

A WAKE FOR COUNTERINSURGENCY?

Abandoning Counterinsurgency: Reviving Antiterrorism Strategy

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ABSTRACT: This article introduces the value of efficiency in counterterrorism, such as that applied in Israel's effective national defense strategy, to resolve the conundrum of eliminating global terrorism.

Over the past fifty years the US military's interest in counterinsurgency has ebbed and flowed, reflecting broader shifts in American grand strategy and the global security environment.¹ The first US "counterinsurgency era" began in the early 1960s when policymakers recognized the Soviet Union and China were inspiring or directly supporting left-leaning insurgencies to weaken the West, and to do so with less risk than direct military confrontation.²

Southeast Asia soon became the primary laboratory. After the United States withdrew from Vietnam, the military purged its counterinsurgency knowledge and capability only to rebuild it partly in the 1980s when Soviet backed insurgent movements were rising again, most importantly in El Salvador.³ By the 1990s, the United States again abandoned counterinsurgency, assuming it was a legacy of the Cold War that would fade to irrelevance with the demise of the Soviet Union.⁴ Insurgencies lingered in the Americas, Africa, and Asia; but without sponsors, most seemed irrelevant to Washington.⁵ When the United States military was deployed to the Balkans, peacekeeping rather than counterinsurgency became the central component of what was then known as "low intensity conflict" and later "military operations other than war."

When the September 11 attacks on the United States and President George W. Bush's subsequent Global War on Terrorism led to US intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, counterinsurgency came roaring

1 For a succinct explanation, see Paul B. Rich, "A Historical Overview of US Counter-Insurgency Policy," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 25, no. 1 (2014): 5–40.

2 See Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1977).

3 See Benjamin C. Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1991); Max G. Manwaring and Court Prisk, eds., *El Salvador at War—An Oral History of Conflict from the 1979 Insurrection to the Present* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1998); and Andrew J. Bacevich et al., *American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1988).

4 For detail, see Steven Metz, *Counterinsurgency: Strategy and the Phoenix of American Capability* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 1995).

5 One of the rare exceptions was the communist insurgency in Colombia, but US concern was more about the insurgents' involvement in narco-trafficking than their dilapidated ideology.

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back, beginning what David Ucko called a “new counterinsurgency era.”⁶ But this iteration was different. Both Iraq and Afghanistan were initially intended to be short stabilization operations following the removal of hostile regimes. They only evolved into counterinsurgency when opponents of the new, American-backed governments adopted the techniques of Cold War insurgents.⁷

From 2003 onward, the US military rediscovered, updated, and applied Cold War-era counterinsurgency concepts, turned them into updated Service and Joint doctrine, and developed organizations and capabilities to implement the new doctrine.⁸ This approach took extensive effort since the Army’s inclination after Vietnam was to resist involvement in counterinsurgency.⁹ Partly because of this resistance, the revival of counterinsurgency took several years. Even so, it was the fastest such adaptation of a conventional force in history.¹⁰

During this process, though, the United States never seriously debated whether Cold War-style counterinsurgency made strategic sense in Iraq and Afghanistan—whether it was a universal approach or a time- and situation-specific one. Because extremists in Iraq and Afghanistan were doing things that looked like twentieth-century insurgency, American strategists simply dusted off Cold War counterinsurgency and revised it.¹¹ This worked in Iraq to an extent. After several years of bloody and expensive fighting, the insurgency was battered to the point the Iraqi government could have finished it off by institutionalizing political and economic reform and continuing to professionalize its security forces.¹² That the Iraqi government failed to do so hints at deep flaws in the American approach to counterinsurgency.

The US campaign in Afghanistan was less successful. The conflict there was a lower priority than that in Iraq, so stabilization and

6 David H. Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the U.S. Military for Modern Wars* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009). On the integration of counterinsurgency into the Global War on Terror, see Robert M. Cassidy, *Counterinsurgency and the Global War on Terror: Military Culture and Irregular War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

7 On the initial coalescence of the Iraq insurgency, see Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); and Hashim, “Insurgency in Iraq 2003–10,” in *The Routledge Handbook to Insurgency and Counter Insurgency*, ed. Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn (London: Routledge, 2012). On the Afghan insurgency, see Antonio Giustozzi, “Insurgency in Afghanistan,” in Rich and Duyvesteyn, *Routledge Companion*; and Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007).

8 Unlike the period between Vietnam and the 1980s, or from the early 1990s to 2005, Joint and service counterinsurgency doctrine continues to be updated on a regular schedule. While new revisions will be published soon, the current versions are US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), *Counterinsurgency*, Joint Publication (JP) 3-24 (Washington, DC: JCS, 2013); and Headquarters, US Department of the Army (HQDA), *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, Field Manual (FM) 3-24/ Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-33.5 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2014).

9 See Fred M. Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

10 See Chad C. Serena, *A Revolution in Military Adaptation: The US Army in the Iraq War* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011). Other government agencies revived their counterinsurgency concepts as well. See US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency* (Washington, DC: US Central Intelligence Agency, 2009); and US Government Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative, *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Political-Military Affairs).

11 Daniel Marston, “Lessons in 21st Century Counterinsurgency: Afghanistan 2001–2007,” in *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare*, ed. Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian (Oxford: Osprey, 2008); and Carter Malkasian, “Counterinsurgency in Iraq: May 2003–January 2007,” in Marston and Malkasian, *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare*.

12 See Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle For Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Pantheon, 2012).

reconstruction programs were underresourced. Afghanistan had a much weaker national identity and professional class than Iraq, making the job of supporting counterinsurgency more difficult. And the Afghan insurgents had two of the things a successful insurgency needs: a lucrative funding source (opium) and an external sanctuary the United States has been unable to shut down (Pakistan).¹³

Today, US involvement in Afghanistan is at a much lower level than a few years ago. But, there is no sign Kabul will be able to contain, much less defeat, the insurgents any time soon. Even so, American political leaders continue to bet on counterinsurgency, apparently believing if the precise US troop levels and missions are found, it eventually will work. In reality it will not, mostly because there is a much bigger issue at play: Afghanistan demonstrates the American conceptualization of counterinsurgency, born in the Cold War and resuscitated without a fundamental revision after the September 11 attacks, has reached the end of its lifespan.¹⁴ The Army, the Joint Force, and the rest of the US government now must do what it failed to do after September 11 and seriously examine the assumptions, conceptual foundations, and strategic effectiveness of counterinsurgency. This analysis will demonstrate counterinsurgency is unacceptably inefficient and should be abandoned in favor of a new method of antiterrorism that better reflects the domestic political situation and the dynamics of the twenty-first-century global security environment.

How We Got Here

While the United States has a long tradition of small wars against irregular opponents and implemented a form of counterinsurgency in the Philippines between 1899 and 1902, counterinsurgency did not become central to American grand strategy until the 1960s.¹⁵ Worried by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's January 1961 speech endorsing "wars of national liberation," the eroding security situation in Laos and South Vietnam, the consolidation of Fidel Castro's regime in Cuba, the French defeat in Algeria, and the outbreak of communist insurgencies in Colombia and Venezuela, President John Kennedy concluded the Soviets were undertaking indirect aggression against the West using leftist insurgencies. This decision made counterinsurgency strategically significant.

13 While the "surge" is often credited with breaking the Iraq insurgency (e.g. Kimberly Kagan, *The Surge: A Military History* [New York: Encounter, 2009]), it actually took a combination of factors including some success constricting Syria's and Iran's support for the insurgency, the growing effectiveness of US special operations efforts, and significant improvement in the Iraqi security forces. Steven Metz, *Decisionmaking in Operation Iraqi Freedom: The Strategic Shift of 2007* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010). On the special operations campaign, see Sean Naylor, *Relentless Strike: The Secret History of the Joint Special Operations Command* (New York: St. Martin's, 2015); Mark Urban, *Task Force Black: The Explosive True Story of the Secret Special Forces War in Iraq* (New York: St Martin's, 2012); and Stanley A. McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir* (New York: Portfolio, 2013).

14 For an elaboration of this argument, see Gian P. Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York: New Press, 2013), 113–35.

15 David E. Johnson, "You Go to COIN with the Military You Have: The United States and 250 Years of Irregular War," in *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies: National Styles and Strategic Cultures*, ed. Beatrice Heuser and Eitan Shamir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). On how the Philippines affected US thinking about counterinsurgency, see Brian McAllister Linn, *The Philippine War, 1899–1902* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000). For the closest thing to American counterinsurgency doctrine before the Cold War, see US Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1940).

The rationale for US involvement in counterinsurgency grew from the “domino theory” and the “death by a thousand small cuts” notion popular among French strategic theorists.¹⁶ Revolutionary war, this group believed, had become the dominant form of conflict in the late twentieth-century. Defeats for pro-Western nations, even in places appearing unimportant, could aggregate into global Soviet victory. With a military stalemate in Europe and communist expansion checked in Korea, the Cold War had devolved to a series of Third World skirmishes. The strategic significance of insurgency was symbolic and perceptual as an indicator of historic trends.

To respond, Kennedy ordered a wide-ranging expansion of US counterinsurgency capabilities. He first formed a cabinet level Interdepartmental Committee on Overseas Internal Defense Policy to develop a unified counterinsurgency strategy and coordinate efforts across the government.¹⁷ The Pentagon created an Office on Counterinsurgency and Special Activities headed by Major General Victor H. Krulak (US Marine Corps), giving him direct access to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of Defense.¹⁸ The military services integrated counterinsurgency into their professional educational systems and established training centers for it. Army Special Forces were expanded and reoriented toward counterinsurgency assistance.¹⁹ Even the State Department and the Agency for International Development began to take counterinsurgency seriously, albeit with less enthusiasm than the military.²⁰

From its inception, though, US thinking about counterinsurgency had a heterogeneous intellectual foundation. One important element was the French notion of *guerre révolutionnaire*, which viewed insurgency as East-West proxy conflict. A second element was the belief that counterinsurgency required holistic stabilization and political reform rather than simply battlefield victory and thus needed a tightly integrated military, political, informational, economic, intelligence, and law enforcement effort. This idea came from British pacification campaigns in Malaya, Kenya, and elsewhere, as well as from French officers who fought insurgents in Indochina and Algeria.²¹

The third component of American counterinsurgency was the theory of modernization borrowed from academia.²² Derived in part from the

16 Peter Paret, “The French Army and La Guerre Révolutionnaire,” *Survival* 1, no. 1 (1959): 25–32, doi:10.1080/00396335908440119; and Paret, *French Revolutionary Warfare from Indochina to Algeria: The Analysis of a Political and Military Doctrine* (New York: Praeger, 1964).

17 Charles Maechling Jr., “Counterinsurgency: The First Ordeal by Fire,” in *Low Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties*, ed. Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 26–27.

18 Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History* (New York: William Morrow, 1994), 736.

19 Army Special Forces were created to undertake unconventional warfare behind Soviet lines during a major conflict in Europe.

20 U. Alexis Johnson, “Internal Defense and the Foreign Service,” *Foreign Service Journal* 39, no. 7 (July 1962): 21–22; and Henry C. Ramsey, “The Modernization Process and Insurgency,” *Foreign Service Journal* 39, no. 6 (June 1962): 21–23.

21 Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978); Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency* (New York: Praeger, 1964); and David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964).

22 M. L. R. Smith and David Martin Jones, *The Political Impossibility of Modern Counterinsurgency: Strategic Problems, Puzzles, and Paradoxes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 58–68.

writings of German sociologist Max Weber, modernization theory was based on the idea that the natural path for developing societies was from traditional economic, political, and social organizations to “modern” ones relying on bureaucratic administration with professional credentials and expertise rather than familial or traditional authorities.

As Americans grappled with insurgency, modernization theory provided an overarching intellectual framework. Policymakers and strategists concluded the difficult and complex transition from traditional to “modern” societies and political systems created tensions and conflicts. Modernization saw the political awakening of previously passive segments of society, such as the rural peasantry and marginalized ethnic, sectarian, or racial groups. Often traditional structures of order decayed more rapidly than modern ones developed.²³ All these factors provided opportunities for revolutionary movements. If revolutionaries could not seize power through a Bolshevik-style putsch, one alternative was a protracted, rural insurgency based on an extensive political underground, information warfare and propaganda, terrorism, and guerrilla operations.

Modernization theory told American counterinsurgents that success was not simply defeating insurgent units but expanding the state’s capacity to govern and secure its territory—in other words to do the things modernization theory says “modern” states should do. Until a nation became modern, it could not use political institutions to reconcile divergences among its population or have its security forces prevent or defeat organized insurgency. Thus, counterinsurgency required nation-building.

From the beginning, this kludge of very different ideas had internal tensions. Conceptualizing insurgency as a form of war suggested it should be military-centric, but if battlefield victory did not equate to strategic success, the military could only do half the job—and, it was the easier half. Of course in conventional war, the peace settlement determines whether battlefield success led to strategic victory, but in counterinsurgency, what came after battlefield success was even more difficult to determine.

That conclusion was not the only fissure in the concept. When the British and French undertook counterinsurgency while decolonizing, they assumed the authority of the nation where the conflict occurred. They could impose deep political and economic reforms even if traditional elites opposed it. Yet things were different for the United States: it did not undertake counterinsurgency but counterinsurgency support working through a local partner government. That divergence means the British and French models, which were part of the intellectual foundation of American counterinsurgency, were not fully applicable. Neither those models nor academic modernization theory explains how to compel a resistant local ally to undertake deep reform. In fact, as the United States helped a partner nation expand its political, military, law enforcement, and intelligence capability, Washington’s ability to compel change declined. The United States never surmounted this *leverage dilemma*

²³ For the most influential analysis of this phenomenon, see Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968).

in Vietnam or later in Iraq or Afghanistan. Current counterinsurgency doctrine recognizes this problem but offers no solution.²⁴

Combining academic modernization theory with British and French notions of counterinsurgency also created organizational problems. The military dominated America's counterinsurgency organization even though the ultimate solution to insurgency was nonmilitary. Despite creating large embassies in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, either the US military remained the most important player (Vietnam, Afghanistan) or the embassy found when most of the US military left and the insurgency was under control, it could not convince the partner government to finalize success by continuing deep reform (Iraq).

The Decay of Old Concepts

As American counterinsurgency was revived in Iraq and Afghanistan, the problematic assumptions and internal tensions inherent to the concept festered and worsened, becoming less tolerable as the strategic significance of insurgency declined. For instance, the architects of post-September 11 counterinsurgency accepted the idea that it is a type of war; the phrase "counterinsurgency warfare" was common. While insurgents do use armed action, war is not entirely military but rather military-centric.²⁵ Insurgency, by contrast, is designed to diminish the importance of the military realm, primarily because the state—especially a state that has external counterinsurgency support—is normally militarily dominant, at least at the very end.

In some ways, insurgency is more akin to premodern fighting where the primary objective was to demonstrate the bravery of individual warriors or capture prisoners for ritual sacrifice or slavery than to impose the political will of one group on another. This means calling counterinsurgency "war" is using the word euphemistically like the "war on poverty" or "war on drugs." This allegory makes sustaining public support difficult since Americans expect their nation eventually to "win" in some demonstrable way. Approaching counterinsurgency as war skews both its organization and its expectations.

The traditional conceptualization of counterinsurgency assumed partner governments supported the Western-Weberian notion of modernization and were willing to undertake deep reforms to become "modern." All they needed was a boost. Counterinsurgency had "an ideological dimension imbued with a distinctively American liberal philosophical and political self-understanding."²⁶ From this perspective, all the United States needed to do was provide partner governments the means to modernize.

24 See, for instance, JCS, *Counterinsurgency*, VIII-8.

25 Some scholars treat nonviolent strategic social movements as a type of insurgency. See, for instance, Mark Grimsley, "Why the Civil Rights Movement Was an Insurgency," HistoryNet, February 24, 2010, <http://www.historynet.com/why-the-civil-rights-movement-was-an-insurgency.htm>. I disagree and consider insurgency a type of strategy, which by definition includes armed force, whether semiconventional military operations, guerrilla operations, terrorism, or most often, a blend of them. Insurgency is not military centric but always entails violence. Steven Metz, "Rethinking Insurgency," in Rich and Duyvesteyn, *Routledge Handbook*; and Metz, "Insurgency," in *Conceptualizing Modern War*, ed. Karl Erik Haug and Ole Jørgen Maaø (London: Hurst, 2011).

26 Smith and Jones, *Political Impossibility*, 57.

This assumption proved accurate in some places like El Salvador, Colombia, and the Philippines. To the architects of American counterinsurgency, that success validated the principle, leading them to draw universal conclusions from culture- and situation-specific circumstances. Yet in many parts of the world—including those most prone to insurgency—the state is not a detached reconciler using a rule set that does not favor any one segment of the society. The body politic is not designed to balance diverse interests but to formalize and to sustain the group holding power. Because this motive produces resistance, Americans encouraged the local elite to transform the political, legal, and economic systems into something reflecting the Western notion of fairness or, as it is often phrased, good governance. But, such entreaties ask elites to alter a system that benefits them, their families, and their peers.

In other words, the American approach to counterinsurgency is contingent on partner elites acting irrationally—doing things against the interests of themselves, their families, and their affiliates. As Joint counterinsurgency doctrine notes, “US counterinsurgents will often have to cajole or coerce [host nation] governments and entrenched elites to recognize the legitimacy of those grievances and address them. This is especially true where reforms would involve compromising the political and financial interests of those elites.”²⁷ While accurate, these elites generally undertake just enough reform to satisfy Washington, which keeps assistance flowing without fundamentally altering the beneficial system.

Thus another flaw with the traditional conceptualization of counterinsurgency appears: the United States seeks the complete defeat of the insurgents while its local partners often benefit from the persistence of an insurgency large enough to sustain American interest and assistance but not powerful enough to overthrow them. Insurgency keeps aid flowing and gives the political elite an excuse for repression, exclusion, and holding onto power.²⁸ Imagine, for instance, Afghanistan with the Taliban defeated: with little interest from the world, the country would sink back into even more crushing poverty. Without a stream of external assistance, Afghanistan’s professional class and political elite would have far fewer economic opportunities. In long running conflicts, a “war economy” usually emerges, which benefits both the elites that the United States supports and the insurgent leaders.²⁹ Ultimately, this rapport means those with the power to end an insurgency—whether local elites or counterinsurgent leaders—often have little incentive to do so; while those who suffer the most from the conflict—the local population—do not have the power to end it.

While US doctrine recognizes the problem, the United States has never found a way to resolve it.³⁰ To gain the support of the American public, US political leaders must portray a conflict as one where supporting the local elite is an important, even vital American interest.

27 JCS, *Counterinsurgency*, II-19.

28 Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 330–31.

29 See, for instance, Karen Ballentine and Heiko Nitzschke, *The Political Economy of Civil War and Conflict Transformation* (Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2005).

30 JCS, *Counterinsurgency*, III-3.

This commitment, combined with the fact that many insurgency movements are, in fact, worse than America's partners, diminishes US leverage over its partner elite. Thus, the United States is unable to compel its partners to undertake the degree of system change that might prevent future armed resistance but which erodes their own power and wealth.

The United States also is hindered by the idea that the "normal" state of affairs is for a state to exercise control over all of its national territory. In many parts of the world—including those prone to insurgency—this is not the norm. While governments would be happy to do so, they draw the very rational conclusion that the benefits of exercising full control over their national territory is not worth the costs. Thus, they focus on the areas where the elite and its affiliates live, whether regions or parts of cities, and on the wealth-producing parts of the nation such as economically robust urban areas, regions with important natural resources, and transportation corridors. They write off rural hinterlands dominated by nonelite groups, regions that do not generate wealth, and increasingly, poorer urban areas. Elites accept these areas are informally governed, often with little or no presence by the formal state. The potential for armed conflict emanating from informally governed regions always exists, but local elites make the rational decision that tolerating that risk—and living with persistent terrorism—makes more sense than attempting to exercise full control everywhere.

The traditional notion of counterinsurgency called on the state to undertake economic development to undercut resentment and opposition. In other words, the state would provide a better deal to the population than the insurgents. This idea made sense within the context of modernization theory as Americans first grappled with counterinsurgency. It was no coincidence Walt Rostow—the deputy national security adviser for John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, as well as an architect of US involvement in Vietnam—had written a book linking the "stages" of economic growth with political stability.³¹

Positing a causal relationship between economic growth and preventing or quelling insurgency has many problems though. One is the tendency of populations to grow faster than the creation of jobs. Many analysts have found a correlation between youth bulges and youth un- (or under-) employment as well as internal political violence.³² Even states that recognize this interdependence often can do little about it, particularly in an era of globalization, when the economic health of a nation is often determined by external factors beyond its control.³³ And, the causal linkage between economic growth and insurgency oversimplifies the causes for someone creating or joining an insurgency. Often psychological factors such as personal grievances or the desire for personal empowerment, heroic status, or simple

31 Walt Whitman Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth, A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

32 See Lionel Beehner, "The Effects of 'Youth Bulge' on Civil Conflicts," Council on Foreign Relations, April 13, 2007, <https://www.cfr.org/background/effects-youth-bulge-civil-conflicts>; Henrik Urdal, *The Devil in the Demographics: The Effect of Youth Bulges on Domestic Armed Conflict, 1950–2000*, Social Development Paper 14 (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2004); and Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, *Youth Bulges and Conflict*, Technical Brief Winter 2010 (Washington, DC: US Agency for International Development).

33 Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

boredom are as, or more, important than political factors or the absence of economic opportunity.³⁴ Simply creating low status jobs does not address these psychological factors.

Today changes in the global security environment exacerbate the flawed assumptions and the internal tensions of the traditional conceptualization of counterinsurgency and undercut much of its remaining validity. Take the notion that counterinsurgency requires the state to create a counternarrative to the one propagated by insurgents. The counterinsurgency narrative, according to Joint doctrine,

should contextualize what the population experiences, legitimizing counterinsurgent actions and delegitimizing the insurgency. It is an interpretive lens designed to help individuals and groups make decisions in the face of uncertainty where the stakes are perceived as life and death. The [counterinsurgency] narrative should explain the current situation and describe how the [host nation] government will defeat the insurgency. It should invoke relevant cultural and historical references to both justify the actions of counterinsurgents and make the case that the government will win.³⁵

Creating a coherent narrative was feasible in the twentieth-century when the primary means of information propagation—authoritative written material or broadcasts—could be controlled, or at least largely controlled, by the state. In today's information saturated environment where narratives can form, grow, go dormant, and be reborn outside the control of the state, the idea of counterinsurgents agreeing to and implementing a narrative to influence perceptions of a conflict, as US counterinsurgency doctrine calls for, is nostalgic at best.³⁶ With radical transparency and instant connectivity, there is more of a theme and meme swarm than the development and promulgation of an agreed-upon, coherent narrative.

State sponsorship of insurgency or provision of sanctuary to insurgents still happens as it did during the Cold War. Think Russia and Ukraine, Pakistan and Afghanistan, or Iran and Yemen. For the United States, though, there is no risk of the “death of a thousand small cuts” as during the Cold War. Insurgency is still using proxy aggression but is no longer a form of superpower proxy conflict. In general terms, this application means insurgency is less strategically significant than it once was.

Where Do We Go Now?

Today insurgency is most common precisely where the flawed assumptions, conundrums, and internal tensions of the traditional notion of counterinsurgency are the most pervasive. And, the United States security policy has entered a time of frugality. America can no longer lavish security resources with little regard for efficiency. This need for frugality means counterinsurgency has run its course. With the strategic

34 Steven Metz, “Psychology of Participation in Insurgency,” *Small Wars Journal*, January 27, 2012, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/psychology-of-participation-in-insurgency>.

35 JCS, *Counterinsurgency*, III-9.

36 For an exploration of this concept, see Steven Metz, “The Internet, New Media, and the Evolution of Insurgency,” *Parameters* 42, no. 3 (Autumn 2012): 80–90. For a more expansive treatment of the broader phenomenon, see James Jay Carafano, *Wiki at War: Conflict in a Socially Networked World* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2012).

stakes lower, it no longer makes sense for the United States to accept the gross inefficiency and adverse benefit-cost ratio of counterinsurgency. America must still counter irregular threats but improve efficiency and better balance costs and benefits.

The first step is remembering the United States reengaged in counterinsurgency after the September 11 attacks because policymakers saw it as part of antiterrorism. Such actions were a way to eliminate sanctuaries for extremist movements and shrink the pool of terrorist recruits. But in reality, counterinsurgency support almost never reaches that end state. Partner governments take American support and implement enough reforms that the insurgency cannot overthrow them; then, the partners stop. They tolerate simmering extremism in the hinterlands or urban slums so long as it does not pose an existential threat to the regime.

This practice means counterinsurgency may be an effective method of antiterrorism; however, it is not an efficient one. Today the United States needs antiterrorism strategies that are acceptably effective but also affordable and sustainable. To find them, policymakers must remember the threat of nations ruled by extremists providing bases for terrorists to attack the United States or its allies. Thus, helping create friendly governments that rule the way the United States would prefer might be nice. But, the only necessity is preventing terrorist power projection.

Given that, the United States should shift to something such as the Israeli approach to extremism and terrorism. After finding out how difficult and costly traditional pacification and counterinsurgency is and recognizing it could never “win the hearts and minds” of the Arab populations in places like southern Lebanon, Gaza, and the West Bank, Israel concluded it could tolerate extremism but not terrorism, settling for a realistic, affordable, and sustainable approach that is not contingent on how neighboring states are ruled. If enemies mobilize enough strength to threaten Israel directly, it strikes at them with the most effective combination of air and land based military power. After weakening the extremists, Israel withdraws, knowing it may have to repeat offensive operations again if the threat reaches intolerable levels.

This approach, which relies on the time-tested techniques of spoiling raids and large-scale but limited duration punitive expeditions, might provide an acceptably effective and sustainable post-counterinsurgency strategy for the United States.³⁷ Such an avenue clearly would require some sort of small persistent presence using some combination of the intelligence community, military special operations forces, overhead assets (most unmanned), and increasingly, ground-based autonomous systems. But if al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, or another terrorism-based extremist movement develops bases and a power projection capability in a place like Afghanistan, Libya, or Yemen, the United States should launch a powerful military and interagency strike force. But America should abandon the idea that the Afghanistans, Yemens, and Libyas of the world want to, or can become, stable, pro-American nations, or that trying to transform them is a good use of increasingly scarce security

37 For more on this approach, see Steven Metz, “The Case for a Punitive Expedition against the Islamic State,” *World Politics Review*, February 6, 2015, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/15031/the-case-for-a-punitive-expedition-against-the-islamic-state>.

resources. So long as transnational terrorists do not plot, train for, and launch attacks from such nation's soil, that is enough.

To make this approach work, the US military needs to redesign its forces and develop strategic concepts and doctrine for limited duration, large-scale expeditions. The key would be the ability to project Joint and interagency forces—increasingly ones bolstered by autonomous systems—over long distances, and repeat as necessary. The mantra for counterinsurgency has always been “clear, hold, build.” An expeditionary antiterrorism strategy would accept clearing is necessary, but holding and building are not worth the costs. Adversaries would no longer believe they could draw the US military in and wear down American will over time. Hopefully, opposing forces would be deterred by knowing the United States could at least “clear” through large-scale expeditions as many times as necessary, particularly as expeditionary forces increasingly integrate autonomous systems. Deterrence always requires capability, credibility, and communications. An antiterrorism strategy based on limited duration expeditions would be credible in a way traditional counterinsurgency is not.

Conclusion

Traditional counterinsurgency was seen as a form of war without all the definitional attributes of war but with a dose of an old-fashioned theory of modernization, which has been superseded in the academic world. If the concept ever made sense, it no longer does. Counterinsurgency must be refocused on the core security problem: transnational terrorism. Counterinsurgency might be a way to address that problem, but it is immensely inefficient and difficult to sustain politically. When the United States had a surplus of defense resources and could garner public support for anything that struck back at extremism in the emotional years immediately after the September 11 attacks, inefficiency was tolerable. Now, it no longer is.

This turn of events suggests the United States must abandon counterinsurgency as a tool of antiterrorism. Shifting to a strategy that contains, weakens, and deters transnational terrorism by strategic expeditions—large scale punitive raids, repeated if necessary—is a viable way of meeting the criteria of minimal effectiveness, maximum efficiency, and political sustainability.

