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Bandwagonistas: rhetorical re-description, strategic choice and the politics of counter-insurgency

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This paper seeks to explore how a particular narrative focused on population-centric counter-insurgency shaped American strategy during the Autumn 2009 Presidential review on Afghanistan, examine the narrative’s genealogy and suggest weaknesses and inconsistencies that exist within it. More precisely our ambition is to show how through a process of ‘rhetorical re-description’ this narrative has come to dominate contemporary American strategic discourse. We argue that in order to promote and legitimize their case, a contemporary ‘COIN Lobby’ of influential warrior scholars, academics and commentators utilizes select historical interpretations of counterinsurgency and limits discussion of COIN to what they consider to be failures in implementation. As a result, it has become very difficult for other ways of conceptualizing the counterinsurgency problem to emerge into the policy debate.

**Keywords:** Surge; counterinsurgency; FM 3-24; COIN lobby; rhetorical re-description; population-centric; Afghanistan

**Introduction\textsuperscript{1}**

In late 2009, President Obama ordered a review of strategy in Afghanistan, a review prompted by concerns within the administration that the existing counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy might be inappropriate and that alternative concepts ought to be investigated. At the end of this review it was decided to continue with the population-centric approach to COIN that had emerged during the campaign in Iraq. This paper seeks to explore how this particular form of COIN narrative shaped American strategic considerations during the Presidential review, demonstrate the narrative’s historical genealogy and suggest weaknesses and inconsistencies that exist within it. More precisely the authors’ ambition is to show how this narrative emerged and became dominant and how this dominance has been used to marginalize other lines of argument. We contend that this has produced a situation in which counter-insurgency has become a strategic end in-and-of-itself such that it: does not take into account the broader security interests of the United States or indeed its allies; does not adequately address the resource

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implications it is founded on; fails to address a number of internal contradictions; and limits its primary focus to the foreign counterinsurgent rather than the inadequacies of the host nation government. In sum, the policy-makers’ micro-level emphasis on counter-insurgency presupposes strong macro-level foundations that we argue are not only illusory but also represent a failure of strategy.

There can be little doubt that the upsurge in interest in COIN has been stimulated by the wars being fought by America and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the historical record shows that COIN has neither had a single interpretation nor that the interpretations that have emerged have remained constant over time. Underlying this claim is the observation that the meaning of COIN and the politics associated with the use of the term has been directly related to the political and bureaucratic interests of those actors who are using it. In an effort to foreground these relations more explicitly, the analytical approach taken in this paper is, therefore, loosely based on Quentin Skinner’s method for interpreting texts, surveying ideational change and developing an appreciation for how such ideational change affects political action.2

As per this method, the first section of this paper situates the contemporary COIN debate within its historical and linguistic context. As a result, the contrasting discursive parallels between those actors who lobbied for COIN during the Vietnam war and the way in which a community of contemporary warrior-scholars, academics and commentators have pressed their case with regards to Iraq and Afghanistan is made clear. In particular this section will compare and contrast the way in which three distinct communities have used the term ‘COIN’ at different points in time. These communities we label as the Modernization Theorists, Big Military and the COIN Lobby. By drawing on the work of D. Michael Shafer, the second section explores the large number of assumptions that underpin these COIN discourses. Typically such assumptions include, for example, a belief that only large-scale commitments can produce victory, and that popular support for an insurgency has less to do with the failures of the host government, and more to do with insurgent ‘intimidation’.3 In the third section it will subsequently become clear how the contemporary COIN Lobby utilizes the various interpretations as outlined in Section 1 so as to establish the context for rhetorically re-describing their own thinking and as a consequence avoid the need to critically engage with the assumptions that underpin COIN. Instead, the COIN Lobby has constructed a narrative that explains failures in terms of poor implementation while simultaneously retaining their faith in the theory. It will be shown that by limiting discussion to implementation rather than conceptualization, the COIN Lobby’s narrative has the effect of undermining alternative arguments. This, we suggest, has made it very difficult for other ways of conceptualizing the counterinsurgency problem to emerge into the policy debate.

It should be noted at the beginning that although we argue that the narratives put forward by the COIN Lobby consist of numerous theoretical limitations and empirical inaccuracies, we do not claim that COIN is always ‘bad’ and some other approach is necessarily ‘better’. Rather, our primary point is that neither
policymakers, nor the constituencies they represent, have been given the opportunity to weigh the costs and benefits of alternative options available to them, since the effect of the dominant COIN discourse has been to exclude these options from the debate. Specifically we argue that such dominance is due in large part to the way the discourse has been constructed and the ‘legitimacy’ that has been bestowed upon it by ‘experts’. Assuming the arguments of these experts can be challenged, it may be possible to have a more open policy debate in which otherwise marginalized approaches to assessing, understanding and dealing with low-intensity conflict and indeed the wider strategic context can be given more attention.

Before proceeding further a conceptual ground clearing exercise is necessary so as to ensure that the meaning of the terms genealogy and rhetorical re-description, as used here, are properly understood. For the purposes of this paper, genealogy is taken to mean the process of investigating, ‘… the political stakes in designating as origin and cause those identity categories that are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin.’ The term ‘rhetorical re-description’ is derived from the work of Quentin Skinner who shows how concepts are not so much, ‘… statements about the world than as tools and weapons of debate’. As such the aim of a rhetorical re-description is to recast a term in a new light such that it might persuade someone that an action that had previously been ‘condemned may seem worthy of praise’. This perspective of language use can be related to the linguistic philosophy of J.L. Austin who observes that sentences rarely are concerned with truth-values but more typically have ‘performatory’ functions, such that a writer or author seeks to secure the uptake of the proposition that they are advancing. Both the concepts of genealogy and rhetorical re-description appear apt to a discussion on the politics of COIN. The next sections will describe how.

**Contrasting parallels in COIN discourses, past and present**

Sometimes described as ‘graduate-level’ warfare it is clear that, since at least the Kennedy administration, the process of developing COIN strategy and techniques has attracted the attention of some of the finest minds from the academy, the military and a range of foreign policy institutes. Recently, academic debate has been drawn to the uses, and for some, the abuses of social scientific techniques associated with subjects such as anthropology by military commanders seeking to isolate the insurgent from the population. However, there has been little academic interest in debating the relative importance of COIN within its broader structural context. In this respect, the focus has been on the micro-techniques of COIN rather than on more traditional strategic concerns such as whether it is appropriate or viable to indefinitely commit significant national resources to a particular conflict. The intention of this first section is, therefore, to situate these contemporary social scientific and strategic debates by demonstrating how the present conception of COIN has emerged. In this regard,
we have identified three main schools of thought that deal with the role of the US military in COIN, which we have labeled respectively ‘Modernization Theorists’, ‘Big Military’, and ‘COIN Lobby’.

For Modernization Theorists, COIN is primarily a non-military problem. In those cases where the military is involved, this involvement is mainly limited to supplying and advising host-nation forces, particularly in such areas as civic action and small unit actions. During the 1960s, this approach was dominant in US COIN policies in countries such as Thailand and Bolivia. It has also been employed in a post-9/11 context in countries such as the Philippines. By contrast, a Big Military approach views COIN as primarily a military problem to be solved with the large-scale employment of US forces. Unlike the Modernization Theorists who favor the indirect use of small-scale Special Forces to ‘win hearts and minds’, Big Military prefer directly employing brigades, divisions, and corps-level formations to ‘search and destroy’. As will be shown, the Big Military approach came to dominate US policy in Vietnam. More recently in Iraq and Afghanistan, a third approach has emerged and been promoted by a group the authors have labeled the COIN Lobby. The COIN Lobby approach is a synthesis of the Modernization Theorists and Big Military, with the military retaining its dominant role but its functions being reversed. According to this school of thought, large-scale US military forces are employed to ‘win hearts and minds’ by ‘protecting the population’, whereas small-scale Special Forces are used to ‘search and destroy’.

Our genealogy starts then with the Modernization Theorist’s interpretation of COIN. Before the COIN era inaugurated by the Kennedy administration, the US military had significant experience of fighting ‘savage wars of peace’ and assisting other countries to counter subversion and insurgency. For example, under President Eisenhower, the Overseas Internal Security Program was initiated to bolster the internal security capabilities of friendly governments. However, following Kennedy’s election the idea of COIN took on a particular set of theoretical connotations that were intimately connected to a number of social scientific ideas that collectively became known as Modernization Theory. Principally but not exclusively advanced by Walt Rostow, the explicit objective of Modernization Theory was to explain how ‘Third World’ developing countries might advance towards modernity without the need for political violence. For these theorists, ‘Modernization’ meant encouraging countries to become ‘democratic, equalitarian, scientific, economically advanced and sovereign’. Violent change it was thought helped create the conditions that would allow Marxists to divert a country’s transition away from modernity towards becoming a communist state. The proper counter to this possibility was to help a state develop appropriate forms of governance so as to resist a general decline into violence.

Underpinning the Kennedy Administration’s approach was the belief that ‘communist-inspired’ insurgency was a global problem that the US military did not have the resources to pursue everywhere. Consequently the discourse of those officials and social scientists charged with devising COIN practices in the early 1960s indicates that the Cold War concept never involved large-scale military
intervention. Instead many of the individuals promoting COIN, theorists that, apart from Rostow, included the likes of Roger Hilsman and Edward Lansdale, conceptualized ‘insurgency’ primarily as a political problem for which a mainly military response was inappropriate. Hilsman noted, for instance, that counter-insurgency should not be conducted by regular troops,

... but rather by a sophisticated combination of civic action, intelligence, police work, and constabulary-like counter-guerrilla forces that use a tactical doctrine quite different from the traditional doctrine of regular forces.

With the active support of the Kennedy administration the Modernization Theorists were backed up at the level of grand strategy by a newly founded inter-agency Special Group (Counter-insurgency) charged with developing policy and institutionalizing COIN throughout the government. Sustained by a President and Secretary of Defense who, at least according to the historian Russell Weigley, did not support large scale troop deployments to suppress communist insurgency, this new interagency group’s correspondence demonstrates that COIN was primarily discussed in political, economic, social and psychological terms. As far as the Modernization Theorists were concerned the police assets provided by the Agency for International Development were often more relevant than the military assets provided by the Defense Department.

The COIN doctrine that subsequently emerged, enshrined in the 1962 ‘US Overseas Internal Defense Policy’ (OIDP), was intended to ‘serve as basic policy guidance’ throughout the government. This document emphatically stated that the US military’s role was limited, even in those cases where a significant insurgency had developed, to at most providing indigenous forces with advice, mobility, communications support and training assistance. Although each of the services were asked to develop COIN capabilities to support the OIDP, it was clear that more large-scale ‘conventional’ force structures — referred to here as the Big Military — would not be used. Instead, when military capability was required, the Kennedy administration promoted the development of Special Forces, an organizational innovation specifically designed to enable the implementation of COIN where it counted, at the tactical-operational level.

Given the way the Kennedy administration had imposed their ‘unconventional’ ideas about COIN on the services, it was almost inevitable that the ‘conventional’ Big Military conception of COIN was going to be very different to that held by the Modernization Theorists. In the first place, the Big Military were unhappy with the idea that non-military agencies, or even the Special Forces, ought to be in control of COIN. In 1962 for example, many senior military officials sought to ‘conventionalize’ US strategy opposing ‘the advice of British Brigadier Sir Robert Thompson, who advocated a police-style COIN strategy’. Through a process of bureaucratic obstruction, the Army also went about undermining Hilsman’s ‘Strategic Concept for South Vietnam’, a strategy that emphasized non-military and paramilitary, rather than conventional military means, even though it included the deployment of thousands of Special Forces.
across Southeast Asia. Several commentators agree that the Army preferred to fall back on its core institutional competency of waging conventional war. In Vietnam this translated into a focus on ‘limited’ rather than ‘small war’ manifesting itself in the way that the Big Military mentored the South Vietnamese by helping them to develop their armed forces along conventional rather than irregular lines. Following Kennedy’s death in 1963, as the Big Military advocates of conventional operations progressively took control over the American war effort, the approach advocated by the Modernization Theorists received less attention and civilians became increasingly marginalized.

As one commentator has observed, the result of this shift was that, ‘the basic conception of COIN became narrowed to military considerations of applied force [thereby] reducing the emphasis on political, economic, and psychological factors’. What replaced the Modernization Theorist’s approach to COIN has typically been caricatured by the phrase ‘search and destroy’. In the period between 1965 and 1968, as the US military became more directly involved, it became attached to the sorts of operations designed to force the enemy to defend key locations so that they could be annihilated in conventional battles of attrition. Such decisions necessitated a rhetorical re-description of the meaning of COIN away from that proposed by the Modernization Theorists towards an interpretation that now emphasized big conventional type operations in an effort to find, fix and destroy an elusive enemy. Yet even though ‘search and destroy’ gradually constituted the bulk of the US military’s efforts in Vietnam, it coexisted alongside a much more modest ‘pacification’ approach consistent with Modernization Theory known as the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program.

Such perspectives both contrast neatly with and set the context for the way that the contemporary COIN Lobby interprets counterinsurgency and prescribes remedies for Iraq and Afghanistan. The jury may well still be out as to why big nations lose small wars but as far as the COIN Lobby is concerned defeat in Vietnam was partly as a consequence of the military’s over emphasis on ‘search and destroy’ missions rather than on ‘pacification’. According to this argument then, although General Westmoreland had been claiming that ‘search and destroy’ tactics constituted COIN, this did not constitute a true COIN strategy that applied an approach founded on ‘winning hearts and minds’. As far as the COIN Lobby are concerned ‘winning hearts and minds’ means gaining the support of the indigenous people so that they turn against and then go on to help identify insurgents who can then be marginalized both politically and militarily by the counterinsurgents. Thus the COIN Lobby argues that counter-insurgency only properly began following the introduction of the CORDS program and the replacement of General Westmoreland by General Abrams who, it is sometimes claimed, shifted the military’s emphasis away from ‘search and destroy’. Given Abrams supposed preference for large-scale military operations combined with a hearts and minds approach, it is unsurprising that this post-1968 period is often used by the current COIN Lobby to support their claim that ‘population-centric’ COIN works.
Upon closer examination, however, this argument reveals several slights of hand and historical reformulations. To take one example, the narrative that emphasizes the success of the ‘hearts and minds’ approach neglects to reference the highly controversial CIA-run Phoenix Program.\textsuperscript{35} At the same time this narrative assumes that the population recognized the South Vietnamese government to be ‘legitimate’, that they perceived the Communists as ‘illegitimate’, and that as a result there was a need to protect the population from ‘intimidation’.\textsuperscript{36} Furthermore the narrative suggests that the presence of US troops was the key determinant in reducing the southern insurgency whilst neglecting the possibility that either government reforms or massive demographic shifts had any significant effects. Finally, in its focus on ‘hearts and minds’ the COIN Lobby purposefully fails to account for the often brutal COIN methods employed by the South Vietnamese security forces, presupposes that US material support was indefinitely unlimited, that US, Vietnamese and international public opinion was mostly irrelevant and that other Cold War priorities could play second fiddle compared to Vietnam.\textsuperscript{37} In effect then the COIN Lobby re-describes counter-insurgency in Vietnam so as to down play the importance of factors that might detract from an emphasis on the need for large-scale troop deployments.

This view is reflected in the current \textit{US Army/Marine Corps Counter-insurgency Field Manual} FM 3-24 (FM 3-24), the theoretical keystone document developed by the COIN Lobby and published in 2006. Central to FM 3-24 is the notion that at least 20 to 25 counterinsurgents per 1000 inhabitants are necessary to wage a population-centric counter-insurgency campaign.\textsuperscript{38} These troops provide the security that supposedly will isolate the indigenous population from the insurgent and allow for the building up of the civil infrastructure thereby making it possible to win over the undecided in favor of the host nation ‘legitimate’ government. Absent from the manual, however, is a discussion of wider strategic imperatives that shape the way COIN might be implemented or what type of intervention might be appropriate bearing in mind the political context. Given that these considerations are, at least theoretically, taken at the civil-military interface, some might argue that strategic level considerations are inappropriate for inclusion in a field manual. Nonetheless, the manual is prescriptive in its conviction that large-scale troop deployments are necessary for engaging in COIN. Consequently alternative conceptions of COIN, conceptions that would allow politicians to choose an alternative to large-scale troop deployments is not possible within the COIN Lobby’s existing doctrinal framework.

As far as the COIN Lobby is concerned therefore, counterinsurgency ‘success’ demands the commitment of a large number of troops. This is underpinned not only by an analysis of Vietnam that establishes the underlying historical sense of such a position but is also backed up by rhetorical moves that define large-scale troop deployments to be essential for winning the ‘hearts and minds’. In this respect the strategy presupposes that these troops are available to be deployed for an indefinite period, that domestically the public is willing to support such a deployment, and that the host nation population will have a positive view of the
military presence rather than see it as a foreign occupation to be resisted. Numerous other practical problems created by a large US troop presence, such as its inflationary impact on the local economy, are rarely acknowledged. By selectively interpreting the historical evidence so as to link the definition of COIN with large-scale troop deployments, the COIN Lobby has in effect closed down discussion as to whether there are more sustainable alternatives to this approach, or what other approaches would be available in the absence of a large troop commitment. Instead the COIN Lobby has sought to implement a strategy that had failed in Vietnam by re-describing what success in Southeast Asia might have looked like if soldiers had been taught the proper skills, commanders had properly understood the fundamentals of COIN or the relationship between various agencies had been more integrated. At its heart then, the COIN Lobby, in its analysis of COIN in Vietnam, has restricted itself to problems with the implementation of a particular type of COIN theory; what they have not done is directly engage with the very basis of the strategy. As a result and as we will show in the next section, many of the assumptions that were seen to be in operation during the Cold War continue to be in place in the twenty-first century.

Counter-insurgency assumptions

In his book *Deadly Paradigms*, D. Michael Shafer critiqued the way in which US policymakers failed to address what he considered to be a number of underlying assumptions that would otherwise call into question the utility of the COIN paradigm. This section explores how many of those assumptions are still in operation, skewing the COIN discourse and affecting the way in which current policy is formulated. As will become clear, evidence of the unwillingness to revisit fundamental assumptions can be found in abundance both in COIN doctrine and in the Afghanistan and Iraq war discourse.

Written in the late 1980s following a period of resurgent interest in COIN, Shafer argued that the standard US policy prescription to insurgency was founded on three main pillars. Firstly, it involved strengthening the threatened government’s security apparatus to ensure its ability to protect the population from insurgent intimidation. Secondly it required the promotion of good government in order to deny popular support to the insurgency. Thirdly it demanded that effort be made to provide higher living standards to meet the ‘rising expectations’ caused by a developing country’s transition to modernity. The question Shafer attempted to answer was why this seemingly reasonable policy prescription failed.

Whilst Shafer took for granted the notion that bureaucratic politics and organizational rivalries hindered counter-insurgency efforts, his main criticisms were reserved for counter-insurgency doctrine itself. In this respect, according to Shafer, COIN doctrine had three significant shortcomings. In the first instance, as an outside power, the US only had limited leverage on the host nation government. Secondly, US policy presupposed the idea that the host nation
government was willing and capable of making the reforms required to weaken support for the insurgency. Finally, US COIN doctrine paid little attention to the nature of the relationships that existed between the population, the government and the insurgents.

Shafer’s criticism helped to identify a number of counter-insurgency traps. For example, in those situations where the US preferred not to get directly involved in countering an insurgency, policy makers were left to rely on a host government to willingly pursue American policies. However, Shafer observed that the extent to which a host government wanted to undertake such activities typically depended on whether the US would support it. This in turn created the conditions in which US policymakers would feel the need to directly support a host government either by deploying counterinsurgents to a country or through the injection of large quantities of capital in order to develop the internal capacity to counter the insurgency. However, such an approach could only achieve success provided that those in power did not abuse their positions at the expense of those they were supposed to represent, and that the population supported a strengthening of the security forces of that country. In this context, Shafer observed that policymakers tended to treat the relationship between host-government and its population uncritically, assuming that the government was ‘legitimate’ and the insurgency ‘illegitimate’. This perspective was underpinned by the assumption that the host government already had the right quantity and quality of relationships with the people it was supposedly meant to govern. Yet Shafer pointed out that such an approach could also backfire if the government was corrupt and unwilling to make reforms, and / or if the security forces were as much a part of the problem as they were the solution.

Finally, according to Shafer US policymakers also made universal assumptions about the sources of insurgency whilst ignoring local conditions. This observation reflected the notion that much of US COIN policy, despite the failures in Vietnam, continued to uncritically accept the central message of Modernization Theory that political violence was a bi-product of a country’s transition from tradition to modernity. Shafer was quick to point out that this idea assumed that the underlying source of grievance was the same around the world and that by generalizing the analysis had failed to engage with the political particularities of each instance of this form of violence. As a result, by confusing the sources of political and social change with the revolutionary dogma of communist-inspired insurgency, the United States, he argued, had developed an inappropriate COIN strategy.

Whilst the COIN Lobby has done much to paper over many of Shafer’s observations, it is not difficult to show how the assumptions he identified are still in operation today. For example, the contemporary COIN Lobby makes much of its claim that it has learnt the lessons of Cold War COIN and does not conflate the basis for one insurgency with that of another. ‘Communist inspired global insurgency’ cannot simply be re-labeled ‘al-Qaida (AQ) inspired global insurgency’, for as David Kilcullen convincingly argues it is a mistake to
suggest that the global ambitions of AQ are necessarily the same as the local and regional actors that it has made pragmatic and sometimes totally ‘accidental’ alliances with. Consequently having understood the differences between specific insurgencies, tailored counter-strategies can be developed that target the particular basis of the conflict. That said, however, Kilcullen also provides a sophisticated account for how AQ infiltrates and exploits local issues in order to increase popular support, foment insurgency and globalize what might previously have been a localized dispute.\textsuperscript{44} Accordingly, while claiming that it has learnt the lessons of the Cold War about the need to differentiate between insurgencies, this line of argument nevertheless continues to presuppose that a large-scale military intervention to counter the Taliban in Afghanistan is necessary, since this will supposedly have a negative impact on the ‘real enemy’ which is AQ. While Kilcullen recognizes that a large-scale counterinsurgency ‘is a game we need to avoid wherever possible’, he still cites ‘Iraq in 2007, and parts of the Afghan campaign in 2006–2008’ as examples of counterinsurgency ‘done properly’.\textsuperscript{45}

Similarly it could be argued that the government in Afghanistan lacks the motivation, legitimacy, and the resources to implement US foreign policy goals. Indeed, as Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, the US representative in Kabul indicated in memoranda to the Obama administration, the Karzai government actively avoids taking responsibility for security and development whilst further seeking to embed and expand US and foreign involvement in the country. According to Eikenberry the reason that the Karzai government is so keen to do this is to ensure that it retains power. Without a political class who might represent Afghanistan below the level of President Karzai it is hard to see how an alternative administration might be formed.\textsuperscript{46} Consequently the United States is left to deal with an institution that it has created and sustained but that neither has the willingness nor the capability to take responsibility for its own sovereignty. Among the ‘solutions’ that has received considerable support by US officials has been to work with sub-state actors, even though this could potentially weaken the authority of the central government. The analogy of working with sub-state actors in Iraq has often been invoked in support of this policy.\textsuperscript{47}

That these assumptions are still in operation is not surprising given the way in which contemporary iterations of COIN theory, such as those encapsulated in FM 3-24, have neither developed the older theories in particularly novel ways nor addressed Shafer’s central criticisms. One study examining the evolution of US counter-insurgency doctrine, notes that the versions that emerged during both the Vietnam and Iraq wars are ‘remarkably similar’, and claims that ‘This will surprise those who believe that doctrine in the Vietnam era was somehow very different’.\textsuperscript{48} What has changed since the Vietnam War, however, is the fact that the COIN Lobby are considerably more aware of the political dimensions of their approach especially when it comes to winning arguments within the corridors of power in Washington DC. That they have been adept at creating the conditions in which their perspectives have thrived constitutes the final section of this paper.
Rhetorical re-description and the marginalization of alternative conceptions of COIN

Having situated the COIN Lobby’s discourse in its genealogical context, outlined the basic conception of COIN that they advance, and exposed the underlying assumptions their views are founded upon, this final section is concerned with describing the political maneuvers the contemporary COIN discourse is being made to perform. This involves placing the COIN Lobby’s discourse in its practical context whilst demonstrating how alternative strategies are rhetorically re-described.49 This section consequently directly engages with the ‘performative functions’ of the COIN Lobby’s discourse, a discourse that we suggest is not just concerned with describing the facts but has at its root normative dimensions that serve to commend its own conception of COIN while condemning alternative perspectives. Given the way they successfully framed the discourse in the lead-up to Obama’s December 2009 decision to send more troops to Afghanistan, this next section describes who makes up the COIN Lobby, how they exploit their dominant expert position and what arguments they use to defend and advance the idea that large-scale troop deployments are required to implement a counter-insurgency strategy.

The COIN Lobby

As noted earlier, the COIN Lobby refers to a particular type of COIN theory. It also refers to a distinct group of individuals who promote this theory. The COIN Lobby may not resemble the structures of a formal lobbying organization. However, it is clear that they constitute a recognizable interest group within the national security community that appears to work in ways that will be familiar to those who observed the advocates of maneuver warfare in the 1980s.50 Unlike in the early 1960s when the push for an effective counter to ‘global insurgency’ originated with civilian Modernization Theorists and politicians, the contemporary debate is primarily being driven by a well-connected group of active and retired military officers, academics, think tank pundits, and commentators. This group consists of warrior scholars inside the military such as General Petraeus and Brigadier General H.R. McMaster; ex-Army officers such as General Jack Keane; ex-Army officers turned think-tank pundits, such as John Nagl and David Kilcullen; defense academics such as Conrad Crane and Isaiah Wilson III; think-tank commentators such as Frederick and Kimberly Kagan, Max Boot, Stephen Biddle, Michael O’Hanlon, and Andrew Exum; civilian academics such as Eliot Cohen, Sarah Sewall, and Montgomery McFate; and journalists such as Thomas Ricks. Whilst it would be hard to claim that the agenda of these actors is fixed, we contend that the inter-relationship of these individuals over the last several years and the general thrust of the arguments they make in favor of a particular type of COIN theory suggests they constitute a COIN Lobby.51

A key aspect of understanding any interest group such as this is not only to look at what ideas are being promoted, but also to examine how the ideas are
being promoted. In the case of the COIN Lobby, there is an observable relationship between the practitioners, theorists and the advocates. For instance, a number of the individuals cited above, referred to as an ‘odd fraternity of experts’, participated in the drafting of FM 3-24.\textsuperscript{52} They were also instrumental in advocating the increase in US forces in Iraq that became known as the ‘surge’.\textsuperscript{53} In addition, many of the individuals who helped create FM 3-24 and advocated the ‘surge’ have served in important advisory roles to the commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan where their ideas have been put into practice. As David Ucko notes in relation to the ‘surge’: ‘These individuals, along with other experts with experience and familiarity with counter-insurgency, were now being brought together to implement their theory and findings in the field. From humble origins, the COIN community was now at the helm’.\textsuperscript{54} For example, upon his arrival in Iraq in 2007, Petraeus created the Joint Strategic Assessment Team, headed by McMaster, and which also included Kilcullen and Biddle.\textsuperscript{55} Likewise after General McChrystal arrived in Afghanistan, a ‘strategic assessment group’ was created which included Biddle, Exum, and Frederick and Kimberly Kagan.\textsuperscript{56} More recently, following the sacking of McChrystal, McMaster, the Kagans, Biddle, and Keane were invited to Kabul to advise Petraeus.\textsuperscript{57} These assessment teams not only sanctioned the subsequent strategies that emerged in Iraq and Afghanistan, they also commended the subsequent policies by using their status outside the military to legitimize and add credibility to the eventual approach adopted by the US military. This process further bolstered the privileged credentials of the experts whilst guaranteeing upbeat assessments to Congress and the media.\textsuperscript{58} However, due to their common ideology regarding COIN, these experts merely served to reinforce pre-existing assumptions rather than providing critical assessments that would challenge these assumptions and recommend alternative strategies.\textsuperscript{59}

What follows in the remainder of this section are several examples of how members of the COIN Lobby have attempted to frame the public debate in terms favorable to their line of argument. Specifically, we have chosen four themes highlighted in their discourse that have also been prevalent in the debate that occurred concurrently with Obama’s Afghan strategy review. Firstly, they make the point that the US military abandoned COIN after Vietnam, so as to reinforce the perception that ‘proper’ COIN only consists of large-scale military intervention. Secondly, they have argued that COIN is the most appropriate method of waging a global campaign against terrorism, and that a more traditional ‘counter-terrorism’ strategy is inappropriate. Thirdly, the ‘success’ of the Iraq ‘surge’ is not only given prominence in their discourse but is also described as a vindication of the FM 3-24’s tenets to the extent that the approach ought to be applied in Afghanistan. Finally, they make the case that, prior to the arrival of General Petraeus in Iraq and General McChrystal in Afghanistan, the US military in those two theaters was not waging ‘counter-insurgency’. As we will show, each of these arguments is misleading and based on either a very narrow interpretation of, or a complete disregard for, the evidence.
COIN abandoned after Vietnam

One narrative that features prominently in the COIN Lobby’s discourse is that the US military abandoned COIN after Vietnam and focused instead on conventional operations in Europe. For example, in his Foreword to FM 3-24, Nagl quotes approvingly the former US Army Vice Chief of Staff General Jack Keane, who said: ‘After the Vietnam War, we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency’. According to this narrative, the Army only gradually, and somewhat reluctantly, reintroduced COIN during the course of the Iraq insurgency. This narrative is revealing in its failure to account for the alternative approaches to COIN that were enacted by the US military in the aftermath of Vietnam.

One obvious case that undermines this narrative was the emphasis placed on COIN by the Reagan administration. Throughout the 1980s a great deal of political and military attention was focused on the perceived need for developing a US capability to deal with Third World insurgencies. Although some US leaders may have wanted to use large-scale military intervention to counter insurgencies, their attitudes were conditioned by a ‘no more Vietnams’ mentality. This ensured that the US would not undertake large, long-term military deployments but instead would adopt more subtle methods. These subtle methods included employing the CIA, Special Forces and other non-military actors. Prospects for waging this sort of ‘low intensity conflict’ were examined in great detail even as conventional forces were re-orientated back on the Soviet threat. In many ways this approach mirrored that of the Modernization Theorists with its emphasis on limited military involvement. The current COIN narrative looks back on this period as if it were an anomaly, whereas it is clear that the type of COIN that was practiced under Reagan constituted the main way in which the US countered insurgencies throughout the Cold War.

The COIN Lobby does, therefore, tend to downplay those narratives that do not favor the large-scale deployments of troops, almost as a matter of course. For example, during the Cold War, the US Government assisted many countries in their efforts to counter insurgencies, including those that simultaneously occurred while the Vietnam War was ongoing, such as in Thailand or Bolivia. These programs, which consisted of a very small fraction of the resources allocated to Vietnam, formed the US Government’s primary means of countering insurgencies around the world. Yet while the Vietnam War was occurring, the discursive emphasis of counter-insurgency experts, similar to today, was placed on the large-scale conflict in Vietnam, with little theoretical interest in examining why such a large-scale program was not applicable to dealing with other cases of insurgency, or conversely, why a small-scale strategy might not be more appropriate. As a result, COIN both then and now has been discussed in terms that suggest it is considered to be an end in itself rather than a means to an end. Put slightly differently, the expert discourse is dominated by questions of how to make the existing large-scale paradigm more effective, rather than whether the
paradigm is either sustainable or the most appropriate means of securing the policy objectives. To give a specific example, mainstream discussion of the role of intelligence in COIN presupposes a large US military force that would make use of this intelligence as part of a population-centric strategy. There is little to no discussion of employing US intelligence to build up local security forces, which historically has often been their main function.

Similarly, the contemporary discursive emphasis on COIN in Afghanistan excludes any discussion of smaller-scale programs in the Philippines, the Horn of Africa, and so forth, which were created as a part of the Global War on Terrorism, but have received little scholarly attention, and practically no media attention. An important question here that is never raised is why the employment of large-scale COIN in one context achieves the security objectives of the US more efficiently than a smaller-scale version that is the norm everywhere else. This is not to suggest that one version of COIN fits all circumstances but rather it is to question the absence of discussion as to why and under what conditions one approach is chosen over the other, and what the merits and drawbacks of these might be. Thus when treated as an end in itself more strategically sensible uses of COIN as a means to an end get downplayed.

**Counter-terrorism versus Big COIN**

It is worth noting that the COIN Lobby’s interest in what they consider ‘real’ COIN only began in earnest with the onset of the Iraq insurgency. Subsequently, changes have occurred throughout the US military in an effort to ensure that it becomes more adept at the type of COIN advocated by the Lobby, particularly at the operational and tactical level. Spurring this activity, two important theoretical trends can be discerned. The first and most noticeable has been the move to develop and propagate a ‘respectable’ COIN doctrine that would be appropriate for a large-scale US occupation, while marginalizing alternative small-scale approaches. This has entailed describing the US military in such a way as to suggest that it could be trusted to do the right thing in a way that neither the host government, the international community, nor other branches of the US government such as the State Department or the CIA could be relied on to do. But it could only do so if it were allowed to wage a population-centric counter-insurgency that would employ large-scale forces. The second trend was to substitute ‘counter-insurgency’ for ‘counterterrorism’ and try and shift the dominant discourse away from a ‘Global War on Terrorism’ towards ‘Global Counter-insurgency’. This approach advocated the idea that the most effective means of ‘defeating global jihad’ was to adopt a COIN approach vice a counterterrorism one.

These trends in the COIN discourse are clearly seen in the Obama administration’s 2009 Afghan strategy review. While the COIN Lobby initially supported President Obama’s March 2009 decision to send more US troops to Afghanistan, by July signs began to appear that Obama was rethinking his
support for a COIN strategy.\textsuperscript{72} This reluctance became explicit on 13 September when, following the controversial Afghan elections in which President Karzai appeared to have rigged the results, the President subsequently ordered a review that would include the option to abandon the COIN strategy.\textsuperscript{73} During the ensuing discussion, the COIN Lobby did much to shape the terms of debate so as to highlight the point that more troops were needed to successfully prosecute US strategy in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{74} Alternatives such as keeping force levels steady or even reducing numbers and concentrating on a ‘counter-terrorism’ approach that relied heavily on special forces were characterized as both unworkable and a prelude to withdrawal.\textsuperscript{75} This was backed up with references to an imminent collapse of the Afghan government should such an approach be adopted.\textsuperscript{76}

Thus one of the key achievements of the COIN Lobby has been to redefine the terms of the strategic debate. It is noteworthy that the raison d’être cited for the emphasis on COIN remains the threat from ‘terrorism’, with the implication being that ‘counter-terrorism’ in its own right is insufficient.\textsuperscript{77} During the Fall 2009 strategy review Vice President Biden pushed to de-emphasize the COIN strategy aimed at the Taliban in favor of a counter-terrorism approach that would focus on AQ.\textsuperscript{78} In response to Biden’s challenge to the COIN paradigm, the COIN Lobby reframed their previous position. They now argued that earlier US efforts had failed precisely because of the emphasis on ‘counter-terrorism’, but that ‘success’ could be attained only if the resources were made available to properly implement a population-centric COIN strategy. For instance, according to the COIN Lobby’s argument in support of General McChrystal’s August 2009 request for increased troop numbers, without extra forces the US would be unable to wage a counterinsurgency campaign. By this logic, they were implicitly suggesting that President Obama’s March 2009 decision to send more troops to Afghanistan did not constitute COIN despite the fact that their earlier support for the administration’s decision to send troops and wage a counterinsurgency campaign is well documented.\textsuperscript{79}

It is interesting that under both Bush and Obama, the discursive emphasis of the COIN Lobby was consistently placed on the ‘big’ conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, but almost never on the smaller ones. From a theoretical perspective, this discursive emphasis on the two large-scale conflicts, with their associated emphasis on the use of ‘combat brigades’, has meant that the idea of small-scale COIN, involving the CIA and Special Forces among others, has become anachronistic. To suggest that such a small-scale approach could be a viable alternative to an indefinite large-scale military commitment is viewed in heretical terms, or derided as mere ‘counter-terrorism’.\textsuperscript{80} For the COIN Lobby, ‘counter-terrorism’ is often equated with an ‘enemy-centric’ approach which they believe to be the anti-thesis of the ‘population-centric’ precepts they are espousing.

Paradoxically, the COIN Lobby’s discourse assumes that only large-scale COIN works irrespective of the fact that the United States has pursued small-scale operations in other parts of the world, yet they have not pushed for such operations to be expanded in a manner consistent with their argument. Instead,
they implicitly argue that small-scale COIN is irrelevant and makes little or no contribution to COIN theory. Thus, the only ‘legitimate’ approach involves large numbers of troops to ‘protect the population’. But this argument reveals a significant internal contradiction. The logical extension of this position is that other cases where a ‘terror threat’ would justify intervention, such as Pakistan, Somalia, or Yemen, should also involve the application of a similar population-centric model. However, unlike the ‘ideal’ COIN, structural limitations and resource constraints have ensured that the United States has been limited to employing a ‘counter-terrorism’ strategy in other parts of the world, as evidenced for instance by the drone attacks in the case of Pakistan.81

Any acknowledgement of the structural limitations on the US military’s ability to wage a global COIN in a similar style to Afghanistan or Iraq is noticeably absent from the arguments advanced by the COIN Lobby. Instead the COIN Lobby has marginalized arguments favoring small-scale COIN.82 Whether this marginalization is intentional, or merely reflects an ideological predisposition, the fact remains that this sort of strategic choice has been marginalized both in the theoretical debate as well as in planning and doctrine. Indeed a critical weakness in the theory underpinning the COIN Lobby’s arguments is the failure to discuss the circumstances in which a large-scale rather than a small-scale deployment might be appropriate.

The surge narrative

The term ‘surge’ has generally been used to describe President Bush’s plan, announced on 10 January 2007, to increase the number of US troops in Baghdad and Anbar Province. Subsequently, the period 2008–2009 saw the emergence of a ‘surge narrative’ that was employed by the COIN advocates in their arguments for sending more US troops to Afghanistan. According to this narrative it was primarily the combination of additional US forces and a new ‘population-centric’ approach to operations in Iraq that was responsible for a steep decline in violence. It was this decline in violence that was deemed the primary standard constituting ‘success’, in contrast to political reconciliation or some other ‘metric’.83

This narrative can be critiqued in at least three ways. Firstly, the underlying assumption is that it was the Americans who were the principal agents, and that both the Iraqi government and people, not to mention the various insurgent groups, were merely passive players. Therefore, important factors which do not form a part of the narrative include: the huge demographic shifts that occurred due to the sectarian violence that peaked in 2006–2007, the consequent need for many Sunni groups to ally themselves with the US to avoid ‘ethnic cleansing’, the brutality of ‘Al Qaeda in Iraq’ which alienated many Sunnis, and the reluctance of the Shiite militia leader Moqtadr al Sadr to engage in a war of attrition against superior US forces.84 Secondly, the emphasis placed on a ‘population-centric’ rather than an ‘enemy-centric’ approach, overlooks the high levels of violence employed in the course of US and Iraqi military operations in cities such as
Baghdad and Basra, the covert campaign to kill or capture ‘irreconcilables’, the increased use of airpower, and so forth.  

Finally, the narrative never includes strategic context. In other words, the question of how a ‘surge’ related to the achievement of US political objectives in Iraq is never addressed. The emphasis of the narrative is placed on a specific definition of short-term success, defined simply as a reduction in violence, rather than how this objective translated into longer-term strategic results. This lack of attention to strategy can be discerned simply by examining the time-period of the narrative, namely 2007–2008, with no attention paid to the period of US occupation thereafter. Consequently, a number of issues are not considered, such as the reliability and allegiance of the Iraqi government being supported, the continued presence of some 120,000 US troops as of January 2010 and the costs associated with that presence, or how long-term US interests in the region were secured as a result of the ‘surge’. Were the ‘surge’ to be placed in the wider strategic context, a very different narrative would likely emerge, and certainly not one as positive as the one promoted by the COIN Lobby.

Interestingly, it was none other than Petraeus who initially cast doubt on applying the Iraq ‘surge’ strategy to Afghanistan. In a March 2009 speech, Petraeus said an Iraq-style surge would not work in Afghanistan because of poor logistical infrastructure and that it was imperative Afghans not view the Coalition as conquerors.  

By contrast, in the Autumn 2009 strategy review, Petraeus reversed his position, and supported a ‘surge’ in Afghanistan. The reasons for this reversal are unclear, particularly as the two conditions he had mentioned in March for avoiding a ‘surge’ had not changed by the Autumn. However, it is plausible his reluctance in March to endorse a ‘surge’ can be attributed to his hesitation to cast doubt on the recently inaugurated President Obama’s decision to deploy 17,000 additional US troops by suggesting these forces were not sufficient. By contrast, in the Autumn 2009, the political circumstances were more favorable to argue for more troops.

2007 and 2009: the rise of COIN and the fall of two generals

Finally one of the key themes advanced by the COIN Lobby, and one that is closely related to the surge narrative, is the notion that it was General Petraeus who brought COIN to Iraq in 2007. According to this narrative, prior to Petraeus’ arrival, and with the exception of several outlier cases such as that of Colonel McMaster and Tal Afar in 2005, the US military had not been waging a ‘proper’ counter-insurgency. Instead, the narrative highlights a virtuous feedback loop between the success of the surge and the vindication of the ‘Petraeus doctrine’; a feedback loop that represented a model for how the US military ought to undertake operations in Afghanistan.  

The section will show that this line of argument rhetorically re-describes the conflict in Iraq in the period between 2003 and 2007 in such a way that it actively distorts the historical record so as to portray General Casey, Petraeus’ predecessor, as having failed to implement a
proper COIN strategy. The upshot of this discursive construction, which has been similarly employed in Afghanistan, has been to link the ‘success’ of COIN to particular ‘high-profile’ military leaders, while castigating other military leaders who were perceived to be less successful in implementing similar strategies.

Upon taking over Multi-National Forces-Iraq in July 2004, Casey observed that many officials were still thinking in terms of the ‘aftermath of a conventional war’ rather than as a counter-insurgency. The earlier failures to clearly define the US mission in Iraq as a counter-insurgency led Casey to choose the term ‘full spectrum COIN operations’ as the mission statement in the Campaign Plan that was approved in August 2004. Even though the discursive emphasis was on COIN, Casey’s initial campaign plan was organized in such a way that COIN was just one line of operation alongside a number of others. However, contrary to the claims being made by the COIN Lobby, it is clear that General Casey put a great deal of effort into developing a COIN strategy that reflected both the demands of his political masters whilst attempting to meet the requirements of operations in Iraq. For instance in the autumn 2004, Casey’s strategy chief brought in a small number of scholars, subsequently known as ‘Doctors without Orders’, who were charged with rewriting the campaign plan to ensure that it better reflected the problems being faced. Casey then went on to establish a ‘COIN Academy’ in December 2005 in order to disseminate best practices in COIN throughout the military, a move made in large part due to the belief that the pre-deployment training received in the US was inadequate.

Among the most important criticisms being made about Casey, however, was the suggestion that: a) he was too interested in ‘standing up’ Iraqi forces so that US forces could ‘stand down’; b) he did not place enough emphasis on ‘protecting the population’; and c) he let too many US troops get tied down to large bases rather than making them live amongst the people. According to this line of argument, General Casey was not successful because he did not adopt the interpretation of COIN advocated by the COIN Lobby. It should be noted, however, that Casey was working against a political backdrop in which US government policy emphasized the reduction of US forces in Iraq. For the COIN Lobby to argue that General Casey did not properly implement COIN is therefore disingenuous. Casey was subject to the sorts of political considerations that made it impossible for him to pursue any other policy than the one he was advancing.

Nonetheless, despite its weakness, the narrative that was used to undermine Casey and promote Petraeus has also been seen in Afghanistan. In the spring of 2009, General McChrystal replaced General McKiernan. The way in which McKiernan’s dismissal was portrayed, however, reveals much about the way in which the COIN Lobby has sought to defend the central axioms of their doctrinal preferences. It should be noted that prior to his dismissal, many members of the COIN Lobby had praised McKiernan for his approach to COIN. Noting that he had requested tens of thousands of additional troops necessary to conduct operations, Michael O’Hanlon observed that the US was ‘finally playing for keeps’. However, at the time of his dismissal, it was being argued that
McKiernan did not properly understand COIN and therefore it was necessary to replace him with someone who represented the ‘varsity team’.95 By rhetorically re-describing the pre-McChrystal period in Afghanistan as ‘counter-terrorism’, with McChrystal’s arrival ushering in a counter-insurgency approach, the COIN Lobby were able to construct a self-serving timeline to influence the Afghanistan strategy debate in their favor.96 Hence, because counter-insurgency had not been tried before in Afghanistan, McChrystal would need to be given time and resources to implement such a strategy. Interestingly, this narrative would again be refined in the fall 2009 to suggest that McChrystal would only be able to do COIN in the future if President Obama sent more troops to Afghanistan, the implicit implication being that operations conducted as part of McChrystal’s command in the summer 2009 did not constitute COIN, even though the COIN Lobby had described them as such at the time. As can be observed from this case, rhetorical re-description is a tactic regularly employed by the COIN Lobby to promote their case, and judging from Obama’s decision to order a new Afghan ‘surge’, they have been remarkably adept at prevailing in the policy debate.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined a genealogy of the prevailing US COIN discourse, exposed its underlying assumptions and identified a number of rhetorical re-descriptions used by the COIN Lobby in the defense and promotion of their doctrinal preferences. In addition, it has sought to highlight the integral part played by ‘experts’ in constituting this discourse, particularly their role in legitimizing population-centric COIN. Although providing such expertise might otherwise be viewed in positive terms, we argue that it has had the consequence of marginalizing alternative discourses and strategic choices. As critical historian Gabriel Kolko noted in relation to the counter-insurgency expertise provided during Vietnam, the consequence of this expertise was that it ‘impeded the modification of COIN doctrine in the face of failure’.97 The correlation between the efforts in Vietnam and the intellectual support currently devoted to COIN is noteworthy, as are its consequences. At the theoretical level, what is clear is that the COIN Lobby has allowed itself to focus on correcting the failures of practice that they have identified from their appreciation of Vietnam without engaging directly with the possibility that the entire strategy was in itself a failure.

In the context of Iraq and Afghanistan, the COIN Lobby has constructed a narrative that in effect commends the idea of deploying large numbers of troops in an effort to ‘clear, hold and build’ whilst at the same time condemning alternative conceptions such as ‘counter-terrorism’ and small-scale COIN. Lacking any substantive or organized opposition, this narrative has achieved a dominant position in the policy discourse. As a result, the policy debate has been restricted to lines of investigation that have in many ways been determined by the COIN Lobby. This has produced a situation in which the kind of strategic question that is typically concerned with means / ends relationships has been marginalized in
favor of a debate that focuses on the finer micro-level details of counter-insurgency doctrine. Given the nexus of institutional interests that are currently aligned in the form of a COIN Lobby it is, however, imperative to retain a critical perspective with regards to the strategic choices being made by the United States and its allies. Such a critical stance not only serves to ensure that strategies are pursued for the right reasons but also that a full range of options can be examined. Considering the exorbitant human, material, and opportunity costs associated with population-centric counter-insurgency, exposing the policy discourse to credible alternatives is arguably among the more significant challenges now facing the strategic studies and national security policy communities.

Notes
1. Bandwagonista is a play on the phrase COINDINISTA, the term used to describe a number of influential warrior scholars, academics and commentators who have been involved in developing the US counterinsurgency Field Manual 3–24 and shaping US counter-insurgency policy in Afghanistan and Iraq, see http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/11/30/the_coindinistas.
3. This shortcoming is evident in FM 3–24. According to one criticism: ‘The new doctrine assumes a close alignment of interests between the United States and its host government: The manual assumes that our role is to enable the host government to realize its own best interest by making itself into a legitimate defender of all its citizens’ well-being … But if local leaders put self-interest ahead of public interest and rank currying favor with local elites above economic development or broad political legitimacy, then unconditional aid will often be misdirected and governing legitimacy sacrificed in favor of short-term personal expediency.’ Biddle, ‘Is It Worth It?’.
4. This definition is taken from Judith Butler and quoted in Colwell, ‘Deleuze and Foucault’.
7. Austin, Philosophical Papers, 220–222.
8. The role of ‘intellectuals’ and other policy experts in developing and sanctioning the counter-insurgency strategy and techniques of the Vietnam-era has achieved a good deal of scholarly attention. For an overview of RAND research on counter-insurgency during this period, see: Long, On “other war”. However, for a more general overview of American intellectuals’ relationship with policymakers during this period, see: Kuklick, Blind Oracles; Marquis, “The Other Warriors”; Gilman, Mandarins of the Future. Other important works which expound on this theme include: Clemis, ‘Crafting non-kinetic warfare’; Robin, The Making of the Cold War Enemy, 185–205; Deitchman, The Best-laid Schemes. For a history of Michigan State University’s various programs in South Vietnam, including its police assistance program, see: Ernst, Forging a Fateful Alliance.
9. See for example, Gonzalez, American Counter-insurgency; Network of Concerned Anthropologists, The Counter-Counter-insurgency Manual.
11. The Eisenhower administration had pursued a number of similar programs within a global Cold War paradigm. What made the efforts of the Kennedy administration different was the way in which development was linked to the theoretical construct of

The classic and influential work explicating this view is: Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*.


14. Milne, *America’s Rasputin*, 87–89; Protheroe, ‘Limiting America’s Engagement’; Currey, *Edward Lansdale*, 218–219, 259–282. It should be noted that although Rostow was initially content to support a limited US advisory presence as the most effective means of waging counter-insurgency, he also later supported bombing North Vietnam. His advocacy for bombing can be attributed to his idea, also known as the ‘Rostow thesis’, that the US military needed to target the external support for insurgency. (Milne, *America’s Rasputin*, 134–157) Similarly, his October 1961 proposal to send 25,000 South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) troops to South Vietnam was intended solely to protect the borders from infiltration. (96).


17. Rosenau, *US Internal Security Assistance to South Vietnam*; For a more general study on this topic, see: Kuzmarov, ‘Modernizing Repression’.


24. For a description of the use of police forces in South Vietnam and the turf war between those sensitive to Modernization Theory and those in favor of a more conventional military response see also Shaw, ‘Policemen versus Soldiers’, 62. See also Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises*, 131.

25. Two classic studies dealing with the US Army in this regard are: Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*; Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*.


28. The CORDS program was initiated in 1967.

29. We more formally define the nature of the COIN Lobby in section 3 of this paper.

30. Contrary to the rhetorical thrust of his title, Mack argues that the asymmetric nature of COIN produces a strategic context in which big nations lose small wars because of domestic pressure. See Mack, ‘Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars? An overview of other prominent arguments on this topic can be found in: Record, ‘Why the Strong Lose’.

32. Nagl, Learning to eat Soup with a Knife, preface.
33. It has been argued that the ‘intellectual’ underpinnings of the eventual shift in priorities towards ‘pacification’ can be found in the March 1966 Army report entitled ‘A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam’ (PROVN). For instance, see: Sorley, ‘To Change a War’. A contrary view that emphasizes Westmoreland’s ‘search and destroy’ strategy as being integral to counter-insurgency can be found in: Birthe, ‘PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians’.
34. For an overview of the historiographical debates dealing with this period, with specific focus on historians’ views of the ‘hearts and minds’ emphasis, see: Hess, Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War, 112–131.
35. Leaving aside the many critical portrayals of the Phoenix Program, even the more positive ones still paint a picture of a very deadly program. For one recent study, see: Rosenau and Long, The Phoenix Program and Contemporary Counter-insurgency. As this study notes, ‘According to the CIA, anti-infrastructure operations – including those carried out by the PRUs, the National Police, and allied conventional military units – were responsible for capturing, killing, or persuading to defect (“neutralizing” in the somewhat sinister language of the time) more than 80,000 cadres during 1968–1972’ (13). In a curious omission, FM 3–24 does not mention the Phoenix Program at all in its generally positive treatment of CORDS, which it describes as ‘a useful model to consider for other COIN operations’ (74–75). As an example of dubious scholarship on this issue, it is interesting to note that David Kilcullen has called for a ‘Global Phoenix Program’ (40) in the 30 November 2004 version of his ‘Counterinsurgency: Strategy and the Phoenix of American Capability, which not only makes no reference at all to the Phoenix Program, but makes only the following minor and negative reference to the value of CORDS: ‘The Viet Cong political infrastructure was too entrenched, the South Vietnamese regime too corrupt and illegitimate, and the American public too alienated to win the conflict. And even CORDS could not substitute for coherent counter-insurgency strategy’, Metz, Counter-insurgency, 9.
36. In contrast to the narrative of successful US pacification efforts in South Vietnam, it has also been argued that the ultimate reason for the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975, had less to do with the cut-off of US supplies, and more to do with the fact that South Vietnam had not actually been pacified in the first place. According to this view, ‘Pacification, as a political-military strategy aimed at both the people and the adversary, had to ultimately be judged on its ability to foster a political community in South Vietnam capable of mobilizing the people advantageously into the political process and ultimately immunizing the society against communist subversion . . . Saigon lost the war because it could not build a political community in South Vietnam’. See: Grinter, ‘How They Lost’, 1116–7.
37. There is also a similar absence in the current discourse of any interest in examining the counter-insurgency methods employed by the Iraqi or Afghan security forces. For
instance, it is a common complaint heard among Afghans that they need protection not from the Taliban, but rather from the Afghan police. Likewise, there have been numerous reports of abuses by Iraqi security forces, none of which figure into the ‘population-centric’ narrative of the Iraq surge.

38. This population-based quantitative approach is very different from the insurgent-based approach used in Vietnam where it had become ‘an accepted rule of thumb that ... there must be 8 to 15 counterinsurgents for every guerilla put into the field if one wishes to go from a not-losing situation to one that will produce victory by attrition’. Fall, Vietnam Witness, 336–7.

39. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, keeping the large US military presence sustained has required an enormous logistical chain that utilizes the road network. In both cases, insurgents have placed considerable emphasis on roadside bombs. Countering roadside bombs requires increased protection for convoys which creates additional problems and raises costs. In Afghanistan, for instance, keeping US forces supplied often requires paying off warlords, and in some cases, the Taliban.

40. Shafer, Deadly Paradigms.


42. To take the example of alignment of interests between the US and the host nation government, though not referring to Shafer’s argument directly, Biddle’s critique of FM 3-24 similarly notes that ‘the manual assumes that the role of the United States is to support and defend a threatened government that has a presumptive claim to legitimacy. It may be necessary to persuade that government to reform in order to strengthen this claim to legitimacy, but the manual presupposes a powerful alignment of interest between the United States and the host government’. See: Isaac, ‘Review Symposium’, 348.

43. Shafer, The Unlearned Lessons, 60–1.

44. Kilcullen, Accidental Guerilla.


47. Abrashi, ‘Petraeus: Afghan Tribes Needed to Fight Militants’.


49. Tully, ‘The Pen is a Mighty Sword’, 10–11.

50. Due to limited information, this study avoids any examination of Congressional staffers in advancing particular views, such as William S. Lind’s promotion of maneuver warfare in the 1980s while serving as a Senate staffer. Unlike the Congressional Military Reform Caucus of that period, in which the legislature played a highly visible role in the US defense debate, no similar group exists today. For more information on the military reform movement, see Wheeler and Korb, Military Reform, 17–38.

51. It is claimed that the politics of this group is bi-partisan. See Luban and Lobe, ‘Neocon Ideologues Launch New Foreign Policy Group’, Bender, ‘Husband and Wife Take Stage in Debate on Afghanistan’; Lozada, ‘The “It” Think Tank’.

52. The reference to ‘odd fraternity of experts’ was used by Sarah Sewall to describe the participants of a February 2006 meeting at the US Army Combined Arms Center at Ft. Leavenworth Kansas who gathered to discuss the new counter-insurgency field manual. She described them as ‘an unusual crowd of veterans of Vietnam and El Salvador, representatives of human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations, academic experts, civilian agency representatives, journalists, and active duty US and foreign military’. See: Sewall, ‘Modernizing U.S. Counter-insurgency Practice’, 103.
53. According to Petraeus, ‘In the fall of 2006, AEI scholars helped develop the concept for what came to be known as “the surge.” Fred and Kim Kagan and their team, which included retired General Jack Keane, prepared a report that made the case for additional troops in Iraq . . . it became one of those rare think tank products that had a truly strategic impact’. Petraeus, ‘The Surge of Ideas’.


56. Ackerman, ‘So Who Were the Advisers for McChrystal’s 60-Day Afghanistan Review?’.

57. Lubold and DiMascio, ‘Putting the Band Back Together’.

58. This point is highlighted by the sponsored trips provided to Michael O’Hanlon, Max Boot, and Frederick and Kimberly Kagan. The upbeat assessments can be found in the following articles: O’Hanlon, ‘Vision for Victory in Afghanistan-Part 1’; Boot, ‘Give McChrystal a Fighting Chance’; Boot, Kagan and Kagan, ‘Yes, We Can’. In the case of Iraq, one of the most controversial op-eds in this regard followed a trip sponsored by Petraeus’ command: O’Hanlon and Pollack, ‘A War We Just Might Win’.

59. The sort of knowledge / power nexus that we are referring to can best be seen in the way General McChrystal’s command has cited academic works such as those produced by Lyall and Wilson, see: Barnes, ‘In Afghanistan, less armor may be more’. The study in question is Lyall and Wilson, ‘Rage Against the Machines’.

60. The concession is made that Special Operations Forces were retained. See Nagl, ‘Let’s win the wars we’re in’, 1; Mansoor, ‘From Baghdad to Kabul’.

61. For Keane reference, see: Petraeus, Amos, Nagl, Sewall, The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counter-insurgency Field Manual, xiv.


63. According to John Waghelstein, the head of US counter-insurgency efforts in El Salvador in the early 1980s, ‘Security, training and advisory assistance are the keys to success in counter-insurgency and, if utilized early enough, will preclude the need for the deployment of US troops in a role for which, given our present conventional preoccupation, we are inadequately trained and doctrinally unsuited . . . We should not, as has generally been the case, send conventionally oriented officers to create a miniature US defense establishment’. See: Waghelstein, ‘Post-Vietnam Counter-insurgency Doctrine’. Waghelstein could have added that it was not simply a matter of inadequate resources or doctrine, in other words purely ‘military’ concerns that had made counter-insurgency ‘virtually a non-subject’, but that political considerations and public opinion also played a large part in determining the goalposts of US military intervention.


65. An interesting counterfactual here would be to suggest that if the current COIN Lobby was transplanted back in time to the early 1980s, and truly believed it was necessary to defeat the ‘insurgency’ in El Salvador, just as they do today in Afghanistan, whether they would have advocated sending tens of thousands of US troops there, or would they have preferred the relatively small-scale approach that was actually used.

66. There was considerable discussion during the Eisenhower presidency about the prospects of large-scale military intervention in Vietnam, though military leaders
such as General Ridgeway were opposed on strategic grounds. For more information on senior military officers who argued against large-scale intervention, and their rationales for doing so, see: Buzzanco, Masters of War. Following the US escalation beginning in 1965, the increasing deployments to Southeast Asia forced the US Army to transfer key units from the ‘central front’ in Germany. Taking too many of these troops out of the ‘front-line’ was considered too risky, and there was also concern about sending US-based units to Vietnam that were otherwise expected as reinforcements in Europe should war erupt there. See: Trausweizer, The Cold War US Army, 162–94.

67. Flynn, Pottinger, and Batchelor, Fixing Intel.
68. For a fuller discussion of this point, see: Michaels, ‘Agents for Stability or Chaos’.
69. The key text that examines this renewed emphasis on institutionalizing counter-insurgency is: Ucko, The New Counter-insurgency Era. Ucko dates early 2004 as the beginning of the ‘reorientation’ to counter-insurgency. See page 169. Throughout this book, Ucko uses the term ‘community’ to refer to the military and civilians who were ‘versed’ in these types of campaigns, and who led the conceptual efforts to promote counter-insurgency within the military. While the term ‘community’ provides a useful adjective, we feel the term ‘lobby’ is more appropriate to describe many of the individuals Ucko refers to given their active role in the policymaking process that we outline in this article.
70. In the case of FM 3-24, it has been argued by critics that the decision by the University of Chicago Press gave the new doctrine undue academic sanction. Likewise, in their efforts to bolster the credibility of the doctrine, proponents of FM 3-24 often note that the process of writing it was a collaborative effort between the military, academics, NGOs, etc.
71. This view was most clearly expounded by Kilcullen, see: Kilcullen, ‘Countering Global Insurgency’ . More recently, it has been suggested this approach be embraced by the Obama administration, see: Hoffman, ‘A Counterterrorism Strategy for the Obama Administration’. General Petraeus has also argued this point publicly, stating that ‘counterterrorism actually requires a counter-insurgency approach, not counteracting terrorism’. See: Petraeus, ‘Striking a Balance: A New American Security’.
72. According to one account, National Security Adviser General James Jones told US commanders in Afghanistan in late June that President Obama was reluctant to send more troops. See: Woodward, ‘Key in Afghanistan’. As an example of the concern shown by counter-insurgency advocates in response, see: O’Hanlon, ‘We Might Still Need More Troops in Afghanistan’, The Washington Examiner.
73. Three detailed accounts of the strategy review are: Kornblut, Wilson and DeYoung, ‘Obama pressed for faster surge’; Baker, ‘How Obama Came to Plan for surge in Afghanistan’; Parsons and Barnes, ‘Obama Homed in on an Afghanistan Pullout Date’. Also, see Eikenberry, ‘Ambassador Eikenberry’s Cables on U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan’.
74. During a high-level meeting to discuss Afghanistan strategy options, McChrystal reportedly said that ‘no alternatives had been offered besides “the helicopter on the roof of the embassy,”’ a reference to the hasty American withdrawal from Saigon in 1975’. This comment came in response to Eikenberry’s concern that the strategy debate was too focused on US troop levels, with little attention devoted to the risks sending more troops would have on deepening the dependence of the Afghan government on the United States. See: Landler and Zeleny, ‘Among Obama Aides’.
75. Although McChrystal had presented one high-end COIN option that would include increasing troop levels by 80,000 troops, political considerations dictated that the COIN Lobby press for a ‘middle’ way that raised the deployment by only

76. Riedel and O’Hanlon, ‘Why we can’t go small in Afghanistan’.
77. Although the term ‘War on Terrorism’ fell out of official favour when the Obama administration came into office, the justification of ‘counter-terrorism’ is still provided to explain US military operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere. As a part of the discourse in which members of the COIN Lobby advance their case, particularly with regards to Afghanistan, references to that country returning to a pre-9/11 Al Qaeda sanctuary are often invoked. For instance, according to General Petraeus: ‘A comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy is what is required to keep Afghanistan from becoming once again a sanctuary for transnational extremists as it was prior to 9/11’. Petraeus, ‘Striking a Balance: A New American Security’, 2009.
78. Biden’s notion of a ‘counter-terrorism’ approach evolved considerably during this period. Initially, it was reported Biden favoured a drawdown of US force levels, concentrating on special forces, drone attacks, and advising the Afghan security forces. Subsequently, Biden became associated with the ‘minimal’ option to increase US force levels by 10,000–15,000 troops. However, as this still represented a defeat for the COIN Lobby, who backed McChrystal’s plan for some 40,000 troops, Biden’s plan continued to be derided as a ‘counter-terrorism’ approach, whereas they argued a population-centric counter-insurgency strategy was what was required. For examples of this criticism, see: Boot, ‘Give McChrystal a Fighting Chance’; or, Boot, ‘We Can’t Downsize to Success in Afghanistan’.
79. It is interesting to note that in response to Obama’s March decision to send ‘only’ 21,000 additional US troops, there was no discussion of this being a ‘counter-terrorism’ approach, nor did any members of the COIN Lobby criticize this policy using the term ‘counter-terrorism’ in a derogatory way. Rather, they discussed it in terms of a ‘counter-insurgency’, with the reservation that more troops would probably be required later.
80. In critiquing FM 3-24, Stephen Biddle makes a brief reference to a debate over ‘the comparative merits of waging COIN with large conventional forces as opposed to small commando detachments (the manual mostly concerns the former)’, but provides no further elaboration. See: Isaac, ‘Review Symposium’, 347.
81. The drone attacks in Pakistan have come under attack by some members of the COIN Lobby who argue that it reflects an enemy-centric or counter-terrorism approach, in which too many civilians are killed, thereby alienating the local population, rather than protecting them. For an elaboration of this argument, see: Kilcullen and Exum, ‘Death from Above, Outrage Down Below’; Exum, Fick, Humayun and Kilcullen, *Triage: The Next Twelve months in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. 
82. We do not suggest that cases of small-scale COIN are nowhere to be found in the discourse of the COIN Lobby, but rather that fundamental questions about how these cases can serve as alternative models to large-scale COIN, particularly in relation to force levels, are never raised. An example of this can be found in: Boot and Bennett, ‘Treading Softly in the Philippines’. In this article, the authors describe the Philippines case as a ‘tiny success story in Southeast Asia that may offer a more apt template than either Iraq or Afghanistan for fighting extremists in many corners of the world’. Yet they then go on to dismiss this case’s relevance for Iraq and Afghanistan, saying that it ‘cannot be replicated everywhere’ by arguing that ‘To make this approach work requires having capable partners in the local security forces’. According to this logic, as long as the host nation has ‘capable partners in the local security forces’, then the US can adopt a small-scale approach, but there is no further mention of what qualifies as being a ‘capable partner’. Nevertheless, it is revealing that this is the sole criteria that is offered by which to choose between large-scale and small-scale COIN.

83. A classic example of this narrative can be found in: Kagan, The Surge. See also: Boot, ‘Déjà vu in Kabul’.

84. According to one RAND study, ‘the central improvements in security have resulted from fractures between insurgent groups rather than a major change in US operations’. See: Long, Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence, 26. For a dissenting critique of the surge, Stephen Biddle undermines the narrative’s claims about the centrality of additional forces and ‘population security’ tactics in the reduction of violence. As he notes: ‘Nor is the CLC (Concerned Local Citizens) phenomenon that has been so instrumental in the current reduction of violence chiefly a product of the hearts-and-minds logic at the root of the manual. The availability of more US troops to provide population defense was certainly important, and this emphasis on population security is clearly consistent with the manual’s prescriptions. But the surge itself was far too small to secure all of threatened Iraq in itself, and cannot in itself account for the growth in negotiated ceasefires. At least as central to the latter was a dramatic change in Sunnis’ perceived military prospects following their defeats in the wave of sectarian violence after the February 2006 bombing of the Askariya Mosque’. Biddle goes on to claim that the ‘strategic interest calculus of the Sunni insurgency’ also underwent a change due to the brutality of their ‘erstwhile Al Qaeda allies’. Moreover, Biddle stresses that the reduction in violence ‘hardly represents the winning of Sunni hearts and minds by the Shiite government through the provision of services and government security’. See: Isaac, ‘Review Symposium’, 349–50. Despite these reservations about the ‘surge’ narrative, Biddle still believes it is necessary to pursue a population-centric strategy in Afghanistan. A detailed explanation of his reasoning can be found in: Biddle, ‘Is it Worth it?’.

85. There is little discussion of the increased use of airstrikes during this period, ‘often in densely populated areas’. See: Londotto and Paley, ‘In Iraq, a Surge in US Airstrikes’.

86. ‘Petraeus: Iraq-Style Surge Wouldn’t Work in Afghanistan’.


88. Wright and Reese, On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign, 125–6.


90. Ricks, ‘US Counter-insurgency Academy Giving Officers a New Mind-Set’.
91. The ‘consensus’ view among US political elites, as espoused in the Iraq Study Group report, provided a number of arguments against adding more US troops. See: Baker and Hamilton, *The Iraq Study Group Report*.

92. For a detailed description of the reasons for McKiernan’s dismissal, see: Chandrasekaran, ‘Pentagon Worries Led to Command Change’.


95. Exum, ‘McKiernan Out, McChrystal In’; Kilcullen, ‘For Answers to the Afghanistan-Pakistan Conflict, ask: what Would Curzon Do?’.

96. Boot, ‘Obama’s Right on Target in Afghanistan’.


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