

IMAGE: Carl von Clausewitz, oil painting, Wilhelm Wach, 1830

Creeping Death

Clausewitz and Comprehensive Counterinsurgency

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IN 1840, PRUSSIAN Maj. Gen. Carl von Drecker traveled to French Algeria as a military observer. In the French counterinsurgency campaign against Abdel-Kadr's insurgency he found a vastly different war than what he was used to studying in Europe. Drecker saw no use for Carl von Clausewitz' *On War*, written just eight years prior, in defeating a guerrilla insurrection. Contrary to Clausewitz's work, Drecker remarked that there

was "no center of gravity" to be found in irregular warfare. He continued, "The finest gimmicks of our newest theoreticians of war lose their magic power . . . indeed, the most sublime 'Theory of Great War' will be obsolete and one has . . . to come up with a new one."¹

There would indeed be a new theory, one focused on the difficulties inherent in countering insurgencies. The lessons learned by the French in places like Vietnam, Morocco, Madagascar, and Algeria would become the intellectual underpinnings of the "population-centric" school of counterinsurgency. French practitioners such as Joseph Gallieni and Gallieni's understudy, the French Marshall Louis Hubert Gonzalve Lyautey, put population-centric methods to good use, and David Galula captured them in his widely read book, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*. The core of population-centric counterinsurgency is the belief that the civilian population is the center of gravity and, if the counterinsurgents win the loyalty of the population, the insurgency will be defeated. The most recent expression of this school is the current U.S. Army and Marine Corps doctrine for counterinsurgency, designated Field Manual (FM) 3-24 *Counterinsurgency*.

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However, another theory maintains that a focus on the population is folly, and counterinsurgents must focus solely on the pursuit and destruction of insurgent fighters. Theorists like U.S. Army Col. Gian Gentile, a West Point professor; retired U.S. Army Col. Ralph Peters; Israeli theorist (and Clausewitz critic) Professor Martin Van Creveld; and British military theorist William F. Owen vociferously deny the utility of population-centric methods and argue that seeking out and destroying the enemy is the counterinsurgent's path to success.

The problem is that both of these theories are wrong. They are built on an inaccurate idea of the center of gravity concept and a misunderstanding of Clausewitz's theory as a whole. Both ideas assume a predictable, static relationship between the enemy, the civilian population, and the insurgency itself. Despite Drecker's protestations, it is Clausewitz who offers the most insight into insurgencies, and his ideas reveal that a more comprehensive method is required for successful counterinsurgency. Unfortunately, the dichotomous argument between fallacious enemy-centric and population-centric ideas so dominates the debate that reality is obscured. In *On War*, Clausewitz's most important recommendation is that statesmen and commanders must understand the kind of war in which they are engaged. However, they must also first understand war itself.

The Trinity

This essay points out that the analytical reductionism inherent in both ideas has clouded the theories as well as the practice of counterinsurgency. It does so with a focus on third party support to host nations that are fighting an insurgency, also referred to as Foreign Internal Defense.

The central theory in *On War* is Clausewitz's "wondrous trinity" describing the forces that affect war and warfare. He believed that war could be thought of as being suspended between three "magnets": primordial violence, hatred, and enmity; chance and probability; and war's subordination to rational policy. He further connected each of these aspects with a physical manifestation as an example. The population is usually paired with primordial hatred and violence and the armed forces with chance and probability. The government is responsible for the policy.

While some have used this structure to claim that Clausewitz's ideas do not apply to nonstate actors and irregulars, it is important to remember that the secondary trinity was merely an example of how the primary trinity can manifest itself. These three constructs exist in an insurgency just as they do in any other war. Although insurgencies usually do not possess a formal military or government, at least at first, they have irregular fighters, they formulate political aims and attempt to establish governmental bodies, and they derive from the population. Whether or not that manifestation is present, the underlying primary trinity remains. Clausewitz went on to say, "A theory that ignores any one of them or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship between them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless."²

Despite this warning, modern counterinsurgency theorists have indeed ignored the portions of the trinity and their interrelated nature. Each theory ignores two of the three aspects of the trinity and, furthermore, assumes an arbitrary relationship between the enemy, the population, and the political goals of the insurgency as a whole that does not exist.

Population-centric theorists predict that without the population, the insurgent military forces cannot or will not continue to pursue their policy goals. Similarly, enemy-centric theorists assume that attrition alone will defeat the enemy's will, at which point the population will simply adopt the policy goals of the counterinsurgents.

These ideas are the result of conflating means into ends. Gaining the support of the population or killing and capturing insurgents are means to affect the enemy's will, but not ends in and of themselves. Put in terms of Clausewitz's wondrous trinity, the current theorists propose to remove one "magnet" and believe the other two will automatically become irrelevant.

This is a result of theorists searching for a center of gravity without understanding the concept itself. Clausewitz describes it as "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends." He went on to cite examples of centers of gravity, but nowhere does he connect them with specific nodes of the trinity.³ The center of gravity exists between the nodes, binds them together, acts upon

them, and is acted upon by them. It's a charismatic leader or a popular ideology, to borrow two of the Prussian's examples. Thus, it shifts between nodes with the pendulum. Napoleon, as a center of gravity, animated the population, dominated policy, and commanded the army. The two counterinsurgency schools not only falsely identify the center of gravity, but wrongly assume that it is static.

Systems theory also sheds light on how misguided current thought on counterinsurgency has become. Systems theory teaches that there are two types of systems. Structurally complex, or linear, systems work in a predictable manner and consist of parts that have little freedom of movement. Examples of structurally complex systems include automobiles, machine guns, and howitzers. However, interactively complex or nonlinear systems consist of components that have freedom of action and interact in unpredictable ways. Examples of interactively complex systems include economics, diplomacy, war (including insurgencies), and warfare.

For either prevailing theories of counterinsurgency to be feasible, one must assume a predict-

able, repeatable, cause-and-effect relationship between components. In the case of enemy-centric counterinsurgency, the assumption is that tactical defeat of insurgent fighters will cause collapse of the insurgency. The population-centric school assumes the same sort of popular support for the insurgents. This logic would work if insurgencies were structurally complex; cut the fuel line and the car will stop moving. However, an insurgency is not a machine composed of detailed components that operate in a fixed and predictable manner, and such a simplistic outlook cannot help but be incorrect. Rather, insurgencies are dynamic, nonlinear entities whose parts interact in unpredictable and complex ways.

Praxis

Insurgencies do not fail solely because they lack support of the population or suffer defeat on the battlefield. They slowly drown in a rising tide of defeat across multiple dimensions, amongst the population, on the battlefield, and in their policy goals. Simplistic strategies that ignore this will fail. Clausewitz's pendulum can be struck and a



U.S. Army Spc. David Reaves provides security alongside an Afghan National Army soldier at an ANA compound in Parwa'i village in eastern Afghanistan's Nuristan Province, 26 August 2010. (U.S. Air Force, Staff Sgt. Steven R. Doty)

system's fuel line cut, but the trinity will realign and the system will heal. Rather, the trinity's nodes must be seized and the insurgents' system flooded. Insurgencies die through suffocation, a lack of freedom to self-correct. Clausewitz alluded to this when he wrote that for an insurgency to be successful it "cannot sustain itself where the atmosphere is too full of danger. . . [and] it [the insurgency] must be at some distance, where there is enough air, and the uprising cannot be smothered by a single stroke."⁴ The counterinsurgent force that ignores the insurgents' military force, the population from which they derive, or the legitimacy and efficacy of the government that they oppose provides a venue that the insurgent forces can exploit.

Successful counterinsurgency methods deny the insurgents air and space. To bridge the gap between theory and praxis, the counterinsurgent must fuse the two methods into a comprehensive strategy, one flexible enough to pivot among the three aspects of the trinity while not ignoring any one. It may be that, when it comes to defeating an insurgency, there is no singular decisive center of gravity that will lead to success. Counterinsurgents will not win a Gettysburg or a Stalingrad. Rather, victory lies with the culmination of an ever-growing tide of attrition, subversion, and coercion.

Counterinsurgents must formulate a comprehensive strategy that fosters in the minds of the insurgents a feeling of creeping and inevitable death at every turn. As war is a struggle of wills, and the opponent's will is a psychological entity, only the psychological means (including the psychological effects of defeat in combat) can truly attack it. Insurgent fighters must pursue relentlessly, violently, and vigorously so the play of chance and probability seems increasingly skewed toward their extinction. They must see their rational political aims become increasingly improbable as the legitimacy and effectiveness of the nation's government increases. They must perceive that the passion of the population for their cause is minimized or negated by the counterinsurgent forces.

Utilizing Clausewitz's secondary trinity as a conduit to affect the primary trinity is the route through which the counterinsurgent must destroy the enemy's will and psychology. The relations between the trinity will inevitably ebb and flow, and these tides must be successfully navigated by

a constantly adapting counterinsurgent force. The tides resemble Col. John Boyd's prescriptions to "enmesh [the] adversary in a world of uncertainty, doubt, mistrust, confusion, disorder, fear, panic, [and] chaos,"⁵ and "magnify their internal friction, produce paralysis [and] bring about their collapse."⁶ The two major schools of thought are insufficient and the continued debate between them stifles progress toward a better understanding. Only a comprehensive theory of victory that considers all three aspects of the secondary trinity as method to affect the enemy's primary trinity in the pursuit of political ends will lead to decisive strategic effects.

To be sure, the counterinsurgent military force is not solely responsible, or equipped, to conduct a comprehensive strategy. Counterinsurgency is a national-level undertaking. The military strategy must be nested within the larger strategy. While the active insurgent fighters may not always be the center of gravity, defeating them is certainly a good step toward success; thus, the military strategy and the military forces executing it should focus on killing and capturing insurgents. However, other elements of national power must contribute. Additionally, gaining the trust and confidence of the local population can play a part in a larger strategy as well. It is when these two ways become ends that the strategy will fall apart.

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History

There are countless historical examples that illustrate these points. In the American Revolution, the British shifted forces to the southern colonies hoping to take advantage of loyalist



ART: *The Battle of Reichshoffen*, 6 August 1870, Aimé Nicolas Morot 1887.

sentiment there. Instead, their presence caused a virtual civil war between patriots and loyalists that negated any British military gains. In the Second Boer war, the Boers were defeated by the British in highly conventional fighting, but then transitioned to irregular warfare and continued to fight. During the French-Indochina War, the French enjoyed political control in South Vietnam, but were undone by catastrophic military defeat at the hands of the insurgents at Dien Bien Phu. The French in Algeria and the Americans in Vietnam discovered that military success on the battlefield can be undone by political developments on the home front.

There is a thread of commonality for successful counterinsurgency efforts as well. During the Philippine Insurrection, the U.S. Army fused both ideas to achieve success. The British eventually did defeat the Boers with a combination of enemy-centric, population-centric, and political

tactics. In Malaya, the Briggs plan added political and population-centric methods to ongoing British military operations to produce success against communist insurgents. During the Huk rebellion in the Philippines, the American Central Intelligence Agency operative Edward Lansdale and the Philippine politician Ramon Magsaysay designed a comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign that led to success. In Sri Lanka, brutal fighting and marginalization of the Tamil population, aided by geography, overwhelmed the insurgency over the course of 25 years from 1983 to 2009. In Iraq in 2006, it was a combination of increased U.S. troop presence and the Iraqi population's turn against the insurgents that led to success. One of the best examples was the French counterinsurgency in Madagascar where Gallieni, one of the fathers of population-centric counterinsurgency, used a mix of force, civil affairs, and political control to snuff

out the Hova insurrection. Gallieni described this successful method as a “combination of political action with military action” while simultaneously establishing “intimate contact with the populations, exploring their tendencies, their mentality, and striving to satisfy their needs in order to attach them through persuasion to the new institutions.”⁷ This is a clear description of a comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign.

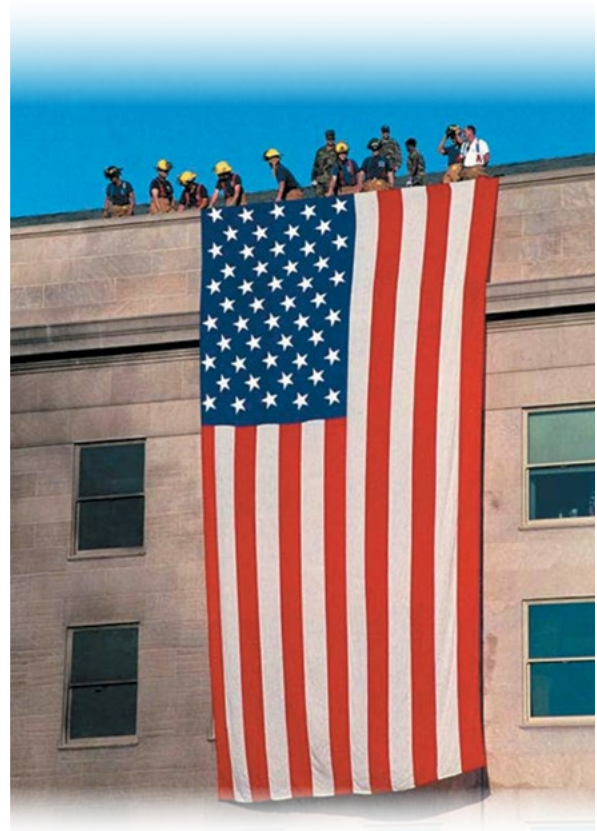
Case Study: Operation Enduring Freedom

The American military is currently receiving a harsh lesson in counterinsurgency at the hands of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The United States found itself confronting an insurgency after the events of 9/11 and the quick military defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and Flight 93 precipitated a U.S. invasion of Afghanistan where the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization was based. The ruling regime in Afghanistan, the Taliban, had long provided sanctuary for Osama bin-Laden and the core of Al-Qaeda. Although the Department of Defense had no plan in place to attack Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom was adroitly planned and executed with heavy CIA involvement.⁸ A blindingly fast campaign based on Special Operations Forces and support to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance succeeded in toppling the Taliban government in less than a month.⁹ It forced the Al-Qaeda leadership, including Osama bin-Laden, to flee to Pakistan within two months.¹⁰ An enemy-centric method for the defeat of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan seemed the right choice as the U.S. success left Afghanistan under the control of the United States and free of meaningful resistance by the end of 2001.

At this point, having achieved success in the military sphere, the United States had a great opportunity to focus on the other legs of the trinity to consolidate its gains against Taliban resurgence. Afghanistan remained relatively quiet for years following the defeat of the Taliban; consequently, the number of foreign troops in Afghanistan was kept to a minimum. In fact, it was the smallest U.S. peacekeeping force since World War II, falling as low as just 6,000 U.S. troops.¹¹ Unfortunately, the NATO leadership squandered this opportunity to

make progress in the government and population dimensions within Afghanistan.

In 2003, U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad and U.S. Army Lt. Gen. David Barno, the military commander in Afghanistan, made great strides toward a more comprehensive strategy.¹² However, the strategy collapsed as resources and talent were siphoned from Afghanistan into the ongoing war in Iraq. The United States at this time did not view the Taliban as a “strategic threat,” instead believing that its earlier military defeat was sufficient to destroy the organization.¹³ The country received scant resources, far less than the aid per capita provided to Bosnia in the mid-1990s.¹⁴ Douglas J. Feith, under secretary of defense for policy, remarked that, “nation building is *not* our strategic goal” (emphasis in original).¹⁵ In 2008, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Michael Mullen described the effort in Afghanistan at the time as an “economy of force” mission.¹⁶ U.S. troops in Afghanistan were tasked to “hunt the Taliban and Al-Qaeda,” not assist the government or population of the country.¹⁷ Despite



Rescue workers drape the American flag on the Pentagon after the 9/11 attack. (U.S. Government)

improvements in the Afghan economy, NATO and Afghan forces began paying for their neglect of Clausewitz's trinity.¹⁸ Between 2005 and 2006, suicide attacks quadrupled and other armed attacks tripled.¹⁹ Following their truce with Pakistan, Taliban forces had regrouped and were beginning to focus their efforts on retaking Afghanistan from the NATO forces.²⁰ Insufficient efforts in all three dimensions of Clausewitz's trinity provided the Taliban this opportunity. In this case, even a more robust military effort in Afghanistan would not have prevented the Taliban from reconstituting in Pakistan and attacking again.

In contrast to NATO's strategy, the Taliban's offensive in 2006 was more aligned with the trinity. While continuing to fight NATO forces, the Taliban installed a "shadow government" to provide the population an alternative to the Afghan government under President Hamid Karzai.²¹ The Taliban even targeted religious leaders friendly to the Karzai government for assassination to prevent them from convincing the population to support Karzai.²² In late-2008, increasing violence prompted the Bush administration to conduct a review of its efforts in Afghanistan. That review found violence had risen 500 percent in the previous five years, and Afghan approval of NATO forces had dropped by 33 percent within the last year. These findings prompted a reinforcement of 10,000 U.S. troops to the 32,000 present at the time.²³ In June 2009, Congress confirmed Gen. Stanley McChrystal to command NATO forces in Afghanistan, and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates ordered the general to conduct a strategic review of the situation.²⁴

This analysis found that NATO forces were "disconnected" from the Afghan populace and "pre-occupied with the protection of our own forces."²⁵ Additionally, the report found weak Afghan state institutions, a high level of corruption, and frequent abuses on the part of the Afghan government.²⁶ The report recommended a population-centric counterinsurgency effort that would require additional troop reinforcements. In November 2009, President Obama approved just such a plan and a U.S. troop increase of 30,000.²⁷ The new mission for NATO included taking control of key population centers and lines of communication and building the governance capability.²⁸ Thus, the United States finally began to address all three legs of the trinity, albeit while focusing on the Afghan population, eight years after the initial invasion.

Despite the renewed focus on the population, a secret NATO report leaked to the BBC in January 2012 indicated that, in Afghanistan, popular support for the Taliban insurgency increased and Afghan civilians welcomed Taliban efforts at governance.²⁹ Even if NATO forces were more successful in wooing the Afghan population, it would not have a decisive effect on the Taliban war effort. Afghanistan is a country of over 30 million people.³⁰ If counterinsurgent forces gain the support of 90 percent of the population, an improbable amount of success, that still leaves the Taliban a support system of three million people. Thus far, the course of Operation Enduring Freedom belies the notion that pure enemy-centric methods or pure population-centric methods will produce success. The Taliban were almost entirely ejected from Afghanistan, yet NATO's failure to build the Afghan government and protect and control the population opened the door for the Taliban to return. Now that the Taliban has reestablished itself in Afghanistan, winning over the population, if that were even possible, will not be enough to drive them out.

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Conclusion

To be sure, a comprehensive method that simultaneously pursues victory along numerous dimensions would be a massive, expensive, and bloody undertaking. It is for that reason policymakers must understand the need for a comprehensive strategy before committing to a counterinsurgency campaign, just as they should for any conflict. The counterinsurgents will almost always have constrained resources, but theories that promise a shortcut by targeting only one

dimension of an insurgency are simply snake oil that must be rejected. They cannot correctly inform the statesmen and commanders as they attempt to heed Clausewitz's command to understand the nature of the conflict. There is no easy way to attack an insurgency's center of gravity, and there is no singular critical vulnerability. As Clausewitz said, "The victor . . . must strike with all his strength and *not just against a fraction of the enemy's*."³¹ (Emphasis mine) Boyd also described just such a comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign, listing military, population, and governmental efforts that must be simultaneously employed to succeed.³² Even FM 3-24 recommends a wide range of tactics that span multiple lines of operation, but does so in a confusing manner while still professing the centrality of the population. If the defense community continues to cling to faddish, shallow portrayals of counterinsurgency, it will continue to, as Colin S. Gray warned, "encourage an indiscriminate massacre of both guilty and innocent concepts."³³

The U.S. counterinsurgency manual is currently under revision. Of course, doctrine is not theory

but rather best practices that have been successful in the past. However, it would be wise to get the theoretical context correct to better inform the doctrine. Thus far, the defense community has been remiss in this crucial pursuit. Foundational theory, like Clausewitz's *On War*, that seeks first to holistically understand the nature of war, should be the starting point for any theory rather than counterinsurgency specific texts. Thus far, these works have been collections of practices specific to a particular time and place. While they should certainly inform American strategy going forward, they are insufficient. Theorists who misunderstand or cherry-pick *On War* to support a sophomoric fantasy of enemy-centric counterinsurgency should be ignored. It is past time the U.S. military move beyond the simplistic population-versus-enemy dichotomy and realize that while counterinsurgency is a specific type of warfare, it is still war and thus subject to the same immutable and timeless forces as any other war. American unfamiliarity with counterinsurgency and the wounds of Vietnam blinded us to this fact. It is past time we take off the blinders. **MR**

Portions of this essay were derived from research conducted for the U.S. Naval War College. Special thanks to Megan J. Hennessey, communication instructor at the Expeditionary Warfare School, and Adam Stahl, Adam Elkus, Alex Olesker, Kelsey D. Atherton, Robert Caruso, Rei Tang, and Dan Trombly for assistance with this project.

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