

The Winning Formula

Reviewed by Thomas Rid

IN THE SUMMER OF 2003, DURING THE EARLY days of the Iraq war, “counterinsurgency” was still an odd and cumbersome word. Soon it dawned on politicians, military officers, and scholars that they better understand its nuances. The literature on “coin” began to mushroom, and today small libraries could be filled with the books and articles devoted to the subject. Most notably, in 2006 the U.S. Army published a much-anticipated field manual, *Counterinsurgency*. Known among aficionados simply by its official publication number, FM 3-24, it became the blueprint for improvement in Iraq, and now, possibly, Afghanistan. The University of Chicago Press republished the manual in 2007 as a book, and it became one of the publisher’s bestsellers in recent years. The gist of the counterinsurgency wisdom is that the local population, not territory, is what matters most. Counterinsurgent and insurgent, in theory, compete for the trust of the locals, for legitimacy. The population is the “prize.”

Mark Moyer pitches his book as a challenge to that thesis. Counterinsurgency must not be just population-centric. Nor can it be merely enemy-centric, as conventional wars against opposing armies were. No, successful counterinsurgency is “leader-centric.” Counterinsurgency struggles are contests between elites, in which the elite group with better “leadership attributes” usually wins. The superior elites manage to gather more popular support, and use it to subdue or destroy the enemy elite and their supporters. So what makes for superior leadership? Ten things: initiative, flexibility, creativity, judgment, empathy, charisma, sociability, dedication, integrity, and organization. Moyer, who teaches at the U.S. Marine Corps University at Quantico, Virginia, sets out to explore these qualities in nine widely disparate case studies.

His aim, he writes, is to “assist” those who are fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. And to do that, he journeys—like the authors of earlier books with a similar goal—back in history. But *A Question of Command* stands out because it reaches back quite far, and to unexpected destinations—St. Louis, Missouri, and Little Rock, Arkansas. The American Civil War and the subsequent period of Reconstruction are rediscovered as counterinsurgency struggles, with Confederate soldiers and Ku Klux Klan members depicted as insurgents. Other historical examples include the Philippine-American war from 1899 to 1902, which pitted the United States against Filipino revolutionary forces under Emilio Aguinaldo; the Huk Rebellion, a communist insurgency that fought the Philippine government from 1946 to 1954; the Malayan Emergency, a guerrilla war for independence between Britain’s armed forces and the communist Malayan Liberation Army; and the Vietnam War. Why these cases and not others? And what are the hazards of comparing them? The reader is left to guess.

Perhaps it is the wide swath cut by Moyer’s choice of case studies that forces his argument into a narrow corner. Leadership explains everything and nothing. Brilliance and mediocrity, of course, are important in counterinsurgency. And some of the book’s anecdotes may contain good insights. But leadership matters in all types of war—as well as in baseball and banking. All failures and all successes can be traced to some leadership decision that was made right or wrong, even if the context matters more.

A few of Moyer’s examples: In the early days after the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the

**A QUESTION OF
COMMAND:**
Counterinsurgency
From the Civil War
to Iraq.

By Mark Moyer. Yale
Univ. Press. 347 pp. \$30

head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, L. Paul Bremer, issued an infamous de-Baathification edict that sent perhaps 100,000 government employees, formerly on Saddam's payroll, into unemployment, further rousing the insurgency—clearly a case of bad leadership. No planning in the Pentagon under the helm of Douglas Feith for Iraq's postwar occupation in the first place—bad leadership. General Muhammad Fahim, a corrupt Tajik military leader who packed the Afghan ministry of defense with his cronies—poor leadership.

And it works in reverse, too. Brigadier General Samuel B. M. Young, commander of the First District in northern Luzon in the Philippines around 1900, shielded his subordinates from political demands and “promoted creativity and initiative”—great leadership. During the Civil War, somewhere in West Virginia, Colonel George Crook, “one of the best Union counter-insurgency commanders,” crushed the guerrillas by picking good officers and, with no specific instructions, “setting them loose in the countryside,” where they succeeded in “capturing or killing large numbers” of insurgents—sound leadership.

Each of the wars Moyar studied has certainly seen great military men with impressive accomplishments. Most recently, commanders such as David Petraeus and Sean MacFarland have achieved extraordinary results under adverse conditions in Iraq. It still is too early to pass historical judgment, but their hard work may have helped pull the country back from the abyss of civil war. So leadership, for sure, is a fascinating aspect of studying operations against insurgents, if the approach is granular enough to absorb vital detail and context. But to be of use in today's wars, a book on command cannot ignore three towering questions.

The troop buildup in the Iraq war, widely referred to as the “surge,” was the initiative mainly of military leaders who nominally were not in charge of such decisions, as Tom Ricks reported in his book *The Gamble*, published ear-

lier this year. Jack Keane, a retired general, played a key role, as did several officers in Iraq and civilians at the American Enterprise Institute. All this seemingly happened in a vacuum of political leadership. From what we know, little guidance and few probing questions came from the White House or the vice president's office. A weighty slice of one of the nation's most important policies may have been developed and executed without the appropriate supervision of elected leaders. Sure, in hindsight the outcome might be a good one. The infusion of 30,000 combat troops into Iraq at a critical time has contributed to stability in the country's war-ravaged cities and provinces. Still, a momentous question begs to be answered: Was one of the most fateful strategic decisions in recent American history the result of a crisis in civil-military oversight, albeit a beneficial one?

This question of accountability doesn't merely concern the political sphere. In May

2007, a debate raging among junior and midlevel officers in the U.S. Army went public when an active-duty officer, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling, published a widely read article in the *Armed Forces Journal*, “A Failure in Generalship.” Senior military officers, not only civilian officials, carried the responsibility for the fiasco in Iraq, he argued. “America's generals have failed to prepare our armed forces for war and advise civilian authorities on the application of force to achieve the aims of policy.” Elsewhere, he charged, “as matters stand now, a private who loses a rifle suffers far greater consequences than a general who loses a war.” Only Congress could “restore accountability” among the nation's top military leaders. The article hit a nerve. As was widely reported, a large number of deeply frustrated junior officers publicly voiced support for Yingling's criticisms, putting the Army's senior

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leadership under real political pressure. Has the problem highlighted by these brave young officers been tackled adequately? Moyar doesn't even mention this remarkable episode.

A third intriguing question is itching to be asked on the enemy's side, about leadership and political violence. Combating terrorism was the prime rationale for launching the wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq. During the first phase of the war in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime were crippled by American and British firepower. As a result, Osama bin Laden's outfit and other violent Islamic groups were forced to transform themselves from hierarchical organizations into an amorphous movement composed of isolated and decentralized cells and activists, tied together by a common ideology, not much more. So how are they led? The world's best terrorism scholars feud over this question. On the one end are those who say that jihad in the 21st century is "leaderless" and most terrorists the world over are "homegrown," without central coordination. Others counter that "Al Qaeda Central," the organization's command post, is still up and running in the rugged mountains of Afghanistan's and Pakistan's ungoverned badlands, and that's where the jihadis should be confronted. There's probably something to the contentions on both sides. In any case, the question cannot be ignored in a book on "leader-centric" warfare.

Yet Moyar is certain that he has discovered the sole antidote to failure, not just in Iraq or Afghanistan, and in the successful operations of the past, but in the wars ahead as well. The odds are "good," he writes, that more dirty wars are in store for America. But *A Question of Command* exemplifies a wider trend in counterinsurgency studies: an obsession with historical comparisons of dubious utility selected to drive home particular arguments. Military and civilian experts love to learn lessons from what French colonizers did in Algeria and Indochina, from the British Empire's campaigns in Malaya and Kenya, or

from the U.S. Army's experiences in Vietnam. That urge is remarkable, not only because most of those campaigns were failures. The scholarly temptation to distill general truths from past experiences of war is as old as it is seductive.

Moyar seems aware of this danger, yet succumbs to it. He is driven to rummage through history by the urge to free commanders from the red tape that counterinsurgency doctrine imposes on them. "Universally applicable" rules, such as the directive to avoid the use of force against the population, might tie one hand behind their back. The result is a romantic view of violence. Moyar approvingly quotes one U.S. Army major in Iraq who says, "The more violent you seem and the more scared they are, the more they cooperate." The United States must not hobble its potential heroes, but "develop its most talented counterinsurgency leaders." Once they are developed, and their charisma improved, it's easy: "Place them into positions where they can wage war without fetters, their unshakable initiative and creative brilliance streaming across the plains and mountains."

Such language leaves a lump in the throat, particularly as it is the book's parting shot. Scholars who try to provide insights for those who endure hardship and personal risk in Iraq and Afghanistan should indeed be hungry for history and detail—not about the Civil War or Vietnam, but about Iraq's tribal relations, Islamic doctrine, sectarian identities and grievances, Afghanistan's violent past, Afghan and Iraqi political systems and culture, the interests of surrounding countries, language, even local literatures, narratives, and myths. Some of these books are being written. But in the counterinsurgency field, they continue to be overshadowed by would-be histories that aim right between scholarly relevance and practical utility—and sometimes miss both.

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