paradigm’. ‘For decades’, Sarah Sewall contended, ‘the US Army in particular had discounted the need to prepare for counterinsurgency – a messy, hydra headed conflict that can, by its very nature, only be won incrementally.’ ‘American culture and US military doctrine’, she averred, ‘prefer a technological solution and the overwhelmingly decisive blow. Americans have a penchant for black-and-white clarity and have historically shown little patience for complexity and extended commitment’.

Progressive military commanders, by contrast, like Generals David Petraeus and Peter Chiarelli who had experienced the ‘messy’ realities on the ground in Iraq ‘recognized a responsibility to prepare troops to meet the wars that call them, not the wars they might prefer to fight’. However, the preparation of American troops to confront insurgent conflicts was only part of the problem. The unprecedented willingness of the US armed forces to open itself to censure provided space for both soldiers and scholars to reflect upon the conduct of US military operations in Iraq and what needed to be done to prevail in the long run. Writing in the US Army journal *Military Review* in 2005, Professor John Lynn of the University of Illinois, offered this trenchant critique:

> The most short-sighted statements I hear are: ‘They only understand force’. Or, ‘If only we could take the gloves off, we could

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39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 104.
The truth is that everyone understands force, and everyone can be battered or intimidated by violence, but such use of violence generates the three ‘Rs’: resentment, resistance, and revenge. People who argue that the enemy only understands force imply that force wins respect. In reality, force usually only instills fear. We are not trying to recreate Saddam’s regime of fear, so we must use more than force.41

‘The wisest analysis of the counterinsurgency’, Lynn continued, ‘came from an unidentified colonel on CNN who states that we cannot really win the hearts and minds of the Iraqis but we can provide security and establish trust. In security lies the support of the majority and the environment in which a new and better state may emerge.’42 As Lynn suggests, providing a critical framework that questioned conventional wisdom was one thing, but it was the experiences of military commanders on the ground in Iraq, when combined with the new reflective mood, that decisively re-orientated military thinking. Officers returning from tours of duty in Iraq offered practical insight into dealing with insurgent forces and the local communities that afforded them succour.43 Lieutenant Colonel Chris Gibson, for example, writing of his experience in Ninevah province maintained that COIN forces needed to ‘be able to convince the people that they can provide security’. ‘Without that’, he contended, ‘locals will not associate themselves with – or even be seen in the presence of – security forces . . . Once security is established, however, locals can see that COIN forces offer a better vision for the future than insurgent forces do.’44

Building on these re-affirmations of the standard tenets of counterinsurgency, other serving officers offered practical evidence to support McFate’s call for cultural knowledge, and the need to attain practical awareness of the particularities of their local surroundings. In this context the experience of Captain Travis Patriquin (who was later killed in action in Tikrit in December 2006) was particularly notable. Patriquin developed a practical understanding of how to work among,

42Ibid.
and obtain the cooperation of, the traditionally pro-Ba’athist Turkomen population of Tal Afar.\textsuperscript{45}

Although the neo-classical school of thought began by re-claiming the insights of previous COIN campaigns, the experience of the Iraq insurgency also meant that this renewed interest quickly led to the re-orientation of much mainstream military thought in the United States.\textsuperscript{46} The publication of the \textit{Counterinsurgency Field Manual} apotheosised this influence.\textsuperscript{47} More intriguingly, the renaissance in COIN thinking soon moved from general re-statements of principle to the promulgation of novel theoretical and practical insights that raised the standard of counter-insurgency analysis. Reflecting on the experience of stabilisation efforts in Iraq, and applying this to the traditional principles of counter-insurgency, both soldier and civilian analysts developed technical, doctrinal and operational understandings in such areas as: equipping COIN forces; understanding tribal networks; sanctuary denial; negotiation strategies and population control.\textsuperscript{48} The experience also facilitated the examination of


\textsuperscript{46}This is not to say that the efforts to make the US Army embrace COIN thinking do not continue to meet resistance. For the contending positions see the debate between John Nagl and Gian Gentile: John Nagl, ‘Let’s Win the Wars We’re In’, \textit{Joint Forces Quarterly}, 52/1st Quarter (2009), 20–6; Gian Gentile, ‘Let’s Build an Army to Win All Wars’, \textit{Joint Forces Quarterly}, 52/1st Quarter (2009), 27–33.


what constitutes the centre of gravity in counter-insurgency operations and its implications for existing conventional forces. Indeed, this remarkable efflorescence in neo-classical thinking has out-grown its origins and surpassed previous COIN writings in operational appreciation and sophistication.

Yet, this neo-classical revival represents only one side of the neo-COIN coin. Alongside the neo-classical school, an alternative approach to neo-COIN thinking arose which emphasised the global characteristics of contemporary resistance movements. This school eventually developed a theory best characterised as global counter-insurgency that prioritised a different set of strategies to those advocated by the neo-classical school. It is the evolution of this school that we shall now examine.

Disaggregating and De-globalising: The Rise of Global Counter-Insurgency

The global COIN school emerged in the wake of the neo-classical revival, which, as we have seen, developed in the context of the Northern Ireland endgame and the post-Cold War wars of dissolution before 9/11. By contrast, the events of 9/11 shaped the global counter-insurgency thesis. Moreover, although some early writings associated with this school surfaced in the immediate aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001, it increasingly identified itself after 2005 in response to the rise of neo-classicist thinking.

Following the attacks on the United States in 2001, John Mackinlay first proposed the view that the unprecedented scope of Osama bin Laden’s ‘organisation and operational approach’ supposed a movement that had travelled ‘significantly beyond the established template of insurgency’. Bin Laden’s global constituency, spreading over 40 states ranging from ‘Oslo to Jakarta’, meant that his appeal ‘could not be regarded as a national or even a regional phenomenon’. Potential


recruits resided in the ‘immigrant and dispossessed family, the internally displaced, the second generation migrants, refugees, and rural communities which have fled from war and famine to add to unhappy and overcrowded metropolitan areas’. Furthermore, Mackinlay observed that:

his financial, logistical and organisational assets do not come from the same source as his popular support, as they would in a national insurgent organisation. His hold over his followers is emotional, no one has seen him but he has the exposure of an international star, which is beamed intensively by a complicit media, using the proliferating communicating system of the McWorld.50

Identifying the complex web of transnational interactions that sustained Al-Qa’eda, Mackinlay, a former British Army officer turned academic, considered that bin Laden represented a new type, namely, a ‘global insurgent’.51 In an important study, published in 2002, Mackinlay developed this analysis, maintaining that bin Laden’s network ‘expanded the definition of insurgency to include a global dimension’.52 Mackinlay’s ideas elaborated upon the ‘New War’ thesis, which identified the simultaneous, but contradictory, homogenising and centrifugal forces in the post-Cold War system that were internationalising contemporary armed conflict, like the wars in the Balkans, to a hitherto exceptionally high degree. He contended that ‘the al Qaeda style of organization must be regarded as a crucially-important consequence of the global age and possibly even the leading edge of a new chapter of insurgent techniques’.53 Although Mackinlay did not stress the point overtly, his theory built upon the theorists of ‘New Terrorism’ that in the years preceding 9/11 had catalogued the transnational networks that facilitated the threat that Islamist and ethno-religious extremist groups increasingly posed.54

51Ibid.
54See Benjamin Barber, Jihad versus McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World Order (New York: Ballantine 1996); Olivier Roy, Bruce Hoffman, Reuven Paz, Steven Simon and Daniel Benjamin, ‘America and the New
Mackinlay situated Al-Qa’eda within the context of a new style of insurgency that inhabited a ‘distinct category’, separated ‘from popular forces by the international scope of their intent, their objectives, recruiting base and organisation’. Moreover, he noted that the ‘global insurgent’ faces formidable opposition forces, and asserted with some prescience that ‘in its efforts to survive, becomes a dangerous and highly-organised manifestation of insurgency, with a demonstrated capability to attack the heart of powerful countries and survive intensive counter-measures’.55

If Mackinlay described the lineaments of global insurgency, it was David Kilcullen, an Australian soldier-scholar, who diagnosed a possible antidote in the form of a global counter-insurgency. In Kilcullen’s view, the ‘War on Terrorism’ obscured the nature of the insurgency, implying that transnational jihadism was monolithic and cosmically unified because its protagonists adhered to the same religion.56 By contrast, Kilcullen maintained that although Islamist movements cooperated with each other, function regionally, and share similar tactical, strategic and operational approaches that align with Al-Qa’eda pronouncements, there was ‘no clear evidence that Al-Qa’eda directly controls jihad in each theater’.57 More precisely, these theatres are frequently characterised by ‘local actors, issues and grievances’ that have ‘little to do with pan-Islamic objectives, and often pre-date the global jihad by decades or centuries’. 58 Kilcullen’s doctoral research into the Indonesian Army’s counter-insurgency effort against the Darul Islam movement in 1950s Sumatra and West Java facilitated his interpretation of Al-Qa’eda. It was his contention that Darul Islam was less a bona fide Muslim movement than a semi-criminal enterprise dominated by the charismatic personality of its leader Sekarmaji Marijan Kartusuwiryo.59 To counteract Darul Islam, Kilcullen argued that the Indonesian Army developed pacification tactics to suit local conditions. In particular, the

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55 Mackinlay, Globalization and Insurgency, 79.
57 Ibid., 598.
58 Ibid., 601.
effective use of local militias, together with population control methods contained and eventually defeated the guerrillas.

The Indonesian Army’s draconian approach to Darul Islam in the 1950s escaped critical media scrutiny. In the era of globalization, by contrast, where transnational connectivity ensured that ‘ideas, capital, goods, services and information and people can be transferred in near-real time across national borders’, there would be no lack of intrusive media. Indeed, globalisation built both an interdependent economy ‘along with an emerging global culture and an embryonic international opinion’. Like Mackinlay, Kilcullen believed that: ‘Insurgents have not been slow to realise the opportunities that such globalised communications – including the new “manoeuvre space” of the Internet and satellite television – provide as a means to impose political and economic costs on governments undertaking counterinsurgency.’ Such technological advances enabled a ‘new class of regional or theatre-level actors’ to emerge. ‘These groups’, he asserted ‘do have links to the global jihad’ often functioning as ‘regional allies or affiliates of Al-Qae’da’ but, more importantly, they exploited localised quarrels to advance its goals. Thus, Kilcullen claimed that Jemmah Islamiyah, which functions as an Al-Qae’da franchise in Southeast Asia, exploited sectarian conflict in Sulawesi to ‘generate recruits, anti-Western propaganda, funding and grievances’ to further the global jihad. Consequently, Al-Qae’da’s modus operandi was ‘not to have direct dealings with local insurgent groups, but to deal primarily with its regional affiliates in each theater’, making ‘the regional-level players in the jihad the critical link’.

The principal task of global COIN, Kilcullen therefore emphasised, must concentrate on breaking the link between the local and the global. ‘[I]f the global jihad is best understood as a globalized insurgency’, he explained, ‘this suggests an alternative – indeed a diametrically opposed strategy for the War on Terrorism, namely, “disaggregation”’. Al-Qa’eda’s claim to aggregate ‘dozens of local movements, grievances and issues’ into a single universal struggle constituted its seminal strategic achievement. Similarly totalising notions like the War on Terror merely played into the hands of those who ‘prey upon, link and

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60 Kilcullen claims in fact that Indonesian COIN methods were less harsh than other similar campaigns of the period such as those in Malaya, Palestine, Cyprus, Vietnam and Algeria. Without some clear statistical or documentary evidence it is difficult to compare and validate this contention. See ibid., 60.

61 Ibid., 59.


63 Ibid., 602.

64 Ibid., 608.
exploit local actors’. Yet, without the ‘ability to aggregate dozens of
conflicts into a broad movement, the global jihad ceases to exist. It
becomes simply a series of disparate local conflicts that can be
addressed at the regional or national level without interference from
global enemies such as Al-Qa’eda’. The disaggregation strategy thus
holds that the foremost challenge for the counter-insurgent should be to
attack the ‘intricate web of dependency’ at the local level, by employing
‘theatre-specific’ measures that ‘de-globalised’ the Al-Qa’eda brand by
emasculating its universal appeal.

The influence of global COIN thinking began to permeate US
military and analytic opinion from the late 2000s. It was increasingly
acknowledged that jihadist ‘strategies and tactics collectively amount to
a series of insurgencies, competing for the right to govern in
predominantly Muslim nations around the world’ and required a
campaign ‘against an ideologically driven collection of insurgents
who act transnationally … are highly networked, and like a cancer, are
adapting and metastasizing’. It demanded a comprehensive global
counter-insurgency effort that would combine all the elements
of national power – ‘diplomatic, military, economic, social, and
informational’ – to counteract and de-legitimise the jihadist
message.

Not Somewhere Else but Everywhere: The Global COIN Critique

Despite gaining adherents, global counter-insurgency theory remained
something of a minority avocation. At the same time, the proponents of
neo-classicism and global COIN shared a common desire to rehabilitate
counter-insurgency thinking and advance its status within defence
circles. David Kilcullen, for example, represents a crossover analyst
who accepts features of neo-classical writing, particularly those
represented in the US Army/Marines’ Counterinsurgency Field Manual.
Kilcullen empathised with the neo-classical commitment to
deep, anthropological understanding of local conflicts, while his

65Ibid., 609.
66John Hillen, ‘Developing a National Counterinsurgency for the War on Terror’,
(March–April 2006), 35–41.
69See for example Daniel Byman, ‘US Counter-Terrorism Options: A Taxonomy’,
70In fact, David Kilcullen and Montgomery McFate shared a writing platform in
Anthropology Today, defending themselves and the role of anthropologists in
professional soldiering background enabled him to write "Twenty-Eight Articles": Fundamentals of Company-Level Counterinsurgency', a treatise much admired by neo-classicists for its distillation of practical counter-insurgency methods for armed service personnel.71

Ultimately, however, the global COIN thesis questioned key pillars of neo-classical thinking. Mackinlay, for example, maintained that classical counter-insurgency theory failed to address the ‘linkage between the Qaeda [sic] network’s tactics in the field’ and its ‘long-term aspiration’ of a restored Caliphate. For Western audiences, this political objective might appear unrealistic, but viewed from Al-Qa’eda’s perspective and the constituency to which it appeals, the ‘acute sense of the symbolic’ embodied in its actions overrides any ‘apparent strategic weakness’. In this respect, he added:

Al-Qa’eda’s preference for huge statements, for bold acts of extreme violence in place of a long-term incremental strategy, appeals to the expectations of a society which is also conditioned by the same global imagery as the west. Whether negatively or positively, the 11 September attacks gripped our attention and changed our lives in a way that justifies his [Osama bin Laden’s] military concept from an insurgent’s point of view.72

Several years later, Kilcullen expressed similar misgivings about the neo-classical school’s rise to prominence. He thought the ‘rediscovery of classical, “proven” counter-insurgency methods’, was ‘misplaced’. ‘Today’s insurgencies’, he declared, ‘differ significantly at the level of policy, strategy, operation art and tactical technique – from those of earlier eras.’73 In fact, the classical paradigm and the ‘prescriptive application of “received wisdom” derived from the classics . . . cast a long shadow’. Yet, in the era of globalization, the “classic” version of counter-insurgency is less relevant for current conflicts’.74


72Mackinlay, ‘Tackling bin Laden’.
74Ibid., 112.
It was left to former US Marines officer, Frank Hoffman, to deliver the most telling indictment of the neo-classical approach. Despite his membership of the team that wrote *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency*, he had become increasingly critical of neo-classicism’s influence over the manual. Echoing Kilcullen, he contended that the neo-classical position focused ‘myopically, on the glorious heyday of revolutionary warfare in the 1950s and 1960s’. It failed, however, to address the complexity of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that were part of the broader global insurgency. More precisely, as another critic, David Betz, contended, ‘Maoist-style People’s Revolutionary Warfare, which is not the sort of insurgency now being faced’ over determined the writing of *FM 3-24*. The Maoist understanding held that insurgency occurred within a defined territorial space. For Hoffman, ‘the classicists ignore the uniqueness of Maoist or colonial wars of national liberation, and over-generalize the principles that have been drawn from them. Today’s insurgent is not the Maoist of yesterday.’

Maoist theories of revolutionary war did indeed influence much neo-classical writing. In this context, McFate predictably perhaps cited Mao’s aphorism: ‘The people are water, the Red Army are fish; without water, the fish will die’, to sustain a modern parallel. In an analogous vein, *FM 3-24* defers to past insurgency/counter-insurgency thinkers and practitioners. It respectfully acknowledges Mao’s thinking about protracted people’s war and the manual is predicated upon the assumption that counter-insurgency is about the domination of a given geographic setting.

Ultimately, though, excessive deference to Maoist theories of guerrilla warfare led neo-classicism into a strategic, Iraq-centric, cul-de-sac. Consequently, Hoffman argued classical precepts constitute either ‘blatant flashes of the obvious’, or are simplistically one-dimensional. Unintentionally confirming Hoffman’s thesis, one neo-classical monograph published in 2007 criticised the utility of the much vaunted British COIN operation in Malaya, on the grounds that the ‘promise to withdraw once the situation was stabilized’ must be assessed negatively because ‘the British had to surrender their role as occupier to defeat the insurgents’. Such a view not only repeats an
understanding first articulated by those like the radical journalist Robert Taber in *War of the Flea* (1970), it assumes that any concession, no matter how minimal, must be regarded as a victory for the insurgents. Yet, a sophisticated counter-insurgency effort maximises self-interest, and manages change to one’s own advantage. Such reductionism, ultimately leads to a crude Maoist/counter-Maoist paradigm that assumes holding onto physical territory, no matter the cost, is the ultimate goal of any combatant. This neo-classical reductionism not only implies that any withdrawal of forces from an occupied territory represents a defeat, it also risks inducing the kind of certainties that influenced the French approach to COIN during the Algerian War with manifestly disastrous consequences. Evidently, it is not an approach that should recommend itself to Coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is apparent, therefore, that the bulk of recent neo-classical writing on counter-insurgency derives from an attempt both to understand and rectify the failures arising from the Iraq occupation and to that extent, often exhibits minimal awareness of the wider implications of threats in the international system. The renaissance of neo-classical counter-insurgency thinking has clearly been of utility to the US armed forces, facilitating an appreciation of small unit operations to stem the threat posed by a concerted rebellion. However, in an age of transnational threats that emanate, most notably, from de-territorialised jihadist groups, the wider applicability of neo-classicist maxims beyond the theatres of Iraq and Afghanistan remains questionable. Global COIN theorists are therefore right to criticise the underlying premises of neo-classical thought which assumes that insurgencies happen somewhere

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82 As Cassidy, in contrast to Metz’s assessment, notes with respect to British COIN operations from ‘the predominantly rural jungle of conditions Malaya, Kenya, Borneo, Guyana, and Dhofar to the desert conditions of Palestine: Muscat; and Oman; Radfan; and Kuwait’ that the ‘British Army helped bring about favorable political outcomes for Britain. In almost every case of devolution, newly independent states allowed the British Army to retain facilities in their countries.’ Surely, this is the proper criterion for gauging COIN success. Lt. Col. Robert M. Cassidy, ‘The British Army and Counterinsurgency: The Salience of Military Culture’, *Military Review* (May–June 2005), 56.

83 French COIN thinking manifested itself in an unyielding contest that perceived the Algerian nationalist campaign waged by the *Front de Libération Nationale* as a war against Western civilisation, resulting in immense brutality and loss of life on all sides, and which during certain parts of the campaign saw the creation of a clandestine bureaucracy that institutionalised policies of torture and atrocity. Many assessments have been written on the war, but for one of the most comprehensive treatments see Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954–1962* (London: Macmillan 1977).
else. This, in turn, facilitates the view that insurgencies constitute external threats that reside beyond the realm of the modern liberal democratic state – over there but not here. As the global COIN critics maintain, this in itself reflects neo-classicism’s over-dependence on the ‘classic’ view that derived from the twentieth century experience of colonial struggles where imperial powers sought to quell violent opposition to their rule. Yet, as the contemporary experience demonstrates, confining counter-insurgency thinking to the external dimension is untenable when threats, plots, and physical attacks manifest themselves from the Middle East, to South and Southeast Asia, to the modern cityscapes of Europe, North America, and Australia. The theorists of global COIN are surely correct to see the modern-day insurgent phenomenon as an existential reality that has the capacity to be, not somewhere else, but everywhere.

The Limitations of Global Counter-Insurgency

Despite its accurate characterisation of the contemporary transnational insurgency, global COIN thinking, on closer examination, is itself not without limitations. What, we might ask, does global counter-insurgency really mean? Its theorists appear reluctant to define it with any degree of precision. Global counter-insurgency appears long on assertion but short on specificity. Thus, Kilcullen holds that a global disaggregation campaign would seek to:

interdict the Al-Qa’eda core leadership’s ability to influence regional and local players – by cutting off their communications, discrediting their ideological authority, and global operations to keep them off balance. At the regional level, disaggregation would isolate theater-level actors from global sponsors, local populations and local insurgent groups they might seek to exploit in support of the jihad.84

The global counter-insurgency agenda, inter alia, includes: ‘Attacking the “intricate web of dependency”’, which ‘allow [sic] the jihad to function effectively’; ‘Interdicting links between theatres of operation within the global insurgency; Denying the ability of regional and global actors to link and exploit local actors’; ‘Interdicting flows of information, personnel, finance and technology (including WMD technology) between and within jihad theaters’, as well as ‘Denying sanctuary areas (including failed and failing states, and states that

84Kilcullen, ‘Countering Global Insurgency’, 609.
support terrorism) within theaters. The suspicion arises that the global COIN approach comprises little more than a transnational wish list. Indeed, how does this approach differ in strategic insight from Hoffman’s characterisation of neo-classical insurgency as ‘flashes of the obvious’?

The Negation of Ideological Motivation

On the surface, it seems that global COIN offers an improvement over vague terms like the ‘War on Terrorism’, given that its analysts clearly recognise the threat posed by global jihad, and the uncompromising character of Al-Qa’eda and Osama bin Laden. In his deconstruction of the US Army/Marines counter-insurgency manual Hoffman observed that it was ‘relatively mute on the subject’ of religion. Indeed, ‘it offers few indications that the classical approach to terrorist or insurgent activities are altered at all by religions based groups’. Hoffman directed this criticism at the field manual’s neo-classical pre-occupation with a Maoist perspective, which assumes that the target population of a counter-insurgency programme shared an American value system desiring to live in free societies that ‘are consistent with representative democracy’. ‘But’, Hoffman contended, ‘if the population’s values system is not consistent with these basic elements of the US approach, or if they reject them in favor of something founded in the thirteenth or fourteenth century [sic], we may need a drastically revised counter-insurgency strategy’.

However, when it comes to identifying the drivers of jihadism, global COIN theorists are surprisingly coy. Significantly, global neo-COIN writing goes to great lengths to dismiss the religious and ideological motivation for Islamist activism. Instead, it focuses upon organisational characteristics, social networks, psychological profiling, and patterns of recruitment to understand the new global threat. In this context, ‘global insurgency’ reveals a definitional ambiguity analogous to that of the much criticised War on Terrorism. Like the notion of a War on Terrorism global counter-insurgency denotes an amorphous threat, conceals hidden assumptions and obfuscates the object of the war, namely militant, ideologised Islam: or Islamism.

David Kilcullen notably promulgates this view. He dismisses Islamist ideology as the motivation to jihad. Instead, he considers the ‘sociological characteristics of immigrant populations’ responsible for jihadist activity in Europe. These characteristics explain ‘contemporary

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85 Ibid., 610.
86 Hoffman, ‘Neo-Classical Insurgency?’, 78. It would be more accurate to say the jihadist aspires to something founded in the seventh century.
threats rather than Islamic theology’. He further avers that Islamic thought ‘has little functional relationship with violence’. In an interview with The New Yorker magazine he even claimed that: ‘After 9/11, when a lot of people were saying, “The problem is Islam”, I was thinking, It’s something deeper than that. It’s about human social networks and the way they operate.’ Kilcullen’s post-graduate research into the Indonesian Darul Islam movement led him to conclude that ‘it’s not about theology’. He maintained, somewhat adventurously, that: ‘There are elements in human psychological and social makeup that drive what is happening. The Islamic bit is secondary. This is human behavior in an Islamic setting. It is not “Islamic behavior”’. He added: ‘People don’t get pushed into rebellion by their ideology. They get pulled in by their social networks.’ He further opined, rather tangentially, that 15 of the 9/11 Saudi hijackers ‘had trouble with their fathers’.

The process of radicalisation is obviously a complex one. Certainly, the passage to the act of terrorism cannot be reduced solely to religion. Nevertheless, it is somewhat naive, if not perverse, to dismiss it completely. The bombings of the Madrid and London transport systems in March 2004 and July 2005 respectively, and even the 9/11 assaults, are, whatever else, Islamist acts in a Western setting. The view that religion is at best a secondary motive defies the evidence. All the groups that have undertaken high-profile terrorist acts dating from 9/11 and stretching from Bali to Madrid, London and Mumbai have acted in the name of a militant understanding of Islam. Such a pattern of worldwide attacks, exhibiting a profound devotion to a politically religious cause intimates, if nothing else, a religious dimension to jihadism. In fact, to reduce jihadism to individual social pathology attempts to explain away political religion as a social fact. Rather worryingly, it assumes that when a highly motivated jihadist claims to undertake an operation to advance a doctrine, he does not really mean it.

Ultimately, for global COIN theorists to deny the relevance of political religion to jihadist insurgency is akin to suggesting that the armed campaigns waged by Che Guevara, the Red Brigades and the
Baader-Meinhof gang, had nothing to do with Marxist-Leninist and Maoist thought, but can be explained primarily with recourse to their individual personalities and backgrounds. A variety of factors may ‘push people into rebellion’, but ideology inevitably justifies the violent act. Paradoxically, Hoffman’s criticism of neo-classical COIN, namely, that it misunderstands a worldview that wishes to re-create an Islamic caliphate, applies equally to much global counter-insurgency thinking.

Consequently, we need to resolve this paradox: why do counter-insurgency theorists exhibit this reluctance to confront the ideological or politically religious dimension of modern insurgency? We can provisionally discern two factors that explain the paradox and point to its potential resolution: first, the determination of both neo-classical and global COIN theorists to denigrate the most important theorist of war, Carl von Clausewitz; and, second, the absence from the neo-COIN perspective of any conception of terrorism.

Disappearing Clausewitz

In June 2007 a group of influential academics and soldiers met to consider a draft of the British Army’s evolving doctrine for Countering Insurgency: A Handbook for Commanders. The group evaluated modern counter-insurgency thought in the light of the ‘characteristics which might distinguish what might be described as the post Maoist era’. They recognised that: ‘Insurgency has become a globalised technique, the response is now international and multi-disciplined; the strategic centre of gravity lies beyond the territorial boundaries of the operational space; success is determined more in the virtual dimension than by events on the ground in the operational space; (and) in the 1950–60s [sic] the vital ground comprised a single nation’s population now there are multiple populations involved [sic]’.92

This explicitly global COIN agenda, further stipulated, as the minutes record: ‘Be wary of Clausewitz . . . some of his theories complicate rather than inform an effort to explain the complexity of the current version of insurgency’.93 A similar wariness may be discerned among neo-classical COIN writers. Thus, Montgomery McFate observes:

Neither Al-Qa’eda nor insurgents in Iraq are fighting a Clausewitzian war, where armed conflict is a rational extension of politics by other means. These adversaries neither think nor act

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92Notes from ‘Reviewing UK Army Countering Insurgency Meeting’ (KCL Insurgency Group), King’s College London, 20 June 2007, 1. John Mackinlay chaired the meeting.
93Ibid., 2.
like nation-states. Rather, their form of warfare, organizational structure, and motivations are determined by the society and culture from which they come.\textsuperscript{94}

These and other statements, however, reveal both a failure to comprehend Clausewitz and a curious desire to dismiss a theorist whose writings remain seminal to understanding the current era of insurgency.\textsuperscript{95} As his most important modern interpreter observed, ‘revolutionary’ or guerrilla war ‘would figure just as prominently as the theory of nuclear weapons in the treatise of a twentieth century Clausewitz’.\textsuperscript{96} One of Clausewitz’s most significant dictums was that ‘wars will always vary with the nature of their motives and of the situations which gave rise to them’.\textsuperscript{97} In other words, warfare is always determined by the ‘society and culture’ from which it arises, the point that McFate’s research re-discovers. The interaction of a multiplicity of factors, both tangible and intangible, Clausewitz argued, will govern the course of a war, influence how any adversary chooses to fight and the aims for which they strive. All these factors influence the direction, nature and duration of war. War always ‘moves on its own goals with varying speed’.\textsuperscript{98}

The Napoleonic era of warfare between nation-states shaped Clausewitz’s thinking, but his concern was not exclusively with interstate war.\textsuperscript{99} He sought instead to comprehend the ontology of war, rather than see it as a mere epiphenomenon of state activity. As Jan Honig observes, Clausewitzian ideas are ‘easily adaptable to forms of

\textsuperscript{94}McFate, ‘The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture’, 43. See also Celeski, ‘Strategic Aspects of Counterinsurgency’, 35, for another example of critical remarks that question the relevance of Clausewitzian understandings.

\textsuperscript{95}For a recent discussion see Colin M. Fleming, ‘New or Old? Debating a Clausewitzian Future’, Journal of Strategic Studies 32/2 (April 2009), 213–41.


\textsuperscript{98}Ibid., 87.

\textsuperscript{99}Which is something that John Mackinlay, for instance, believes Clausewitz embodies, when he suggested in 2001 of the ‘coalition of likeminded states to “wage the War on Terrorism” is an old-fashioned emergency structure that would address a Clausewitizian threat to security’. Again this is an erroneous interpretation. Clausewitz never wrote of what constituted ‘threats to security’ and to the extent that it is possible to discern a Clausewitzian understanding of threat, it is one that arises from the complex social and political conditions of individual societies, i.e. the source of all war. Therefore the statement is a tautology. Mackinlay, ‘Tackling bin Laden’.
warring social organizations that do not form states’. The Prussian thinker remains highly relevant to understanding insurgencies, both in their classical and modern manifestations. In this regard, McFate’s assumption that rational warfare occurs only among nation-states seriously misrepresents Clausewitz. It is curious, indeed, that an anthropologist, ostensibly dedicated to understanding the customs and traditions of particular social groups, considers non-state actors like Al-Qa’eda existing beyond reason merely because they are not states.

From a political perspective, however, such neo-COIN misunderstanding is not so strange after all. McFate evidently recognises Clausewitz’s central premise that ‘War is a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means’. It is this recognition, though, that unsettles COIN theorists. The reluctance to attribute religious motives to jihadist action, the emphasis on ‘post-Maoism’, and the dismissal of Clausewitz all evince a profound neo-COIN discomfort with the political dimension of war. It is the politics of modern jihadist resistance that contemporary counter-insurgency theorists wish to avoid: for politics denotes complexity, particularity, ambiguity, controversy, and the need to challenge or defend specific value systems. As Honig again observes, what many analysts find disconcerting about insurgent conflicts ‘is the seemingly irrational motivations of parties which originate in the murky depths of history’. Consequently, Clausewitz, who emphasises the politics of war above all else, represents a problem for COIN thinkers who believe any talk of underlying value systems shaping the societal and cultural complexity from which war arises undermines their neutral observer status.

Terrorism: Where Art Thou?
The notable absence of any concept of terrorism from military and academic journals addressing the problem of insurgency following the

101 David Kilcullen, too, appears to subscribe to this conception when he writes that the ‘religious ideology of some modern insurgents’ meant that they often do have ‘real-world objectives’. ‘Particularly in al-Qaeda-linked insurgencies’, he contends, ‘the insurgent may not seek to do or achieve any practical objective, but rather to be a mujahid, earning God’s favour (and hope of ultimate victory through his intervention) through the act itself.’ Kilcullen, ‘Counter-insurgency Redux’, 116.
102 Clausewitz, On War, 87.
103 Honig, ‘Strategy’, 118.
events of 11 September 2001 further corroborates the view that COIN thinking eschews the Clausewitzian political dimension. A cursory examination of articles published in the US Army journal, *Military Review* confirms this point. The journal’s editor acknowledges for instance that for the United States the events of 11 September 2001 ‘marked a pivotal change in our lives, our Army, and our country’. However, it did not mark any significant change in the content of the *Review* (or that of other military journals). Given the pivotal change that 9/11 announced, it might be assumed that the pages of *Military Review* would critically evaluate the radical re-orientation of security priorities. Such an assumption, however, would be wrong. Apart from a special supplement entitled ‘Attack on America’, and a series of excerpts from speeches by the President, Secretary of Defense and the Chief of Staff of the Army contained in its first post-9/11 edition, the *Review* makes only sporadic reference to the Al-Qa’eda terror threat thereafter. This contrasts dramatically with the attention that the key military and academic periodicals devote to counter-insurgency after 2004. We might infer that the specialist military journals avoid terrorism as an object of concern precisely because it is a politically contested term that requires the analyst to adopt a stance upon the character and intent of Islamist inspired violence.

Neo-COIN’s determination to confine Clausewitz’s relevance to inter-state war and its aversion to the vexed question of terrorism is itself ideological. COIN theorists can dismiss Clausewitz’s thinking for understanding the nature of current threats only by assuming that insurgent groups act irrationally and function outside any form of political discourse (because their motives are assumed to be unfathomable). Meanwhile, avoiding any discussion of the ‘terrorist’ threat facilitates an analytical framework that is de-politicised and rationalises intellectual disengagement from any attempt to understand its ‘murky depths’. This process of exclusion and disengagement enables the neo-COIN agenda to address the phenomenon in the rationalist terms with which it is most comfortable, namely, that of technique.

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Technique as a Substitute for Political Understanding

The ‘globalised technique’ of insurgency and the tactics required to combat it, therefore, dominates neo-COIN thinking. Although affecting interest in the cause and spread of de-territorialised jihadism, the assertion of a global counter-technique ultimately reveals the neo-COIN approach to be one of ideological avoidance. Ignoring the politics of the Islamist threat, neo-COIN dismisses what might be politically necessary to defeat it within the state. Focusing upon apolitical operational concepts, statements of aspiration, abstruse debates on the insurgent centre of gravity, the policy minutiae of countering radicalisation, and what Sir Lawrence Freedman describes as ‘vague talk of hearts and minds’ represents an easy, but ultimately evasive option.107

In this context, global neo-COIN is guilty of political equivocation. Whilst the neo-classical school focuses on the tactics necessary to counter armed challenges in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, global neo-COIN practitioners advance techniques that are either intangible or strategically ambivalent. Indeed, for all their criticism of neo-classical thought, vague aspiration apart, global COIN advocates only what in practice amounts to a broader application of colonial, Malayan-style, counter-insurgency. Somewhat bewilderingly, Kilcullen considers the global insurgency paradigm a ‘better model’ than ‘counter-terrorism’, precisely because ‘the key to defeating global jihad’ does not ‘lie in traditional counter-terrorism (police work, intelligence, special operations or security measures) at all’.108 Instead, he contends that the insurgency needs to be ‘regarded as representative of deeper issues or grievances within society. We seek to defeat insurgents through “winning the hearts and minds” of the population, a process that involves compromise and negotiation.’109

Similarly, Mackinlay considers that a ‘dangerous insurgency’ ‘usually has legitimate grievances or cause’ and requires a successful counter-strategy that is ‘politically strong enough to change direction in order to remove the pressure of the grievance, and at the same time hopefully remove a substantial element of popular support from the insurgent’.110 Kilcullen reinforces this position, asserting the need to ‘counter the grievances on which insurgencies feed, denying their energy to their recruiting and propaganda subsystems, and ultimately

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109Ibid., 605.
110Mackinlay, Globalisation and Insurgency, 33.
marginalising them’. Drawing directly from the Malayan experience, he notes approvingly that the British ‘countered the Communist appeal to nationalism by setting a clear date for independence and commencing transition to self-government’.  

Global Neo-COIN as Appeasement and Defeatism

The global neo-COIN attempt to project the Malayan way of grievance settlement onto a global canvas has significant political consequences overlooked in the technical literature devoted to it. This is particularly the case when it applies its technical knowledge to ‘the unbearable sense of grievance’ that energises support for the world wide jihadist struggle. In fact, a political consequence of this de-politicised technical approach to insurgency, and its reluctance to confront the ideological worldview of Islamism, leads to policy prescriptions that are either dangerously naive, or radically utopian. For the practice of grievance removal necessarily raises highly political questions such as: what level of conciliation would placate disaffected Muslim opinion; are the ends of militant Islamism amenable to real world solutions; and if they are, does the price paid for peace in the short term unduly compromise the national interests of Western states? These questions have been widely debated beyond the realm of counter-insurgency.

Suffice to say, however, global COIN’s answers are notable for their temporising. Thus, Mackinlay opines, somewhat curiously, that the ‘global developments’ that engendered Al-Qa’eda inspired violence ‘cannot be arrested by a democratic, free market society; they are the consequences of that society’. In a similar vein, Kilcullen feels the Islamist’s pain, observing that: ‘For Muslims in much of the world, there is no middle way: only a stark choice between jihad and acceptance of permanent second-class citizenship in a world order dominated by the West and apparently infused with anti-Islamic values. For many self-respecting Muslims, the choice of jihad rather than surrender is both logical and honourable.’

112 Mackinlay, ‘Tackling bin Laden’.
113 See for example, Cooper, New Political Religions, Or an Analysis of Modern Terrorism, 147 and Samuel L. Berger and Mona Sutphen, ‘Commandeering the Palestinian Cause: Bin Laden’s Belated Concern’, in James F. Hoge and Gideon Rose, How Did this Happen? Terrorism and the New War (New York: Public Affairs 2001), 123.
114 Mackinlay, ‘Tackling bin Laden’.
These and similar statements from global COIN advocates evince an interesting and quite surprising family likeness to understandings expressed by a radical pacifist, and idealist ‘English school’ of critical international relations theory. Thus, the global COIN view that the prevailing Western economic and political order represses Muslims everywhere closely resembles the analysis of critical international relations scholars that consider Al-Qa’eda style violence either a ‘construction’ of, or a reaction to, Western ‘elite power’. From this perspective, the ‘Westernised world system’ imposes a global economic ‘apartheid’ that reduces Muslims to second-class citizens via the open markets that create a burgeoning economic divide between the rich ‘West’ and the exploited poor of the ‘majority world’.116 This perspective sees insurgency and terrorism as weapons of the weak117 used against the hegemonic West and arising, pace Mackinlay, inexorably from the ‘global capitalist system’.118

In this context, ‘Al-Qa’eda is not a state nor a great power’ but a ‘transnational network and more importantly an idea around which resistance is organised globally and locally’.119 From this critical and idealistic perspective the solution demands a radical transformation of the international order into ‘a system of sustainable security’, ‘based ... on justice and emancipation’.120 The details of this radically transformed order, like the techniques of global COIN, remain somewhat opaque but at a minimum require the abandonment of market economics and the radical revision of Western foreign policy. Interestingly, this utopianism finds echoes in the global COIN perspective, as advanced by Mackinlay, which holds that ‘disarming the hatred of the disaffected Islamic communities means a new US policy on Israel and in the long term, for the US to ... learn to talk to insurgents’.121

Global COIN analysis, ultimately, if rather equivocally, supports a radical, transformational, global thesis. Both approaches reject political religion as the driver of Islamist action while at the same time claiming

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120Rogers, *Global Security and the War on Terror*, 33.
121Mackinlay, ‘Tackling bin Laden’.
to know the technical causes that inspire Muslim disaffection. This of course is not to deny Mackinlay’s observation that governments should be prepared to negotiate with those insurgents able to compromise. Such negotiation may be strategically advisable within the confines of a specific theatre, whether talking to Sunni tribal leaders in Iraq or elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan. But it is an entirely different case to extend this ‘grievance settling’ technique to the international arena. It invokes the logic of appeasement without examining whether global jihadism is capable of being appeased.

The scepticism Sir Lawrence Freedman expressed towards the ‘vague talk of hearts and minds’ reflected his belief that as potential victims of jihadist violence we need to try to understand its political causes. Moreover, ‘even when we do we must also recognize the limited quality of the political response available to us’. Such a political response does not mean ‘finding grievances’ to placate. Rather, it requires comprehending more fully the nature of the forces that wish to establish an illiberal, theocratic world order, considering where and why this problem has arisen, and thereby appreciating the limited scope for agreement, conciliation and amelioration. This further intimates a nuanced understanding, not only of jihadist adversaries, but also of the values and interests that Western societies wish to maintain and defend. This is global COIN’s political failure. For when it is not dimly aspirational on issues of practical counter-insurgency, it is silent on the political question of how to counter the appeal of jihadist ideology. In the end, it is the political battle of ideas and world views that is – as Clausewitz would no doubt assert – the most important theatre of combat in the global insurgency. And where is this crucial struggle to take place? Surely, it is within the domestic context, and the borders of the modern state, not in some putative global sphere.

More Neo-Maoism than Post-Maoism

Although the defining feature of global COIN is its insistence on the ‘post-Maoist’ nature of insurgency, the reality of any counter-strategy, global or otherwise, is that it can only be prosecuted effectively within the spatial confines of the state. In fact, global COIN thinking, through its emphasis on ‘de-linking local issues from the global insurgent system’ unintentionally acknowledges this point. Thus, rather than transcending the era of Maoist insurgency, ‘disaggregation’ and dealing with the threat at the local level, actually returns us by a somewhat circuitous route to the Maoist paradigm. However, global COIN

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123 Kilcullen, ‘Countering Global Insurgency’, 609.
theory’s refusal to countenance the ideological motivation to jihadist activism, obscures what is happening at the domestic political level in Western cosmopolitan centres. It misdiagnoses the nature of the threat, and to the extent that it proposes practical policy guidance, it is mistaken. More precisely, global COIN’s diagnosis invariably conflicts with the thinking and experience of intelligence and law enforcement officials. Diametrically opposed to Kilcullen’s contention that political religion is a second order concern, having little ‘functional relationship with violence’, Jonathan Evans, the Director General of the British Security Service, MI5, in a speech in Manchester in November 2007 maintained:

As I am sure you are aware, the main national security threat that we face today is from al Qaida and its associated groups. But before we look at the violent manifestations of that threat in the UK, we need to remember where this threat comes from. The violence directed against us is the product of a much wider extremist ideology, whose basic tenets are inimical to the tolerance and liberty which form the basis of our democracy. So although the most visible manifestations of this problem are the attacks and attempted attacks we have suffered in recent years, the root of the problem is ideological. Why? Because the ideology underlying al Qaida and other violent groups is extreme. It does not accept the legitimacy of other viewpoints. It is intolerant, and it believes in a form of government which is explicitly anti-democratic. And the more that this ideology spreads in our communities, the harder it will be to maintain the kind of society that the vast majority of us wish to live in.124

This statement reveals the constituting weakness in the global COIN thesis. The term global insurgency rather than clarifying the nature of the current security condition actually ignores it. In reality, ‘global’ insurgency functions as a euphemism for something more prosaic, namely, a domestic insurgency arising from the political forces promoting Islamism both at home and abroad. It is, moreover, the ideology, which global COIN theorists dismiss, that renders the threat transnational and requires governments to deal with elements of jihadism externally and at a multilateral level, as well as at a domestic, police level. Yet, at its core, the threat challenges the integrity of the modern democratic state. In the case of Western states like the United Kingdom this requires, among many other things, re-asserting political sovereignty, securing state borders and elaborating an inclusive

Defeating the ideological message that inspires jihadist militancy, rather than detracting from the Maoist concept of insurgency, actually reinforces its relevance, accentuating as it does the imperative of political and ideological struggle within a given territorial space. It is the sovereign state that provides security for its citizens and through this contributes to the defeat of Islamism globally. Yet the global COIN school obfuscates this prudential requirement of statecraft. Its reluctance to confront the political dimension of the struggle means that it overlooks the core of the problem – the contest over political values at home. It is the internal dimension of the conflict that is problematic, controversial and value-laden, which is why global COIN theorists find it easier to ignore. Moreover, when they do attend to this dimension, they focus not on the illiberal ideology of jihadism but on second order issues like the formation of social networks, prisons, urban deprivation and family breakdown as sources of jihadist recruitment. Even here, the equivocation is palpable, as this technical agenda conspicuously overlooks practices in schools, mosques, colleges and universities which provide much of the ideological energy for jihadist recruitment.\(^\text{125}\)

To summarise, neo-COIN thinking clearly avoids the political dimension of the current conflict and its implications for promulgating a counter-strategy. Yet the ideological contest over values at the level of the state renders the conflict explicitly political. The consequent need to consider state security, however, poses difficult questions relating to civil liberty, public morality, sovereignty, and the problem of multicultural identity for analysts functioning within a cosmopolitan, liberal democratic paradigm. Rather than confront this difficulty, neo-COIN evades it. This contrasts with the growing awareness among law enforcement agencies of the threat jihadism poses to policing a liberal democracy. Thus, Deputy Assistant Commissioner, Peter Clarke, Head of the UK’s Counter-Terrorism Command at the Metropolitan Police admits that, counter-terrorist policing (i.e. internal counter-insurgency) has become intrinsically more ‘political’ as it now has to pre-empt plots and target resources against an identifiable section of the population.\(^\text{126}\)

\(^{125}\)See for example Anthony Glees and Chris Pope, *When Students Turn to Terror: Terrorist and Extremist Activity on British University Campuses* (London: Social Affairs Unit 2005).

Conclusion: Whose Hearts and Whose Minds?

Reviving a state orientated ‘Maoist’ paradigm for insurgency demonstrates the enduring relevance of classical COIN thinking to the dilemma of policing the modern cosmopolitan condition. It also raises difficult questions about the application of counter-insurgency principles in both the democratic state as well as the state of concern. The central Maoist revolutionary warfare objective remains the control of the people: the battle for hearts and minds. We should finally ask, therefore, the question that theorists of global COIN prefer to avoid, namely, what are the implications for internal security of a Maoist strategy operating globally and locally? For the notion of a transnational insurgency poses an intriguing question: who are the people? And whose hearts and whose minds need to be won?

Established neo-COIN thinking, as we have seen, merely offers a recipe of grievance settling, and assumes that Muslim communities in Western states and on the Arab street must be the focus of ‘hearts and minds’ operations. Certainly a comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy would attend to those communities in order to interdict subversive plots and deter those that might otherwise be attracted to the path of violence.

However, a properly conceived political strategy that effectively confronts the existential threat a globalised insurgency presents requires more than this. In an age of polymorphous violence inspired by clashing ideological and religious visions, hearts and minds operations must also address the growing insecurity of majority populations in multicultural states. This no longer silent majority requires government to ensure security and public order before it considers second order re-distributive concerns.127 Sustaining popular support for protracted struggles abroad, such as the Western commitment to fighting the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, while countering the internal jihadist threat at home, minimally requires this political assurance from a coherent counter-strategy.128

As global COIN recognises, the contemporary security challenge is a complex transnational insurgency, which manifests itself simultaneously at both the state and international levels. The totalising political religion driving jihad necessarily conceives ‘over there’ as ‘here’. Consequently, countering this distinctively post-modern style of

revolutionary warfare requires a political strategy that transcends conventional counter-insurgency precepts. It means that a properly Clausewitzian global counter-insurgency effort would indeed entail a global ‘hearts and minds’ campaign, but one very different from that offered in the global COIN theorists’ grievance settling playbook. Maintaining security and facilitating development in places as diverse as Iraq or Afghanistan, as classical and neo-classical insurgency thought contends, would remain an essential ingredient in a properly conceived ‘global’ counter-insurgency programme. At the same time, it also entails the quite separate task of neutralising the ideology that inspires radicalised diasporic Islamic communities to violent jihadism in advanced Western states, while ensuring the necessary social cohesion to sustain a protracted campaign.

Dismissed by neo-COIN commentators, Clausewitz once again seems both prescient and perplexingly overlooked. His first principle in war requires us to acknowledge what the fundamental struggle is about, ‘neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into something alien to its nature’. This means recognising that the contemporary struggle is ideological and permeates both the global system, and the domestic politics of both Western and non-Western societies. Ultimately, it is an eschatological struggle between an illiberal and totalising political religion, Islamism, and secular, cosmopolitan liberal democracy. In that struggle it is not inspiring Muslim hearts and minds that is crucial. It also requires crafting a secular political response as well. It is, then, among other things, a conflict within modern democracies that involves the whole population and the terms of a shared public morality, not just the cultural concerns of minorities within it. Democratic governments must necessarily convince the majority of the validity of the struggle. This cannot be achieved by conceding important points of principle in foreign policy, or compromising political values at home to appease vocal but intolerant minorities under the aegis of grievance settlement.

The evolution of neo-COIN thinking represents a remarkable rediscovery of both archetypal conflicts and the revolutionary style of warfare that has helped define the contemporary polymorphous condition. Its precepts continue to haunt conflicts like those in Iraq and Afghanistan. The evolution of global counter-insurgency techniques that attend to the transnational connections between local conflicts and the external factors that sustain them has also enhanced our understanding. Nevertheless, we should not exaggerate its influence or accept that we have entered a new era of post-Maoist insurgency that marginalises state responses.

\[129\] Clausewitz, On War, 88–9.
The state, on the contrary, remains central, particularly in the
domestic political arena where transnational threats ultimately
manifest themselves and have to be combated. Global COIN, despite
its insights, fails Clausewitz’s first principle. It evades the political issues
that must be confronted at the state level in order to defeat the threat of
de-territorialised jihadism at the transnational level. In this respect, the
rise of the neo-COINs compels us to recognise that the insurgent
phenomenon manifests itself not somewhere else but has profound
implications for the soul, as well as the hearts and minds, of a liberal
and pluralist society.

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