

Book Review

The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War

By Fred Kaplan

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REVIEWED BY JEFF RICE

Fred Kaplan's *The Insurgents* is a highly successful and compelling intermingling of three stories: the rise and eventual fall of General David Petraeus; the intellectual history of counterinsurgency; and the broadening of the learning culture within the United States Military during the Iraq war. Indeed, the heroes of the book are the "insurgents" within the U.S. Army who all but overthrew the dominant paradigm of kinetic warfare in favor of ideas derived from England and France during the end of the colonial era.¹ Kaplan's book picks up on the story told by Tom Ricks in *The Gamble*² about how this intellectual insurgency transformed the way the U.S. fought the war in Iraq, preferring the counterinsurgency (COIN) approach to protecting civilians from insurgents and lowering their casualty rate, and building alliances in order to reduce the number of insurgents. For Kaplan this is nothing short of a profound alteration of the American way of war, one that caused enormous consternation amongst certain sectors of the military who were wedded to a more conventional approach to war.

To this point Kaplan is telling a story others have told. A perusal of journals such as *Small Wars*

Journal, *Military Review*, *Army*, and *Parameters* makes clear that within the military establishment this was a widely debated transformation. It is this debate that Kaplan is so effective in reproducing in this book; indeed, as in his earlier book, *The Wizards of Armageddon*³, he is able to weave intellectual history through good old-fashioned anecdotes (if not gossip) to show the institutional ebbs and flows of innovational eclecticism in its confrontation with institutional conservatism. If computational analysis leading to rational decision-making is the central argument for *Wizards*, then COIN is the heart of *Insurgents*. And just as Kaplan finds the comedy and tragedy of the RAND "geek squad" in the 50s and 60s, he is able to locate similar narrative tensions in the Iraq War. If the assessment fetish of RAND types led to some real errors in Vietnam, the Vietnam War was truly in the rear view mirror for the COIN advocates in Iraq.

It is important at this point to consider the context from which counterinsurgency emerged, namely the attempt on the part of the British and French to preserve their empire. From the novel *The Centurions*, through the work of David Galula (a French military officer who fought in Algeria, Indochina, and advised the U.S. in Vietnam), John Nagle, David Kilcullen, and David Petraeus became increasingly aware of the principles espoused in the practice of counterinsurgency. Within the COIN paradigm, war is 80% political, 20% military; protect civilians and do not try and create insurgents through collateral damage. Kaplan is not afraid to invoke the key variable in all this when he speaks of the U.S. having a legitimate government with which to partner. He is quick to point this out with respect to Iraq and Afghanistan, but inadequately notes that past French and British efforts at counterinsurgency failed because they had no legitimate government with which to partner. It is uncanny to me, at this late date, that there are no references in

Jeff Rice is Senior Lecturer at the Department of History and Weinberg College Advisor at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, where he teaches classes on Civil Wars, African Politics, and the role of assessment during the Vietnam War. He can be reached at: j-rice2@northwestern.edu.

Nagl or in other authors, that recognize a critical flaw in the French or British strategy: the goal of preserving empire. Kaplan understands that there are two key obstacles that must be talked before COIN can succeed: the legitimacy of the government in office, and the counterinsurgent force not being perceived as an occupying army.

I would argue that counterinsurgency, as a means of defeating rebel nationalist forces, has historically been a near total failure. Many would point to the counter example of Malaysia—an atypical case since in order to bring non-Chinese Malays into alliance against the Communists, British General, Sir Harold Briggs had to promise them independence from the United Kingdom. Also, the “enemy” was immediately identifiable as they were Chinese, not Malay. Briggs’ own plan to establish secure villages succeeded because the land to which peasants were moved was better than they had previously occupied. In a private conversation with David Kilcullen, he made the point that unlike Vietnamese villagers whose roots in their home hamlets went far back, the Malays’ were not. If you add the pioneering counterinsurgency against Mau Mau in Kenya, the British won the war, lost the peace, and Kenya became independent in spite of the best efforts of the settler population.

One of the key features of COIN is the expectation of cultural and linguistic awareness. Becoming an occupying force is antithetical to this, and Kaplan is well aware that it stands to generate a countervailing nationalist force. Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki both objected to being run over by American policies prompting Petraeus and others to threaten them with American fiscal and military withdrawal. “Karzai threw a fit. He told them, ‘I have three main enemies’—[the Taliban, the United States, and the international community]—and ‘if I had to choose today, I’d choose the Taliban!’”⁴

The Insurgents takes off when Kaplan details the gap between what Washington thinks is going on and what is actually transpiring in Tel Afar and Mosul. Improvising on the ground, General

Herbert McMaster and Petraeus actually garner success in terms of winning the peace. This is defined as bringing warring factions to the table, negotiating power sharing, and identifying some common enemies (usually Al Qaeda in Iraq). Fighting against the ineffective policies of the former Coalition Provisional Authority Administrator, Paul Bremer and much of President George W. Bush’s Pentagon team, there were some significant advances made by employing some modifications of Galula’s strategy.

This brings us to another key argument of Kaplan’s book about not quite playing by the rules while simultaneously innovating. The concept of “clear and hold” was not new to this war. It was difficult in a manner that is true for many irregular wars. It was adding “build” to the equation that constituted the biggest challenge. Lieutenant General Peter Chiarelli took the lead in this pursuit by developing the notion of SWET (sewage, water, electricity, and trash collection).⁵ Chiarelli innovated in the face of the \$18.6 billion that was allocated for reconstruction. Securing a mere \$100 million, he went into Sadr City (where months earlier his own soldiers were being shot at) and hired locals to build a landfill and “lay PVC pipe to remove ankle high sewage from the streets.”⁶ When General George Casey and Ambassador John Negroponte put an end to the project the Mahdi army resumed their attacks.

What for me was one of the strongest moments in Kaplan’s book—perhaps because it was one of the deeper instances of progress in opening up the learning culture within the U.S. Army—was the incorporation of data surveys to pinpoint insurgent activity. Of course, this is a throwback to both the so-called *Wizards of Armageddon*, but also the flawed data collection and misinterpretation conducted by RAND in Vietnam. For Vietnam, one only has to look at the Hamlet Evaluation Surveys⁷ as well as the Bombing Survey. In neither case was the data collected understood; indeed, it was too frequently misunderstood to the point of creating “accidental guerillas.”⁸

In Iraq, some of this task was left to three women on General Ray Odierno's staff, known locally as "the coven." By analyzing the data on bomb-making sites and "the supply routes they followed into Baghdad,"⁹ they were able to map the homes and transportation networks of the various militias, especially where these points intersected with the resulting friction. However, it was the interpretation of this data, which made the difference.

This discovery wasn't merely interesting: it uncovered a major flaw in the impending plan for President Bush's troop surge. Putting all five of the extra Army brigades in Baghdad wouldn't solve the problem, because the bombs were being built—and the militias inside Baghdad were being supplied—by extremist leaders in the belts outside the capital. At least some of the brigades had to attack the belts and interdict the supply routes.¹⁰

While not meaning to suggest that data collection and interpretation was new to the surge, I think Kaplan is right on target when demonstrating that the use of this data within the context of COIN presented a more holistic analysis of hostile actors. This geographical mapping allowed a targeted response that, at least in theory, could keep the civilian casualties down.

It is worth noting that the quarterly reports the Military provided Congress for Iraq contain some of the most fascinating data we can imagine for measuring progress in a war. In contrast to the Hamlet Evaluation Survey in Vietnam, this data provided quarterly progress on violent incidents, civilian deaths, and U.S. troops lost, but also information about electricity and running water provided both in Baghdad and nationwide. On the assumption that the United States broke the electric grid and given the nature of Iraqi weather, to not have electricity posed quite a problem for civilian relations. To get electricity up and running was a measure of progress (albeit very slow and frustrating).

By the time Kaplan gets to Afghanistan the flaws in COIN become palpable. Concepts like

government legitimacy are frequently mentioned within the text; in its absence the struggle to stabilize and nation build become nearly impossible. In Afghanistan, to this day, the quandary as the U.S. prepares to leave is which insurgent movement, which warlords, which factions of the Taliban can the U.S. work with should the Karzai government fail. In Kaplan's view Iraq worked better, perhaps because the U.S. could more effectively leverage Maliki into cooperation; perhaps because there was a tradition of central government that was more recognizable than that in Afghanistan. Perhaps, it was more likely because the U.S. was able, at critical moments, to undo some of Bremer's errors, put militants on our payroll (Sons of Iraq), flip some other groups (including, for a time, the Sadr Brigade), and utilize counterterrorism to neutralize AQ and other hostiles who were preying on the population.¹¹

This is Fred Kaplan's story, but what makes this a most invaluable book is the manner in which this tale is woven into the organizational analysis of a fundamentally conservative institution with a very slow learning curve. John Nagl, in his now classic *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*¹², makes the case that the U.S. Army learns and forgets only to learn and forget again. David Petraeus' ambition led him to take on the intellectual and institutional restraints the Army had to offer.¹³ His victory led to some success in Iraq, but not so much in Afghanistan. Kaplan provides a ready-at-hand explanation as to why Afghanistan has not succeeded on the one hand, and why Petraeus personally succeeded on the other. In just a few pages at the end of the book Kaplan lays out Petraeus' final downfall. The brevity of this account reflects the tragic ending at the length it deserves.

If one were looking to read one book on COIN or the Iraq War, Fred Kaplan's *The Insurgents* might well be the one to choose. There are some missing aspects (namely, a discussion of the real intellectual flaws behind a strategy originally designed to save the empire), but one should be careful to avoid reviewing the book one wishes the author

had written rather than the one in hand. This is a terrific addition to the literature of the modern American way of war, and while many soldiers might not want to participate in Military Operations Other Than Warfare, the war against extremism indicates that this is in America's future. **PRISM**

educational process. Whether it is in the books by the ubiquitous Emma Sky or Sarah Sewall or the many Kagans, this is its own story.

Notes

¹ This group would include, *inter alia*, General David Petraeus himself, John Nagl and David Kilcullen (early importers of counterinsurgency theory), Andrew Krepenevich, Herbert McMaster, Conrad Crane, Sarah Sewall, Kalev Sepp, Peter Chiarelli, Celeste Ward, and Emma Sky. The latter would include, *inter alia*, David Galula, Bernard Fall, and T.E. Lawrence.

² Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).

³ Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford: University Press, 1991).

⁴ Kaplan, *Op. Cit.*, 346.

⁵ Kaplan, *Op. Cit.*, 185.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ During the Vietnam war, the Hamlet Evaluation Survey (HEM) counted the number of communists "eliminated" or "rallied" (those who joined the government) and the number of villages under South Vietnamese control. See, Robert K. Brigham, *Iraq, Vietnam, and the Limits of American Power* (Philadelphia: PublicAffairs, Perseus Book Group, 2006) 47.

⁸ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: University Press, 2009). It has only been in the last decade that Stathis Kalyvas and his students at Yale have reanalyzed the data in an effort to determine what we could have been learning had we made a better effort to think the data collection techniques and results through.

⁹ Kaplan, *Op. Cit.*, 257-58.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ For the best account of on-the-ground operations against Iraqi hostiles, especially behind insurgent lines, see J.B. Walker *Nightcap at Dawn: Ameriban Souldiers' Counterinsurgency in Iraq* (New York, Skyhorse Publishing, 2012).

¹² John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat the Soup with a Knife* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹³ Another piece to this story, which Kaplan addresses, is the role civilian and semi-civilian advisors played in this