The Heroes of COIN

by Joshua Rovner

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Abstract: The conventional wisdom holds that security in Iraq only improved after Gen. David Petraeus implemented a new counterinsurgency doctrine that stressed population security instead of aggressive operations against insurgent forces. This interpretation is strikingly similar to the historiography of the Huk Rebellion, the Malayan Emergency, and the Vietnam War. In each case observers criticized initial efforts as brutal and counterproductive, only to be rescued when enlightened new leaders arrived on the scene. This article challenges the familiar hero narrative, arguing that critics routinely exaggerate the importance of leadership changes because they view conflicts as experiments in counterinsurgency rather than exercises in state-building. Whereas counterinsurgency (COIN) theory emphasizes issues like public security and government legitimacy, theorists of state-building describe a bloody and protracted competition for power under conditions approaching anarchy. The upshot is that the “heroes” of late-stage COIN might actually depend on the earlier “villains” who did the dirty work of establishing political order and coercing the population into obedience.

Violence in Iraq leveled off after a period of extraordinary bloodshed in 2006-2007. According to the conventional wisdom, security improved because General David Petraeus and his staff implemented a new COIN doctrine that stressed population security instead of aggressive operations against insurgent forces. The Petraeus team, we are told, took steps to scale back the misguided conventional operations of previous leaders and focused on gaining public support instead. Counterinsurgency operations during the “surge” in 2007 helped reverse the course of the terrible civil war gripping Iraq and gave the government in Baghdad the chance to solidify its legitimacy. This interpretation of events is strikingly similar to the historiography of the Huk Rebellion (1946-1956), the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), and the period of major U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War (1964-1973). In each case, observers have criticized initial efforts as brutal and
counterproductive, concluding that the situation only improved after enlightened leaders arrived on the scene.

What explains this peculiar pattern? One reason is that many observers subscribe to a particular slice of modern counterinsurgency theory which describes these wars as armed contests for public support and emphasizes the role of empathetic leaders. The actual fighting between government and insurgent forces, according to this model, is much less important than the underlying contest for the hearts and minds of civilians. For the government, winning legitimacy requires sustained efforts to demonstrate that it is competent and fair, as well as a very judicious user of force to avoid civilian casualties. But winning hearts and minds in the midst of a shooting war is no small feat, and only supremely intelligent and charismatic leaders are able to pull it off. Indeed, Mark Moyar claims that the relative quality of leaders is the single most important factor determining victory in counterinsurgency wars. According to Moyar, COIN is a kind of “‘leader-centric warfare,’ a contest between elites in which the elite with superiority in certain leadership attributes usually wins.”

Our understanding changes dramatically, however, if we view these conflicts as exercises in state-building rather than counterinsurgency. Whereas COIN theorists focus on popular support and government legitimacy, theorists of state-building describe a bloody and protracted competition for power under conditions approaching anarchy. Establishing a state means killing or co-opting one’s rivals and gaining the capacity to enforce laws. As Paul Staniland writes, “We may think we can ‘win hearts and minds’ while establishing a strong state, but state formation is intrinsically about coercion and dominance.” Absent the demonstrated ability to control the population, well-meaning efforts to appear legitimate are likely to fail. The upshot is that the heroes of late-stage COIN might actually depend on the earlier “villains” who did the dirty work of establishing a political order and coercing the population into obedience.

In addition, it is likely that practitioners gravitate to COIN because it offers standard technocratic solutions to complicated local problems. Contemporary counterinsurgency theory presupposes a three-sided initiative, with the government and the insurgent group competing for the support of the civilian population. This simple framework makes it easy to conceive an operational rulebook for COIN: increase efforts to protect civilians, invest in economic development, and enact political reform to reduce popular grievances against the government. Never mind that there are usually more than

1 Mark Moyar, A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 3.
three groups competing for power, that governments as well as insurgent
groups are often plagued by internal divisions and shifting alliances, and that
the population is not some passive group that can be moved en masse from
one side to the other. It is relatively easy to operationalize a COIN campaign
based on a stylized model of insurgency; it is much harder to deal forthrightly
with the ugly and confusing internecine violence that characterizes weak or
failed states.3

Finally, the heroic narrative is appealing because it is inherently
optimistic. It shows that states can succeed by responding to legitimate public
concerns and without resorting to overwhelming violence. It also promises
that military organizations can overcome their conventional preferences and
promote unconventionally-minded leaders just in time to change the course of
failing campaigns. The slow course of state-building may be largely outside
their control, however, and it may require actions that are inconsistent with
modern liberal values.

The Hero Myth

Standard treatments of counterinsurgency paint striking portraits of
villains and heroes. The villains are political and military leaders who fail to
understand that kinetic action against the enemy is at best a secondary task,
and at worst a counterproductive approach. Such leaders tend to drive civilians
into the arms of the insurgents and make it extremely difficult for the
government to gain popular legitimacy. At best they can maintain a modicum
of stability, but the political order will become fragile as the people become
disgruntled and increasingly willing to support an insurgent movement. The
heroes of COIN, on the other hand, understand that such wars have more to do
with political perceptions than military operations. They know that a stronger
military may win every engagement and still lose the war. They are the
enlightened leaders who overcome the military tendency to seek conventional
solutions for unconventional wars; who recognize that population security is the
sine qua non of effective counterinsurgency; and who try to win the
support of civilians by accommodating popular grievances instead of alienat-
ing them through closefisted brutality.

Looking for clues about how to defeat insurgencies, COIN analysts
frequently evoke the conflicts in the Philippines, Malaya, Vietnam, and Iraq.
The conventional wisdom in each case is strikingly similar.

3 War college students probably prefer David Galula’s short treatise on counterinsurgency,
which includes a straightforward checklist of the steps necessary to succeed, to his longer and
more complex memoir of his experience in Algeria in the late 1950s. David Galula, Counter-
and Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958 (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2007 [1963]).
The Huk Rebellion

President Manuel Roxas of the Philippines is widely criticized for his mailed fist policy during the early stages of the Huk Rebellion, which mostly served to drive civilians away from the government and towards the insurgents. “After elections in 1946 brought Manuel Roxas to the presidency,” writes Donald Hamilton in a representative passage:

. . . the government pledged to end the Huk insurgency within sixty days. This only led to a greater fiasco put on by the Philippine government and further angered the peasantry of central Luzon, where the Huks already enjoyed their largest support. Incidents such as off-handed killings by government troops and the shelling of barrios only fueled antigovernment sentiment. Soldiers were placed in towns, and garrisons were established in villages and hamlets. Checkpoints were often used by the soldiers patrolling them as a way to line their pockets with ‘incentive monies’ from villagers simply wishing to pass through. If a villager was too poor to make payment, the usual beatings ensued. Rampant abuse was permeating the otherwise confused intentions of the Roxas government. This ‘mailed fist’ approach was widely viewed as inappropriate, reversing the trends that the United States had hoped from afar would take place.4

Most observers share the view that Roxas’s tacit encouragement of brutality was counterproductive. According to this view, he allowed the military to indulge all of its worst instincts while ignoring the underlying social and economic grievances that made the Huks a popular alternative to the government. This made it easier for the Huks to recruit from their position in central Luzon. Roxas did not take the Huks seriously as an insurgent movement with a groundswell of popular support. Quite the contrary: he saw the Huks as criminals and encouraged the constabulary to pursue them aggressively. In 1947 Roxas declared “open season” on the Huk Rebellion, and the military police began a series of indiscriminate “Huk Hunts,” which included terror tactics and torture against civilians in order to gain intelligence on the insurgents.5 These tactics failed to erode Huk strength or yield much useful intelligence, however. About the only thing they accomplished was to reduce the government’s legitimacy.6 By the time of Roxas’s death in April 1948, writes Rufus Phillips, “the Huks were on the verge of winning control of the Philippines. The Philippine government was corrupt and incompetent. Its army was poorly led, taking on the Huks with

conventional military tactics and in the process often alienating the civilian population."

The next Philippine president, Elpidio Quirino, earns credit from some historians because he was less enthusiastic about repression. On the other hand, he quickly developed a reputation for tolerating massive corruption in the government, and he oversaw a fraudulent election in 1949 that kept him in power. The situation was so bad, according to one analyst, that the Huk actively supported his presidency because they believed it would help their recruitment effort. And Quirino became less moderate after the elections, which were “fraught with fraud, terror, and rampant electioneering violations.” As Huk attacks became more frequent in 1950, Quirino “abandoned his conciliatory stance toward the rebels. In a last-ditch effort to stop the insurgency, he ordered the armed forces to assume the responsibility for combating the insurgents and to return to the terror tactics that the Roxas administration had once used so widely.”

Ramon Magsaysay entered the stage as Secretary of National Defense on August 31, 1950. According to most observers, this was the critical moment that turned the tide of the war in favor of the government. Magsaysay took steps to undo the damage wrought by Roxas’s brutality and Quirino’s corruption. He sought to reorganize the military and police, firing recalcitrant officers who were obstacles to reform. He streamlined military operations to maximize intelligence collection without needlessly provoking the civilian population. He oversaw a credible and legitimate election. And he instituted economic reforms, both real and symbolic, which addressed the basic issues that motivated civilian support for the insurgency and took the wind out of the Huk’s sails.

Magsaysay’s approach has earned him extraordinary praise from historians and political scientists. Donald Hamilton calls him “dynamic . . . a thoughtful, honest, and charismatic leader.” Russell Glenn and Kalev Sepp


9 Greenberg, Hukbalahap Insurrection, pp. 64-66.

both refer to Magsaysay’s “dynamism and imagination,” and Glenn argues that his “charisma, optimism, and persistence” were as important as the substance of any of his reforms.\textsuperscript{11} Lawrence Greenberg contends that his “honesty, unpretentious air, and deep concern with the problems faced by his countrymen forged a bond with the common man that was unprecedented in Philippine history.”\textsuperscript{12} Mark Moyar notes that Magsaysay grew up in a “hut made of bamboo and cogon grass, the Philippine equivalent of Abraham Lincoln’s log cabin.” His youth, which was mostly spent “milking water buffaloes and working his family’s modest plat of farmland,” made it possible for him to combine his natural charisma with genuine sympathy for the peasant population.\textsuperscript{13}

All of this led to immediate results. In a startling turn of events, Philippine authorities arrested the entire Huk politburo in one day in October 1950, just weeks after Magsaysay had become secretary. Army reforms brought more efficient tactics in 1951, leading to a reduction in political violence and a wave of Huk surrenders late in the year.\textsuperscript{14} While conventional military operations continued, Magsaysay added a series of pseudo-operations in which Philippine soldiers disguised themselves as Huk regulars to sow dissent. He was also able to deliver on his promise to help the government conduct relatively clean elections, which took the steam out of Huk propaganda. The result was a remarkable turnaround:

In 1948 the HUs were on the verge of winning control of the Philippines. The Philippine government was corrupt and incompetent. Its army was poorly led, taking on the HUs with conventional military tactics and in the process often alienating the civilian population. Lansdale became the advisor to an extraordinary Filipino leader, Ramon Magsaysay, who as Secretary of Defense changed the army’s approach. Adopting a policy he called ‘all-out friendship or all-out force,’ Magsaysay persuaded the army to put the security and well-being of the population first while aggressively using small unit combat operations and psychological warfare to defeat the Huk guerillas.\textsuperscript{15}

In sum, the force of Magsaysay’s personality and the wisdom of his approach to counterinsurgency led to a sudden turnaround in the military and political trajectory of the war. The government rapidly scored major intelligence coups against the HUs and within a year won legitimacy from a deeply cynical and hardened population.


\textsuperscript{12} Greenberg, \textit{Hukbalahap Insurrection}, pp. 91-92.


\textsuperscript{14} Miller, “Counterinsurgency and Operational Art,” p. 37.

The Malayan Emergency

Historians tell a similar story about British involvement in the Malayan Emergency, a similar communist-inspired insurgency. According to the standard narrative, early British counterinsurgency tactics were disorganized, clumsy, and counterproductive. The first few years of the conflict were disastrous for the British, when military leaders turned a blind eye to frequent beatings of Chinese residents in Malaya. Because the rebellion was almost entirely made up of ethnic Chinese, officers hoped that such tactics would yield important intelligence about the scope and organization of the insurgency. But many of the victims were innocent. British High Commissioner Sir Henry Gurney approved of the harsh treatment of the Chinese, hoping that it would compel citizens to cooperate with the government. In fact, it only drove them in the other direction, and the number of attacks peaked in late 1951. Gurney himself was assassinated in October.16

The situation improved somewhat under the leadership of Sir Harold Briggs, who instituted reforms to improve military efficiency and streamline the security forces. Secretary of State for the Colonies Oliver Lyttleton also penned an important report after his visit to Malaya in late October 1951. Lyttleton’s report, especially its emphasis on the need for a centralized leadership structure, captured the attention of the prime minister and other British notables. No less than Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery told Winston Churchill,

The problem has been studied by the Secretary of State for the colonies; the measures necessary to begin to put things right are clearly set out in his Report. But to determine what must be done is only half the answer, and the easiest half; that of *itself* will not achieve success. In all this welter of trouble ‘the man’ is what counts. The second half of the answer is to produce good men, really good men, who have the courage to issue the necessary orders, the drive to insist that those orders are carried out, and the determination and will-power to see the thing through to the end.17

The *man* turned out to be Sir Hugh Templer, who took over as high commissioner in January 1952. Historians credit Templer with continuing the reforms begun by Briggs and implementing some of Lyttleton’s suggestions. His persistence about the need for reorganization, and his insistence about maintaining a unity of effort, are common refrains in the historiography of the war. But observers stress that Templer brought much more than just an eye for efficient bureaucracy. What really mattered were his personal


17 Quoted in Moyar, *Question of Command*, pp. 120-121.
characteristics and his understanding that the population is central in counterinsurgency.

Like Magsaysay, he arrived to find an armed force that was profoundly ignorant about the social and cultural bases of the rebellion, and one that tended to mask its ignorance through conventional coercion.\(^{18}\) Templer changed course by aiming directly at the political problems that gave rise to the insurgency. According to Kaley Sepp,

Templer [. . .] strived for the political and social equality of all Malays. He granted Malay citizenship en masse to over a million Indians and Chinese; elevated the public role of women; constructed schools, clinics, and police stations; electrified rural villages; continued a 700-percent increase in the number of police and military troops; and gave arms to militia guards to protect their own communities. In this environment, insurgent terrorism only drove the people further from the rebels and closer to the government.\(^{19}\)

Templer’s admirers point out that he ensured these gains by instituting a civil training program that ultimately allowed native Malays to govern after the British exit.

Templer also succeeded because he “possessed the ideal leadership qualities necessary to defeat an insurgency and thus was able to shift the balance of power in favor of the British during the Malaya Emergency.”\(^{20}\) Mark Moyar credits his “magnetism and his attentiveness to the soldiers, police, and civil servants” and tells the story of a young officer who described him as “dynamic, enthusiastic, and for someone in my position a hero, who was always open to ideas from junior officers like myself.”\(^{21}\) Templer was charismatic enough to inspire local military officers, though he challenged their previous actions by reminding them that “the shooting side of this business is only 25 percent of the trouble.”\(^{22}\) He soon won over political leaders, and like Magsaysay, he was quick to remove underperforming officials. Perhaps most important, according to John Nagl, was his ability to mesmerize civilians and cultivate their sense of nationalism while simultaneously respecting his calls to order.\(^{23}\) The result was a dramatic turn in favor of the government. Said Lyttelton, “(H)e dominated the scene. . . In a few months I had almost dismissed Malay from its place in my mind among the danger spots. My role had become simple: it was to back him up and support him.”\(^{24}\)

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\(^{23}\) Nagl, \textit{Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife}, pp. 89-91.

\(^{24}\) Nagl, \textit{Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife}, p. 90.
Vietnam

A similar narrative thread runs through the historiography of the U.S. war in Vietnam. According to the standard account, U.S. forces pursued a conventionally-minded attrition strategy during the period of major escalation in the mid-1960s. General William Westmoreland, the theater commander until 1968, “preferred to focus his energies on the big-unit war and the American forces that dominated it, which he found more exciting than pacification.”25 A West Point graduate and artillery commander in World War II, his outlook fit perfectly in the mold of the conventional Army, and he was known for his perseverance but not his flexibility. These attributes were perfect for the battlefields of Western Europe, where he was able to devote his considerable energy to the task of destroying organized German forces. Westmoreland’s way, writes Max Boot, “was the army way, the American way, the World War Two way. Find the enemy, fix him in place and annihilate him with withering fire power.”20 Vietnam, however, required a great deal more willingness to adapt to changing circumstances and set aside deeply held doctrinal beliefs.

Critics of Westmoreland have long argued that he was never able to adapt, leading him to implement a conventional strategy of attrition against an unconventional enemy.27 Seek and destroy missions may have helped in earlier conflicts, but the communists enjoyed sanctuary across the border and, more importantly, seemed willing to absorb a massive amount of punishment without losing the will to persist. An alternative strategy based on modern COIN theory would have focused on population security rather than aggressive efforts to search out enemy units to destroy. According to Andrew Krepinevich, this would have had the additional benefit of attracting more guerilla units towards U.S. and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) concentrations, thus exposing them to fire. But Westmoreland refused to take a chance with this course of action. He was either a victim of “organizational hubris or slavishness to the Concept (or both),” and as a result he was never able to make an objective reassessment in time to adjust his strategy.28

Worst of all, say critics, Westmoreland’s firepower intensive operational approach led to massive civilian casualties and disillusionment among the population whose support was necessary to shore up the South Vietnamese government. In so doing, he exacerbated the basic political problem of the war: Saigon could not rule on its own if it did not win popular legitimacy, but it could not become legitimate as long as civilians were subjected to high levels of government violence. For this reason, Westmoreland could not

25 Moyar, Question of Command, p. 156.
27 Nagl, Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife, pp. 151-154 and pp. 201-203.
produce a durable victory even if he succeeded in defeating the Vietcong and the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN), the main force units of the North Vietnamese communist government. His obsession with statistical measures of conventional progress also led him to fail to appreciate the impact of such extraordinary levels of violence on the population. His strategy, according to one critic, turned South Vietnam into “a lush tropical bombing range” and ruined any hopes of overcoming popular disillusionment. His strategic myopia caused him to ignore the people in a people’s war.29

General Creighton Abrams, who took command of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) in 1968, implemented a much more nuanced approach. Unlike his predecessor, he was far more attuned to the negative consequences of the attrition strategy and focused on winning popular support by providing security to the population.30 As part of his effort to shift from conventional war to counterinsurgency, he ordered the MACV staff to produce a new “one war” plan so that pacification would no longer be referred to as “the other war.” The new plan seemed to be lifted directly out of modern population-centric COIN theory: “The key strategic thrust is to provide meaningful, continuing security for the Vietnamese people in expanding areas of increasingly effective civil authority.” The plan also overturned previous measures of effectiveness: “It is important that the command move away from the over-emphasized and often irrelevant ‘body count’ preoccupation.” Most importantly, Abrams recognized the political effects of high-intensity military operations: “All too often in the past the enemy has been successful, either by himself threatening the people’s security, or by provoking responses by the allied forces that have been exceptionally destructive to the people.”31

Many analysts argue that this change in strategy was long overdue. The combination of tailored military efforts with a renewed emphasis on rural economic development allowed Abrams to finally begin changing the direction of the war. While he was less successful than Magsaysay and Templer at forcing the Army to confront its organizational preferences for conventional operations, he did put in place the necessary elements of a winning strategy. If not for deteriorating public and congressional support for the war, he might have won.32

30 Phillip Lewis, “Counterinsurgency in Vietnam: Lessons Learned, Ignored, then Revived.”
31 Quoted in Lewy, America in Vietnam, p. 137.
Iraq and Afghanistan

The familiar hero narrative is also present in the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, military leaders implemented a decidedly conventional response to the rising insurgency in 2003. This was not entirely their fault, given the fact that the Bush administration had devoted little attention to possible post-invasion problems and had focused primarily on the need to locate unconventional weapons facilities. Nonetheless, critics claimed that U.S. forces spent too much time on large sprawling military bases rather than living and working among the population; that U.S. operations consisted of large sweeps which frequently produced little if any positive results, and that U.S. intelligence largely ignored the kind of social and cultural information that was necessary to determine the underlying sources of violence to craft responses that would address popular grievances. The major turning point came with the elevation of General David Petraeus and the implementation of a new Army-Marine field manual on counterinsurgency, which stressed the importance of population security and government legitimacy, and warned of the danger of excessive firepower. Petraeus also approved of the decision to arm Iraqi militias in joint cause against al Qaeda in Iraq, even though some of these groups had previously fought against the United States. The reduction in violence in 2008 was in large part the result of this innovative new strategy, enforced by five additional surge brigades. Petraeus’s success in Iraq, along with his doctrinal flexibility and political acumen, gave some observers hope that something similar would happen in Afghanistan.


The Messy Reality

Heroes and villains continue to loom large in studies of COIN. Many observers agree with Moyar that counterinsurgency wars are basically contests of leadership, and that performance in COIN depends principally on finding the right political and military leaders. Only individuals who combine charisma and persistence with an intellectual appreciation for the social roots of rebellion can rescue counterinsurgency campaigns from disaster. Others argue that while heroes are necessary, they do not magically appear. Military organizations must be designed to locate and promote them, and military organizational cultures must reward unorthodox approaches to the knotty problems of COIN. Brilliant leaders will be frustrated if they are not supported by institutions that are capable of reassessment, self-evaluation, and organizational learning.37

But a closer look at the cases described above give us reasons to doubt these arguments. To be sure, Magsaysay, Templer, Abrams, and Petraeus all took steps they thought were important to turn the tide of war. These steps may have been the right ones, and what follows is not a critique of their wartime leadership. But we should not overstate the importance of their decisions to move towards a population-centric COIN doctrine. In each case there was much more continuity in strategy before and after the leadership change than is assumed in the heroic narrative. Earlier leaders also tried to secure the population, invest in local economic development, and win hearts and minds.

In the Philippines, Roxas and Quirino repeatedly reached out to the Huks in an ill-fated effort to bring them into the political process. They also proposed significant land reforms that went nowhere. While they actively sought to repress the insurgency though widespread coercive violence, it is not true that they were naïve about the political, social, and economic issues at stake. Moreover, Magsaysay was certainly not shy about continuing aggressive operations, though he stressed the importance of making those operations more efficient.

In Malaya, Briggs and Lyttelton were responsible for much of the intellectual spade work that underpinned Templer’s approach. “[Templer’s] success was both quantifiable and laudable,” concludes Joel Hamby, “but he did not change course. He adhered to the Briggs approach, wielding wide powers to force results when nothing else worked, reaffirming the goal of independence for Malaya.”38 In Vietnam, much effort had been devoted to

37 Scholars like Krepinevich and Lewy downplay the immediate impact of Abrams revised plan in Vietnam, noting resistance from conventionally-minded commanders and the continuity of operations through 1969. Indeed, Lewy concludes that it was a “paper exercise.” America in Vietnam, p. 139.
pacification, rural development, and government outreach before Abrams took command—and kinetic operations continued apace afterwards. And in Iraq, much of the rhetoric from previous commanders foreshadowed that of General Petraeus. In fact, independent battalion and company level counter-insurgency efforts were underway years before the publication of FM 3-24 and the arrival of the first surge brigades in 2007.39

Even if we grant that there were strategic shifts, it is still not clear that these had a decisive effect on the war. Many other factors affected the course of each conflict. The Huk insurgency repeatedly engaged in self-defeating behavior, including an internecine ideological conflict that led it to banish its most capable military commander, Luis Taruc. The Huk leadership also harbored wildly over optimistic estimates of the timeline for toppling the Philippine government, despite the fact that it never had more than 10,000 fighters who were almost all operating out of Central Luzon. Even at its low point, the government still enjoyed a roughly 4:1 advantage in manpower.

In Malaya, British counterinsurgents benefited from extremely favorable geography, as the insurgents on the peninsula had no obvious sanctuary or source of external resources. Templer’s effort was also eased by the ethnic divisions in Malaya; the intelligence problem was much more manageable because the insurgents were almost all ethnic Chinese. Similarly, General Abrams was able to implement a much more ambitious pacification effort in Vietnam because the Vietcong were very nearly destroyed in the Tet Counter-offensive. Providing population security after 1968 was not the same challenge that it had been before the VC exposed itself to massive conventional attack.

And far from a simple story about doctrinal innovation, the recent gains in Iraq came from events that were largely beyond U.S. control. Long before the surge, Sunni leaders in Anbar province launched an uprising to regain control and restore smuggling profits hijacked by al Qaeda in Iraq. The United States wisely began to pay them, despite the fact that many of the same characters had previously fought against U.S. and coalition forces. The combined effort led to a surprising turnaround in what had been one of the most violent regions of the country.40 Later, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki acted against his co-ethnic rivals in the southern city of Basra and consolidated his control over the Iraqi Shi’a. Although American officials were surprised about Maliki’s action and dubious about his chances, they quickly decided to


support the offensive. Maliki was largely able to subdue his rivals and restore some measure of government control in the south.  

The successes in Anbar and Basra occurred because of U.S. opportunism, not U.S. initiatives. Both helped clarify regional power relations and produced some stability. Neither had much to do with troop surges, population security, or hearts and minds.

The heroic narrative is attractive because it offers a simple framework for practitioners, but it is based on a misleading description of counter-insurgency wars and a simplified history of key conflicts. It treats such wars as contests for political loyalty between established governments and upstart insurgents. In fact, many of these conflicts are more accurately described as state-building exercises in which relatively weak governments and insurgent groups fight for political control over territory and people.

If we view milestone cases like the Huk Rebellion and the Malayan Emergency as state-building efforts rather than counterinsurgency campaigns, then the repressive and violent tactics of the “villains” start to make sense. Indeed, such tactics might be the necessary preconditions for later efforts to win hearts and minds. Progress in the cases described above all came as a result of a messy sequence of coercive violence, suspension of legal rights, voluntary and involuntary population resettlement, and finally economic and political development efforts. Attempts to implement the softer elements of population-centric counterinsurgency failed when they were not set up by a period of intense violence that weakened insurgent groups and clarified the domestic balance of power.

Roxas’s much maligned “mailed fist” strategy probably put more pressure on the Huks than is commonly assumed. It almost certainly generated useful intelligence on the Huks’ size and composition. Indeed, while Magsaysay is credited with improving intelligence, it is worth asking how the Philippine armed forces were able to arrest the whole politburo in a single day just a month after he took the reins as secretary of national defense.  

It is frankly hard to believe he was able to enact sweeping organizational changes which led to extraordinary results in such a short period of time. Much more likely is that prior operations, especially Qurino’s accelerated offensive after

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41 Maliki is now trying to consolidate his gains by centralizing his power over Iraq’s security forces and by persecuting political rivals. This kind of behavior is very consistent with the history of state building elsewhere. See Yochi J. Dreazen, “Strong Man,” National Journal, October 13, 2011; http://www.nationaljournal.com/magazine/nuri-kamal-al-maliki-strong-man-20111013.

42 According to one astonishing account, Magsaysay’s source was the same man that the Huks sent to set up his assassination. As the story goes, Jose Rizal, the grandson of a Philippine revolutionary hero arranged to meet Magsaysay. Two Huks were supposed to interrupt the meeting and kill the new defense secretary, but they were delayed because of jeep trouble. In the meantime, Magsaysay won Rizal over through sheer charisma. Rizal immediately agreed to join the fight against Communism and he soon provided the names and locations of the politburo. William O. Douglas, North from Malaya: Adventure on Five Fronts (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1953), pp. 109-111.
the violence-plagued elections of 1949, yielded the underlying information needed to score such a remarkable intelligence coup. More broadly, the fact that the Huks fell apart so soon after reaching their high water mark in mid-1950 suggests that they had already been badly weakened by government operations. It is more accurate to say that Magsaysay exploited these weaknesses rather than completely reversing the course of the war.

The Malayan case also proceeded sequentially. Karl Hack divides the conflict into three phases: the “counter-terror and counter-sweep of 1948-1949,” the “clear and hold of 1950 to 1952,” and “optimization from 1952 to 1960.” The first phase was a response to insurgent efforts to establish large liberated areas during a period in which the government lacked intelligence on their organization and capabilities. Conventional sweeps were designed to “break up large insurgent units (of up to 500 at peak), riding to the sound of guns, air action when targets presented themselves, punitive actions, and what amounted almost to a ‘counter-terror.’”

Such tactics are not always strategically wise, Hack notes, but later COIN efforts in Malaya would have been bloody failures if they had been constructed while insurgents still freely intermingled with the villagers. The second phase of the insurgency was the expansion of control over the population, a process which included the forced relocation of about a half-million civilians into “New Villages.” The emphasis was on control, not legitimacy; the British sought to re-establish a political order before winning consent. One of the benefits of this approach was that it provided an alibi for villagers, who could plausibly claim that they wanted to support insurgents but were constrained by government rules. The New Villages were deliberately designed to improve surveillance, which made it harder for the insurgents to hide among the population.

The last phase saw Templer centralize control over the whole effort, implement new police training programs, and commit to winning hearts and minds. Hack gives him credit for some of these innovations, but

Less often noted is the way British spatial/population control also peaked in this period. It was not all Boy Scout groups (something Templer thought civilizing) and Red Cross Nurses, as important as they were. . .the emphasis was on getting rid of hard-line Min Yuen, and then upping food control and security operations, until newer, softer, Min Yuen recruits could be identified, turned, and made to yield live information. . .Villagers may have gained a new community centre, but at operational peak they also found their food rations cut, curfews extended, and an ever-more pervasive security force presence.

43 Lawrence Greenberg notes without comment that the politburo “was unexpectedly captured by government troops in October 1950.” Greenberg, p. 67. Luis Taruc’s memoir also casually mentions the arrests, which suggests that the government might have been making considerable progress even before Magsaysay arrived. Luis Taruc, He Who Rides the Tiger (New York: Praeger, 1967), p 87.
44 Lachica, HUK, p. 131.
In sum, early conventional operations were necessary preconditions for Templer’s hearts and minds effort, and strict population controls remained in effect throughout the conflict. Hack’s treatment of the Malayan Emergency—a milestone case for contemporary COIN theorists—challenges the notion that counterinsurgency only succeeds via efforts to minimize violence and earn legitimacy in the eyes of the people.\(^45\) Quite the opposite: it suggests that counterinsurgency is likely to fail if practitioners ignore the nasty reality of state-building and move too quickly to population-centric COIN.

U.S. reforms in Vietnam similarly came on the heels of the Tet Offensive in early 1968. The surprise attack led to shock in Washington and undermined the optimistic forecasts of the Johnson administration, but it also exposed the Vietcong to a ferocious counterattack and staggering losses, causing it to avoid further contact with American forces. Pacification proceeded apace after that threat of Vietcong main force attacks was at least temporarily relieved.\(^46\) And as discussed above, the pattern of events in Iraq fits easily into a state-building framework, as local power brokers fought international forces (and each other) to carve out political power in an unstable and uncertain environment after the fall of the Ba’ath regime. The fighting culminated in an intense period of ethnic cleansing around Baghdad, intra-Sunni violence in the west, and intra-Shia violence in the south. It remains to be seen if the government can consolidate its power, manage the sectarian divides, and create a durable political order. Unfortunately, as the Vietnam case demonstrates, early periods of coercion might be necessary preconditions but they do not guarantee the success of state-building efforts.

**Implications and Conclusion**

The heroic narrative of COIN has important implications for theory and policy. If it is correct, then we should look for answers to basic questions about success and failure by focusing on the characteristics of key individuals. In terms of policy, it suggests that modern militaries should do everything in their power to locate and promote creative leaders, especially those who are unafraid of bucking conventional military preferences. It also provides a measure of optimism for current U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, where the champions of COIN moved into positions of influence in 2009. (The con-


sequences of the more recent leadership changes, especially General Petraeus’s move to the Central Intelligence Agency, remain uncertain.) Moreover, it suggests that the United States can succeed today if it cultivates the right local leaders, as was the case with Edward Lansdale’s close relationship with Ramon Magsaysay.47

But scholars have become increasingly skeptical of this argument. Gian Gentile argues that the popular history of these conflicts is both incorrect and dangerous, because it justifies basic changes to the structure of the army that will leave it unprepared for future conflicts.48 Several other recent studies have taken aim at the solutions themselves.49 David R. Haines notes that advocates of population-centric COIN stress “intergovernmental coordination and cooperation, rule of law, prioritizing political vice security-based solutions, and establishing a stable electoral state.” But the places where insurgencies take hold are plagued by weak institutions, meaning that media censorship and willful neglect of legal norms may be necessary until institutions are on firmer footing.50 Jacqueline L. Hazelton finds that success in COIN typically requires a large amount of brute force along with a complementary dose of limited accommodation.51 Timothy Hoyt and I argue that some sequence of coercion and conciliation might be required to establish political order depending on the circumstances of any given conflict.52 Karl Hack likewise emphasizes the importance of sequence in his reflections on the Malayan Emergency. “You cannot. . . go straight to a comprehensive approach for ‘winning hearts and minds’ and expect it to work,” he contends, “if you have not first broken up the larger insurgent groups, disrupted their main bases, and achieved a modicum of spatial dominance and of security for the population in the area concerned.”53 He also notes that different areas within the same theater might be enjoying more or less security and order, meaning that best practices for one place might be entirely inappropriate for another.

49 Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Beth Grill, Victory Has A Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2010); and Sepp, “Best Practices in Counterinsurgency.”
While these critics do not always agree, their work suggests two important conclusions. First, the stylized treatment of past wars has led to a fundamentally misleading historiography of COIN. The focus has been on particular leaders, especially those who overcome institutional biases and shift strategy towards efforts to protect the population while winning legitimacy for the government. Leadership profiles can make for riveting reading, to be sure, but they overlook much deeper forces at the root of insurgencies and civil wars. This focus can also lead readers to assume that new leaders were responsible for progress, even if their reforms were superficial. Second, by framing conflicts in terms of contests for legitimacy, analysts have largely ignored the unsettling notion that coercion may be a necessary prerequisite to long-term political progress. State-building is a protracted and brutal business, and efforts to win hearts and minds before the state has established control are likely to fail. The real heroes of counterinsurgency may be those who are willing to come to grips with that fact.