

REVIEW ARTICLE

COUNTERINSURGENCY RECONSIDERED

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Introduction

Central to the war on terror has been the practice of counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency denotes the military and non-military means states and their allies use to neutralize the threat posed by an armed non-state actor seeking to overthrow the existing political order within a legally recognized territory. Viewed in its broadest terms, counterinsurgency is an intensely political project, and its significance is captured in the observation made that “War made the state, and the state made war”. This oft-quoted quip attributed to Charles Tilly has generated many contributions to the study of states, societies, and warfare. Tilly argues that the need for resources to wage war has historically driven state formation and consolidation, while the existence of states has facilitated the organization and conduct of warfare. This process has been fundamental in shaping political institutions and practices (1990). Historians, sociologists, and political scientists have explored interactions between warfare and state-formation, producing a rich and varied range of studies looking at the emergence of the state. There is, however, a tendency to see the process of modern-state building as an event, a moment of primal baptism, rather than an on-going process. Consequently, the relationship between state formation and contemporary iterations of military conflict has remained under-theorized and under-explored. This is especially the case since the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, which foreclosed investigations into the relationship between the anti-colonial state and wars of national liberation.

The three books explored in this review article represent a distinctive contribution to the growing literature on contemporary counterinsurgency and its relationship to the war on terror. All three understand the war on terror as a colonial

Hazelton, J.L. (2021) *Bullets not Ballots Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. ISBN 978501754791 (e-pub). 206 pages.

MacKay, J. (2023) *The Counterinsurgent Imagination A New Intellectual History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9781009225823. 604 pages.

Tripodi, C. (2021) *The Unknown Enemy Counterinsurgency and the Illusion of Control*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9781108440714. 282 pages.

project imposed on the Islamosphere. They seek to explain how Western militaries came to rely on ideas and tactics formed in the late nineteenth century, which frequently failed when employed. All three aim to draw lessons from the failure of the counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. These three books build on the work of Douglas Porch, who insisted that the contemporary use of counterinsurgency by the West represented a new imperial project conceived largely in Washington, D.C. (Porch 2013).

The central theme to emerge from these studies focuses on the conception of empire, both formal and informal. In the past, European colonial-racial imperial enterprises frequently confronted rebellions, which required political and military action to ensure pacification and control. The history of counterinsurgency is closely enmeshed in the history of European colonization of the non-European geopolitical space from the fifteenth century onwards (Parker, 2016). An important dimension of this conquest was embedding emergent racial logics in its political project. For example, the Valladolid debate (1550-51), contemplated the question of whether local natives should be categorized as a subhuman species to be exploited like any other animal in the interests of the Spanish Empire, to see how racial logics shaped European colonialism.

Although counterinsurgency has a long heritage, it emerged as an explicit doctrine of control in response to the European Enlightenment and the ideology of revolution that grew out of it (Mackay 2023). This coincided with the accelerated expansion of European colonization in the nineteenth century. The dismantling of the formal structures of European colonial-racial empires, however, did not lead to the demise of counterinsurgency. Former colonial powers continued to draw on this technique to control recalcitrant populations within their own states. For example, the United Kingdom's thirty-year war against Irish nationalists (1969-98), initially relied on tactics and techniques it used to control insurgents in Aden (1963-67) (Thornton 2007). Equally important, the UK embarked on post-imperial counterinsurgency, aiding countries like Malaysia to counter an insurgency orchestrated by neighboring Indonesia (1962-66), or the support it gave to the government of Oman in its efforts to suppress secession by Dhofari groups in the south of the country (1962-76) (Mockaitis 1995).

Most interesting was the employment of counterinsurgency by supposedly 'anticolonial' states, specifically the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War (1948-89). This paradox was reconciled by the logic of a global grand strategy based on competing ideologies that sought to create a better world by establishing and sustaining idealized forms of governance in the former European colonial spaces, which became known as the "Third World". Internal revolt by the populations against these idealized forms of governance led both the United States and the Soviet Union to draw on a combination of means to re-establish control.

In this case, a blend of techniques was employed, which drew on their own violent nation-building projects during the nineteenth century and lessons learned from former colonial powers to support pro-American and pro-Soviet satellite states. Complicating this picture were the efforts made by both the Americans and the Soviets to support insurgent groups dedicated to the overthrow of governments supported by their enemy. As a result, counterinsurgency evolved beyond mere internal policing action into a form of violence more closely associated with the concept of war, defined loosely here as the large-scale use of organized violence to achieve a political goal (Macmillan 2020: 14-40). An important component of this evolution was the representation of counterinsurgency as a nation-building project. The United States' direct intervention in Vietnam (1965-73) and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (1979-89) provide two of the most significant examples of the evolution of counterinsurgency during this period. These wars operated alongside a series of less prominent but still violent counterinsurgency campaigns in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.

Counterinsurgency and the War on Terror

In the heady days of optimism of the post-cold war era, analysts speculated on the likely demise of both insurgency and counterinsurgency. The “end of history” and the triumph of market economies and liberal-democratic elections did not, however, translate into the beating of insurgency swords into ploughshares of capitalist democracies. What it did instead was to reconfigure insurgency into terrorism, beginning the process of de-legitimizing all armed liberation struggles. Without superpower ideological and diplomatic cover, national liberation struggles did not vanish from the world but became embedded in anti-systemic forces within an emerging global architecture.

Alongside the end of superpower conflict was the development of a technologically based military revolution that now enabled states to surveil the entire globe via satellites, drones and a range of other electronic sensors. With this capability, insurgents would increasingly struggle to hide from the counterinsurgent, a key ingredient to the success of any insurgent strategy (Mackinlay 2009). However, this vision presumed that all states possessed a hugely expensive surveillance infrastructure, which they did not. Hence, insurgency and counterinsurgency continued to flourish in the post-Cold War era particularly in weak and fragile states. Moreover, even the United States, with its thousands of satellites and vast military capabilities, proved unable to track and anticipate the actions of groups like Al-Qaeda, as demonstrated by the attacks on 11 September 2001. This single event formally inaugurated the global war on terror, consolidating and repurposing the military architecture of planetary unified commands, such as for example, the US Central Command (CENTCOM). This is one of

eleven commands and is responsible for the orchestration of US military power across twenty-one nations in the Middle East and Central Asia.

In contrast to the opposition to communist camp, which had underwritten US grand strategy in the Cold War, the focus of the war on terror was a more nebulous enemy depicted as a globalized Islamist insurgency. This transnational insurgency was to be fought by the articulation of a global counterinsurgency campaign waged against a range of loosely connected violent non-state actors (Kilcullen 2005). Recycling tropes of colonial warfare, the war on terror was underpinned by a theoretical framework which understood the causes of Islamist insurgency as poor governance. Through improved state building it was hoped that the violence assumed to be associated with poverty could be prevented from spilling over into the Global North. Consequently, the United States saw a need to reorganize the domestic political order across the Islamosphere. The reinvigorated adoption of colonial counter-insurgency doctrine was to be the means to solve postcolonial problems located in the “third world”, by creating a new political order which removed or restricted the violence to the periphery. As a strategy reeking of Orientalism, it failed spectacularly, and echoes of this war continue to reverberate today. According to one US-based research institute, twenty years of war resulted in over 900,000 deaths, largely in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq, and cost the American taxpayer \$9 trillion (Brown University 2021). Ironically, the war on terror war fundamentally weakened rather than strengthened the West and signaled the end of America’s unipolar moment.

The application of counterinsurgency was perceived to play an instrumental role in shaping the conduct and outcome of this war and, as such, became an object of scrutiny in academic and military circles. This allowed those interested to revisit unresolved debates that dominated the counterinsurgency literature over the last century. A classic example is the question of how much violence should be employed by the counterinsurgent to ensure success (Gentile 2015). A second longstanding issue focused on how the military adapted and learned to fight in this politically complex setting (Farrell, Osinga and Russell 2020). A third explored the tensions and frictions that dominated counterinsurgency campaigns as politicians and generals attempted to work together to defeat an insurgency (Ricks 2014). An added complication in more recent campaigns is the manner in which host nation governments have sought to liaise with foreign militaries fighting a counterinsurgency campaign on their behalf (Cowper-Cowles 2012). Finally, what can be described euphemistically as “a cultural dissonance” often manifests itself in wars between Western and non-Western societies and the armed groups representing them (Porter 2013).

Chris Tripodi argues for a connection between historical counterinsurgency campaigns conducted during the age of European empires and the means employed to conduct counterinsurgency during the war on terror. The conceptual link here is

imperialism, which he maintains manifested itself in this war. This idea is based on more than just the traditional understanding of the concept, which focuses on creating a system of physical domination of a territory and its people. In the twenty-first century, imperialism is more about “dominance through indirect means, and ‘it is as much if not more, a matter of ideas and values as anything else’” (2021: 30). Tripodi, accepts (perhaps too readily) that the ideology of the United States was at least formally opposed to imperialism. However, he believes that their actions in Vietnam revealed that while they were not seeking to exploit the Vietnamese in terms of their resources, their efforts to counter the appeal of communist ideology focused on the use of counterinsurgency to create a modern political and economic system, which by default, meant it was democratic. This vision drove US policy in the early years of its intervention in Vietnam and was resurrected within the war on terror, especially in Iraq. To achieve these goals required the modernization of Iraq, i.e. that it was democratic and capitalist. This, in turn, shaped military doctrine and all Western states involved in counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq accepted the logic and rationale of modernization as a means of achieving political stability. As he explains, the cultural turn in doctrine allowed the (re)flourishing of a core set of assumptions about the possibility of using military power as an instrument of social and political change. No longer simply a tool to defeat the insurgency, counterinsurgency was once again an instrument suitable for ambitious social engineering and the radical adjustment of indigenous political traditions (2021: 11).

Like Tripodi, Joseph Mackay sees the war on terror as a colonial activity. Mackay’s contribution to the counterinsurgency debate is twofold. The first is that he expands the temporal horizon of the subject. Most studies of counterinsurgency begin in the mid to late nineteenth century and focus on the efforts made by Europeans to consolidate control over their empires. Mackay goes back to explore the roots of the “discourse and practice of small wars in the seventeenth century and before” (2023: 18). Second, this is not a study of campaigns but an intellectual history of counterinsurgency. He aims to highlight the ideological foundations that have shaped and informed counterinsurgency. However, in contrast to much of the literature on the subject of counterinsurgency, Mackay makes clear that his study is not concerned with fundamental questions such as why insurgents or counterinsurgents win or lose, which is the principal focus of the literature on counterinsurgency (2023: 17). His aim is not to explain how effective military doctrine is arrived at, “but how it arises in general without regard to putative effectiveness” (2023: 43).

While counterinsurgency manuals are not treatises of political thought, I show their authors had extensive and persistent, if not always overt and coherent, beliefs about sociopolitical order and ethical life. Those beliefs shaped their proclaimed means and implied ends (2023: 44).

Mackay's approach is informed by the Cambridge historiographical school, and particularly Quentin Skinner's work. This allows Mackay to treat counterinsurgency manuals as texts within a broader theoretical and philosophical discourse. As Mackay puts it: "Manuals provide idealized frameworks for military conduct" (2023: 42). These counterinsurgency manuals are presented as interventions in a broad series of debates which touch on a narrow scope of military matters, but also illuminate a general philosophical outlook about the political order and the norms and values that should govern it. MacKay compares this inquiry to those who study political philosophy. Here, the big questions focus on "the nature of the good life, justice, political rule, and related matters recur, albeit in variations. In military theory, questions about strategy, tactics, proper conduct, and the purpose of war recur similarly" (2023: 47). In the case of counterinsurgency, the debate concentrates on how to use force to facilitate legitimacy, how to control the population, whether there is any utility in pursuing popular policies, or whether violence is the safest way to achieve control (2023: 48).

Mackay then proceeds to explain how the temporal and geographical transmission of ideas shaped Western counterinsurgency practice. Given that one of the features of Orientalism is to assume transhistorical continuities, Mackay addresses the view that there is a golden thread linking Spanish counterinsurgency in the early modern period and counterinsurgency. He asserts that throughout the history of Western modernity, counterinsurgents faced recurring questions: "Military manuals share related purposes, and address themselves to recurring or overlapping questions, categories, and concepts" (2023: 47). Through this examination he identifies a series of ideas that link counterinsurgency as practiced by Western states across time and space. This allows him to claim that they share the following aspirations: first a commitment to the creation of a society designed along scientific principles, which is utopian and seeks political and social transformation resulting in a specific political order. This is captured in the idea of modernity, which exists within the counterinsurgents' society, and is then exported to another via the process of imperial expansion. The counterinsurgent imagination generates the intellectual and material means to translate this vision into a tangible reality, and in crude terms this is its strategy (20-32).

A key chapter in Mackay's book explores one of the counterinsurgencies in Iraq in 2006 and how it was shaped by the production of US Army and Marine Corps' Field Manual-3-24: *Counterinsurgency*, which came into service in 2007. In examining this example, Mackay's lens of analysis does not focus on the complex and multifaceted nature of the insurgency within Iraq circa 2005-06, but a range of other factors, largely internal to the United States. First and foremost, he highlights its numerous authors and how their values came to shape the project. Of importance here were their educational backgrounds, in terms of undergraduate and postgraduate study, and

the academic disciplines they were in, mainly the social sciences. Of particular significance here was the common interest shown by these authors in irregular warfare, organizational learning, and adaptation of military force structures. Mackay believes this led to the creation of a doctrine which reflected the culture of American military organizations (2023: 383). Moreover, the manual was drafted in an effort address the organizational differences that existed between the services which led to the elevation of a world view based on shared values (2023: 383-85). Mackay analysis of Field Manual 3-24 yields two important observations. First, that the manual represents an attempt to translate British, French, and American ideas on counterinsurgency which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s into the “organizational and political language of the more recent American military establishment” (2023: 391). Second, he believes that in conducting this exercise, core ideas linked to an implicit political project are revealed. These relate to the idea of what constitutes political legitimacy, defined in terms of liberal democratic ideals. In this sense FM 3-24 is very different to past counterinsurgency doctrines. For previous counterinsurgency theorists like David Galula “politics was chiefly instrumental – it was a means, not an end. For FM 3-24 authors, politics appears to do an uneasy double duty as end and means alike. Their goal was to produce political order in line with Western Liberal democracy” (2023: 394).

Such clarity of purpose often contrasts with the way individual and institutional actors narrate their experiences. It is not clear whether the US military bought into the idea of remaking political order. One gets the impression that the US generals responsible for the conduct of the war gave very little thought to the outcomes beyond creating the conditions for a conventional military victory on the battlefield, followed by the rapid withdrawal of the US military. This was certainly the case with General Tommy Franks, who crafted the campaign to overthrow the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. His goal was to win as quickly as possible and not become embroiled in any large-scale nation-building project following the end of the war (2004). This also was the default position of his military successors in Iraq, including General Sanchez (2008) and General Casey (2012). Both were opposed to counterinsurgency and had no vision beyond expediting the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. Indeed, Casey was so committed that even when it was clear that the country was on the verge of civil war in 2006, he remained adamant that the right policy was for the United States to withdraw.

The political establishment in Washington was divided on the question of Iraq in 2006 and a range of solutions were presented to stop the collapse of Iraq. That they chose to apply a full-blown counterinsurgency strategy some five years into the war demonstrates how desperation rather than idealism drove their policy. Moreover, it is not even clear that the architect behind the counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq, Lieutenant General David Petraeus, focused on achieving these higher-level objectives. His goal in pushing this doctrine was to generate the time

and space for the Americans and Iraqis to arrive at a negotiated settlement, principally between Iraq's various political factions that he hoped would allow for the dignified withdrawal of US forces (Mansoor 2014). It is interesting to note that Donald Rumsfeld observed that the principal success of the Surge and the application of counterinsurgency in Iraq was the political effect it had on the United States, where the conflict's center of gravity migrated by tempering the defeatist mood in Capital Hill.¹ Casey echoed this view, arguing that the Surge was always about building domestic support for continued operations in Iraq rather than changing Iraq (Casey 2012).

Both Mackay and Tripodi show a set of parallels between contemporary counterinsurgency and its previous colonial iteration in the relationship between knowledge and military conduct. The war on terror was an epistemological as well as a military exercise.

Tripodi explains that this nineteenth-century European methodology to define and categorize the non-Western world was employed for specific reasons in America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. A problem identified early during the American occupation of Iraq was that those charged with running the campaign needed to comprehend the social and political aspects of day-to-day life within the country they controlled (Connetta 2002). An added complication was the presence of not one but many insurgencies, which compounded the challenge of understanding on the part of the occupiers. A further problem was the reliance some insurgents placed on the use of suicide attacks, a feature of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan that profoundly challenged Western sensibilities and led to an intense academic debate on how to deal with this variation of political violence (Wenger et al. 2012).

According to Tripodi, the military's answer to these problems was to move counterinsurgency into the field of anthropology so they could better understand and adapt to the threat environment they were in. Understanding the culture of one's enemies became the soul of modern insurgency/ counterinsurgency (2021: 3). Tripodi's position in the debate on culture and its use in counterinsurgency is marked by profound skepticism about what it can achieve. He sets out the limitations and almost naïve logic applied by those in the military who sought to sell anthropology and culture as the solution to the problem of securing control over unknown people. An important consequence of this push was that a lobby consisting of academics, military practitioners, and military/academic hybrids such as David Kilcullen, who worked in both domains became wrapped up in the wider goals of this intervention, which was to democratize Iraq. According to Tripodi, a principal flaw in the thinking of this group was its failure to 'take account of similar systems' approaches adopted by the colonial powers over a century ago and which sought to apply scientific methodologies to the business of understanding

and influencing indigenous societies, but which found these to be of marginal use in delivering peace and stability (2021: 8).

The importance of culture is based on the recognition that:

the desire by military actors to achieve an understanding of local native society, of its culture and attitudes, of its forms of political organization and its power structures and personalities has to be seen in the context of the ultimate objective, namely ambitious attempts by the intervening power to exert dominance, control or influence over that society (2021: xi).

In sum, there is nothing wrong with better cultural understanding for allowing forces to conduct a more enlightened form of counterinsurgency, which might defeat the opponent. However, the key point is that when this is linked to an ambitious nation-building project that envisages the reengineering of society, it transcends understanding and becomes part of “an instrument of violent and unpredictable change” (2021: 202).

Tripodi’s analysis of past and recent campaigns indicates that culture proved not to be the force multiplier claimed by its proponents in the war on terror. Perhaps the best illustration of this was the Anbar Awakening in Iraq in 2006, a defining moment in the war in Iraq which symbolized the dramatic improvement in the US military situation, as some Iraqi groups (“Sunni tribes”) shifted their allegiance from supporting Al-Qaeda in Iraq to the Americans. Reflecting on this dramatic moment in the US occupation of Iraq, the brigade commander principally responsible for making this moment happen, Col Sean McFarland, later admitted that he had no idea why this political shift took place when it did and merely sought to exploit the opportunity in the hope that it might lead to an improvement in American fortunes. Tripodi’s central observation is how could an outsider understand the complex motivations of Iraqi “tribal” leaders. His objection is not that militaries sought to achieve a better cultural understanding of the peoples under their control but that the military deluded itself that this idea could compensate for the lack of resources and political commitment to stay the course and achieve the occupation’s aim (2021: 288-316). As such, the book is a strong indictment against the means employed by the military to fight its campaigns in the war on terror. However, it is not clear as he claims that cultural understanding was linked explicitly with grand strategic objectives of the war on terror. Indeed, the importance of greater cultural understanding via the use of human terrain teams began in 2006, when the reality of the war on terror and its cost caused a revision of what was feasible and realistic. As for the effectiveness of anthropology and its employment in this war, this remains contested on ethical and intellectual grounds (Gusterson 2019).

Like Mackay and Tripodi, Jacqueline Hazelton believes that many of the problems with contemporary counterinsurgency stem from an obsession with the idea of a Western conception of modernity and its imposition on non-Western societies. The notion that good governance via democracy and free markets could address the root causes of insurgency was promoted widely by Western governments in the 1990s. It was reinforced by the greed-grievance debate in response to the challenge of explaining the explosion of civil wars in the post-Cold War world (Collier and Hoeffler 2004). An essential part of her thesis challenges the linkages between social, economic and political conditions and their role in ending an insurgency (2021: 9). She also contests the view that good governance requires popular support, facilitated through democracy (2021: 13). Imposing this system of governance on a society fractured by religious and ethnic tension will only serve to fan the flames of conflict (2021: 14); a view shared by those who watched the Iraqi imbroglio unfold between 2003 and 2006 (Dodge 2006). In her view, counterinsurgency needs to offer a solution to the problem of reconciling the conflicts between different groups within a state. Perhaps not surprisingly, Hazelton is also critical of the concept of nation-building, which was a central part of US counterinsurgency doctrine in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Most importantly, she rejects the notion that successful counterinsurgency is based on constructing a centralized, modern, liberal democratic state (2021: 3). Hazelton's rationale for rejecting counterinsurgency as articulated in the war on terror is clearly illustrated in the Taliban victory in Afghanistan in 2021.

In her view, victory in counterinsurgency depends on two processes. The first is the need to secure agreement amongst local elites.

I argue that counterinsurgency campaigns backed by great powers succeed when the counterinsurgent government forms a coalition with rival civilian and military elites who cooperate in exchange for personal or group gain, when the government uses resources provided by the new coalition to cut the flow of support to insurgents, most often targeting civilians with brute force to control their behavior, as well as targeting the insurgency directly (2021: 14).

In essence, political bargaining is not based on creating a social contract with the population, which envisages a redistribution of wealth and political power. Instead, success is based on the government's low-cost accommodation of elite domestic rivals. These are defined as warlords, other armed groups, regional or cultural leaders, and traditional leaders. Such groups provide information on the insurgency and increase the physical means to wage war (2021: 5).

The second component of Hazelton's account is the use of force based on a strategy of compellence. Compellence is the independent variable of why counterinsurgency succeeds. This focuses on bringing elites into line and thereby

destroying the insurgency's capability and will to continue fighting. Force serves two purposes: the first is political and is concerned with "the achievement of accommodation – the use of threats and rewards to gain the cooperation of political and military leaders in exchange for information on the insurgency and the populace and provision of military capabilities to the government" (2021: 18). The second is the military, which focuses on the use of force to destroy the insurgency. Hazelton tests her hypothesis by examining a series of case studies of post-imperial counterinsurgency campaigns, i.e., civil wars fought after the end of the Second World War as global conflict shifted into the Cold War and decolonization. All these examples confirm that bargaining with rival elites rather than sharing wealth and power for the benefit of all is more likely to lead to political success. Brute force was employed directly against civilians and insurgents, and reforms were only instituted after defeating the insurgent threat. This challenges the idea that long-term political stability requires constructing a liberal democratic state. Hazelton makes the following observation:

Counterinsurgency success is about power, co-optation, building a coalition, and crushing opposition, not good governance. It requires co-opting rival elites to build a winning coalition that will overpower the opposition by cutting the flow of resources to insurgents, often through brutal force against civilians. Insurgent and counterinsurgent do not engage in a competition to govern with the people as the prize (2021: 149).

This realist form of counterinsurgency, which is devoid of any ambition beyond the pursuit of immediate national interests of the intervening state, suggests an approach that is far less costly for the United States, the main focus of Hazelton's study. The biggest problem underlying Hazelton's thesis, however, is the belief that military power combined with a Machiavellian bargaining strategy will produce a positive political outcome for the intervening power. If we look at the US war in Afghanistan, it is possible to argue that between 2001-2005, its approach broadly coincided with Hazelton's prescription. The United States worked with the Northern Alliance and other warlords in their pursuit of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban and continued to rely heavily on these elements during the occupation. The US also limited how much nation-building was undertaken and, most importantly, opposed the British recommendation, made in 2002, to deploy a peacekeeping force across the entire country to help promote social and economic development. The rationale for this was simply that the Americans wanted a free hand to continue their counterterrorist operations and were concerned that international peacekeepers would obstruct their freedom of action (Chin 2017). However, the deteriorating security situation within Afghanistan from 2004 onwards reluctantly

caused the US government to become more directly involved in the nation-building process to stop the expanding influence of the Taliban in the provinces in the south and west of the country. This shift in policy happened because it was in the interests of the United States to seek legitimacy via a strategy of nation-building (Schadlow 2017). The campaign to destroy Islamic State – Operation Inherent Resolve – offers another example of a counterinsurgency campaign waged by a US-led Coalition that broadly coincides with Hazelton’s approach. In this case, military success has not translated into a better peace for the United States. The point is that military victory addresses the symptoms but not the cause of insurgency. The fact that Islamic State suffered countless defeats before its rapid expansion in 2014 demonstrates the resilience of the organization and the need for a more balanced political and military strategy. As important, relying on elite groups imposed significant political constraints on what could be achieved in places like Iraq (Chin 2022).

Although not a great power, the latest iteration of Tel Aviv’s “hundred years war on Palestine” (Khalidi 2020) provides another example of the limitations of Hazelton’s model of counterinsurgency. Tel Aviv’s efforts to stabilize the territory or control the Palestinians have not been successful. Tel Aviv struggled to deal with the first Intifada (1987-91), which resulted in the Oslo Accords (1992), which forced the Israeli occupation forces to reduce their footprint in the West Bank and Gaza. Tel Aviv also struggled to deal with the Second Intifada (2000-2005), losing its ability to regulate this geopolitical space. Confronted by the need to control the Palestinian population, but unable to provide a political compromise to any Palestinian elites, Tel Aviv adopted a technologically based counterinsurgency strategy focused on surveillance, both human and electronic. Control through monitoring was reinforced with the erection of physical barriers to limit the movement of Palestinians and their access to resources, especially economic opportunities. This shift in emphasis from the concept of “war amongst the people” (Smith 2008), so frequently articulated in debates on counterinsurgency to disconnection from the people and punishment via military action, became a pronounced feature of Israeli counterinsurgency. Tel Aviv’s heavy reliance on technology tells us what a strategy without an imagined political settlement looks like. Within this setting, the threat or actual use of violence becomes the only viable option for those seeking to preserve the status quo. As important, it is also the only option for those seeking to change it, which is why within the tiny space of Gaza there have been six large scale wars in the last seventeen years, the latest of which erupted on 7 October 2023 after HAMAS sought to break Tel Aviv’s system of control, an act which triggered a massive and incredibly violent response from Tel Aviv. Two salient points emerge from this application of Hazelton’s model of counterinsurgency. The first is that, if viewed through a counterinsurgency prism, US support

for Tel Aviv has not succeeded in suppressing violence and instability. The fundamental problem is that Hazelton presumes it is possible to defeat an insurgent group, but neither history nor recent events in Gaza support the view that this is an attainable goal – you can destroy an organization, but you cannot destroy an idea. Second, the brutality of Tel Aviv's military response is becoming a public relations nightmare for the Americans. Again, this is not a new problem, and sometimes brutality can win the day, but Western democracies struggle to support a war in which their ally is perceived to be employing force in which the principal casualties are civilians rather than fighters/soldiers.

Conclusion

The war on terror revived academic interest in the moribund subject of counterinsurgency. It allowed old questions to be revisited and posed new ones relating to the application of this technique for population control within the context of a twenty-first century global conflict. The most recent reflections on Western counterinsurgency, as practiced in Afghanistan and Iraq, suggest an important reason for failure lay in the fact that it was an imperial project. As such, counterinsurgency reflected a transnational strategic and operational culture that permeated the militaries of the Western world. All three authors agree that the principal cause of failure in the application of this military technique was the pursuit of the Enlightenment and the scientific truths it created in terms of an ideal form of governance. This, it is claimed, shaped the West's concept of nation building as applied in the war on terror. However, it is important to remember that Western counterinsurgency is about more than the Renaissance or the Enlightenment. As important is the direct role played by technology and the military power that emerged from it. Many military historians see a direct link between improved weapons and the rise of the West starting in the fifteenth century (Parker 1988). Jeremy Black modified this position by arguing the success of the West was not based solely on technology but a certain kind of military and political organization which facilitated the efficient exploitation of technology (1994). Seen within this wider context, one could argue that Hazelton's observations regarding counterinsurgency and its practice by Western states today represent a return to a form of counterinsurgency which emerged during the early modern period. The essential point is that technology and the coercive power it creates has always been an important feature of Western counterinsurgency. However, this dependence on technology has also come to be seen as the Achilles heel of modern counterinsurgency largely because its application undermines the conditions required to generate political order, i.e. a viable state (Lyall and Wilson 2009: 67).

Ironically, contemporary Western counterinsurgency has also undermined state formation in the developing world in a less direct way. If we follow Tilly's theory of the rise of the state in the West, the costs of war resulted in the centralization of political power and the rise of the state as a coercive and persuasive apparatus designed to extract resources required to wage intensive war. Western intervention and the application of counterinsurgency in wars of decolonization, national liberation and global terrorism subverted this process. Constant military intervention by the West ensured external actors have stalled the process of violent pacification associated with state formation and thus prevented the emergence of stable political order in the form of a clear victor in a civil war. The argument here is that constant intervention has ensured that, in contrast to the European experience, war has not led to state formation in many parts of the developing world, but states of disorder as set out in the literature on failed states.

Note

- 1 The Surge was the name given to the revised US military strategy employed in Iraq to prevent the country from descending into open civil war. The operation commenced in January 2007 and officially ended in July 2008. It resulted in the deployment of an additional 20,000 US troops to reinforce the 130,000 US soldiers in Iraq. These new forces were deployed primarily to Baghdad and Anbar Province where the scale of internal violence was greatest.

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