

# COUNTERINSURGENCY

## What the United States Learned in Vietnam, Chose to Forget, and Needs to Know Today

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From the title of this book, one could be forgiven for thinking that it was published when the situation in Iraq was devolving into insurgency in late 2003. It wasn't; however, if it had been, perhaps military leaders of all ranks and senior political figures might have adapted far more quickly to what was happening then. Standing where we are today, in the immediate aftermath of two counterinsurgency wars and current involvement advising the Iraqi government against the Islamic State, one could also imagine some future volume similarly titled, only substituting Iraq and Afghanistan for Vietnam.

David Donovan is the pen name of Terry T. Turner, a professor emeritus at the University of Virginia's Department of Urology. He is also the author of *Once a Warrior King: Memories of an Officer in Vietnam*, an account of his tour as a Special Forces advisor in that country when U.S. involvement was winding down in 1969.<sup>1</sup> In the last few lines of his earlier book's preface, Donovan writes,

There will be many who will say that this book and my recollections are too simplistic ... I

would agree; my story is simplistic. It eschews the finer topics of international politics, military strategy, global economics, and who did what to whom first. These subjects are well worn and only lead to endless debate and disagreement, achieving nothing.

Conversely, it's clear in the introduction of his most recent work that he has since had a change of heart. In *Counterinsurgency*, Donovan recounts his participation in a 2006 Combined Arms Center symposium concerning the Army's experience overseas providing security assistance to host-nation governments, when he realized that what the Army learned and painstakingly documented in Vietnam had been forgotten. What he witnessed was an institution "re-inventing the wheel" in its current (2006) struggle. No doubt, Donovan's latest book serves as a warning that this should not happen again.

The author treats those "well-worn" subjects in a way that transcends the context of any specific conflict, despite the Vietnam examples. He briefly describes why the Army abandoned the

counterinsurgency method as a major subject after the Vietnam War, and it's easy for the reader to forecast the same happening again, but Donovan doesn't dwell on it. Far more important to him is encapsulating lessons learned based on his experiences from over four and one-half decades ago in a concise, digestible format for future generations of leaders who will once again, as he argues, have to advise and assist host nations fighting insurgencies.

The resulting product favorably compares to other better-known classics of counterinsurgency theory and practice. The work consists of checklists of things to consider or execute, with a few real-world illustrations and examples from the author and other advisor colleagues. Those lists cover everything from strategic estimates to operational design challenges, from specific tactical tenets for advisors to twelve general principles for counterinsurgency programs, and from a dozen ways those programs can fail to what drives a bureaucracy to put the best face on things and paper over such failures. The text is both pithy in its advice and also rich in its rationales and examples.

One is reminded of the Samuel B. Griffith translation of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, with its selected ancient commentaries on the master's aphorisms.<sup>2</sup> Like the Chinese classic, Donovan's *Counterinsurgency* has something to say to both strategic policymakers and lower-level military leaders, particularly the need for high degrees of discernment and nuance in estimating,

planning, and executing support to counterinsurgency. Unlike Sun Tzu's maxims, this text is written less in a positivist, prescriptive voice and more in a tone warning of dangers to be dodged and pitfalls to be avoided. Most readers with firsthand experience in implementing counterinsurgency in the field will nod their heads in agreement with what Donovan says.

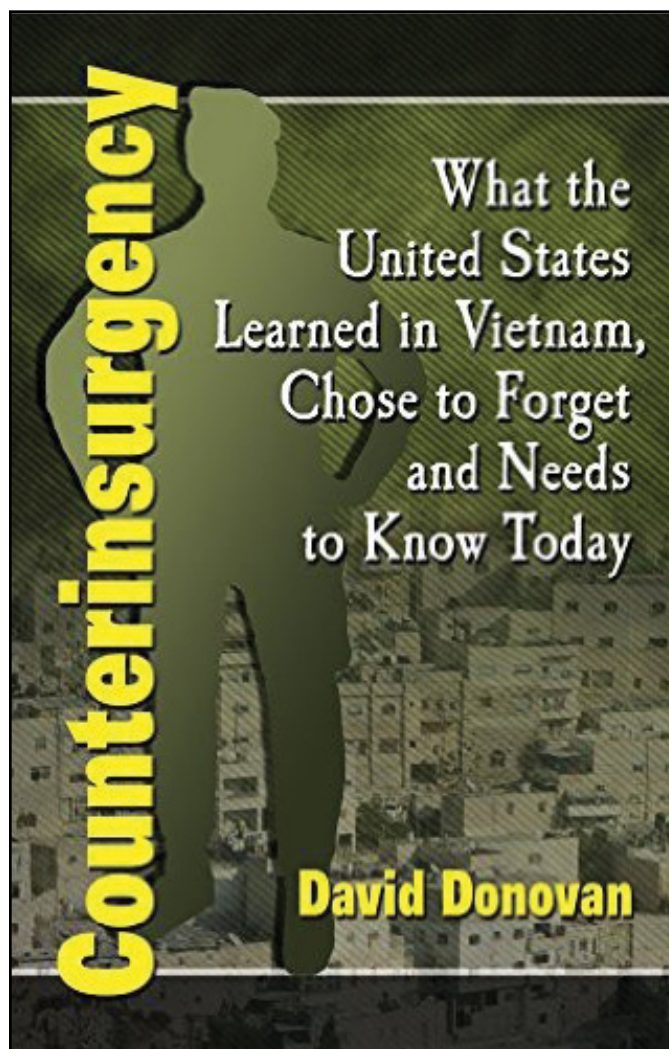
Does this book offer anything to those critical of counterinsurgency theory, such as Col. Gian Gentile

or Douglas Porch? As can be seen in *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency*, Gentile has long been skeptical of the Army's efforts in developing and implementing counterinsurgency as "community building" at the cost of what the institution is primarily intended to do: dis-pense organized violence in the service of the state.<sup>3</sup> Porch makes a compelling case that counterinsurgency is not so different than other kinds of wars in *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War*.<sup>4</sup>

Given Donovan's background, his first book, and the title of this one, it's easy to assume that there is little in this slim vol-

ume that answers the concerns of Gentile and Porch; however, that would be a mistaken impression.

In chapter 9, "The Soldiers They Send," Donovan simultaneously stakes out requirements not only for advisors with special training in counterinsurgency, but also for conventional forces that execute more traditional tasks. Perhaps this is not surprising, given that Special Forces advisors and conventional forces



both played key roles in the Vietnam War. Of course, the author puts most of his effort into explaining why specialized training and education in the subject are so important, and his examples are compelling in justifying his point of view. Certainly leaders of both types of forces would benefit from a close read of Donovan's *Counterinsurgency*.

There will be those who will say that this book certainly seems to fit the mold of a classic work on counterinsurgency theory and practice, such as Roger Trinquier's and David Galula's famous treatises, as it too is founded on the experience of a lost counterinsurgency war.<sup>5</sup> Why should we think we can gain something useful from the losing side? As Sun Tzu tells us, "Those unable to understand the dangers inherent in employing troops are equally unable to understand the advantageous ways of doing so." Perhaps nothing is so instructive than learning lessons from one's failure to overcome those

dangers, from losing battles, even from losing wars. Therein lies the irony encapsulated in the title of Donovan's book. We came, we saw, we learned, we lost, and then we forgot; it shouldn't be this way.

This is a work that deserves a place on professional military and U.S. foreign policy reading lists. First, it reinforces a respect for historical experience that can inform future readiness. *Counterinsurgency's* tenets are timeless and transcend technology. The full title alone is a plea to give up "deliberately self-inflicted institutional amnesia." Second, the work dispenses practical advice to both senior strategists and junior leaders coping with the demands of fighting indigenous insurgencies. Finally, this particular book is arguably the best place to begin studying counterinsurgency as it establishes the relevance of the topic and provides a sturdy bridge between theory and practice. Consider it the newest and best foundational primer on its subject for American audiences. ■

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## Notes

1. David Donovan, *Once a Warrior King: Memories of an Officer in Vietnam* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985).
2. Sun Tzu, *Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963).
3. Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York: The New Press, 2013).

4. Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
5. Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*, trans. Daniel Lee (London: Pall Mall Press Ltd., 1964); David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 1964).

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