

The Essence of Desperation: Accounting for Counterinsurgency Doctrines as Solutions
to Warfighting Failures in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

Why does counterinsurgency emerge during periods of warfighting failure and in crisis situations? How is it conceptualized and legitimized? As the second counterinsurgency era for the United States military ends, how such a method of warfare arises, grips the military, policy makers and think tanks provides a tableau for examining how we conceptualize the strategy process and account for geostrategic change.

This dissertation takes these puzzles as its object of inquiry and builds on the discursive-argumentative geopolitical reasoning and transactional social construction literatures to explore the ways in which the counterinsurgency narrative captures and stabilizes the policy boundaries of action. It conceptualizes strategy making as a function of defining the problem as one that policy can engage, as the meaning applied to an issue delimits the strategic options available. Once the problem is defined, narratives compete within the national security bureaucracy to overcome the political and strategic fragmentation and produce consensus.

A narrative framework is applied to study counterinsurgency strategy during the Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghan wars. This framework examines the symbolic power and positioning of COIN advocates, hegemonic analogies and commonplaces to legitimize COIN, and the romanticized language and imagery associated with COIN doctrine. These elements define the “who, what, where, and why” of the courses of action. Together these discursive resources serve as the building blocks for the counterinsurgency narrative and enable it to capture the geostrategic debate space. This narrative further defines how COIN is conceptualized in particular geostrategic contexts and how it is to be executed.

The study concludes that by empirically tracing the ways in which the actors, analogies, and narratives are produced and deployed into war strategy debates the reasons for COIN’s emergence in crisis periods can be determined. This allows for a thicker analysis of wartime and crisis decision making and a broader view of the ways in which strategy and policy are actually produced within the national security bureaucracy.

In conceptualizing military strategy and policy in this way, we are better able to understand how dramatic changes in strategy occur and map the dynamics which enable that change to occur.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Counterinsurgency is a military doctrine and strategy designed to win the population of an affected nation-state back to the government. Widely associated with the idea of “winning hearts and minds,” it is premised on the notion of clearing an area of insurgents, securing the population, and winning their loyalty through the provision of government services and socio-economic development and reform. Counterinsurgency, or COIN, is also associated with a continuing presence of military forces for long periods and significant aid expenditures. As such, it is a curious strategy to employ in the midst of wars seen as failing and when the population has often turned against supporting the conflict.

This research examines the emergence of counterinsurgency doctrine and strategy in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan in order to understand how this strategy is employed in the midst of these perceived warfighting failures. In doing so, it thinks of strategy as narrative that describes how particular actions will result in better effects in the future. It examines the constituent parts of the competing strategy narratives to understand how counterinsurgency advocates are perceived, how historical analogies are employed to legitimize particular courses of action, and how romanticized language and imagery are employed to support the narrative. In so doing, this research traces the ways in which strategy process works to overcome fragmentation and produce consensus.

The study concludes that by tracing the ways in which the actors, analogies, and narratives are produced and deployed into war strategy debates, the reasons for counterinsurgency’s emergence in crisis periods can be determined. Further this approach enables a better understanding of the dynamics of the policy making process and for understanding how geostrategic change occurs.

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Thanks to all of my classmates and friends in the program. I learned a lot from each of you and appreciated the advice and support. As a classmate of mine in the Virginia Tech PG&G program said, with these inadequate acknowledgements, I will now speak briefly about my positionality.

PREFACE

I have spent my entire adult life in and around the U.S. military and the Department of Defense. From undergraduate time at West Point, to serving in Hawaii and Oklahoma on active duty, in the world of defense acquisition for a brief period after I left the service, to my current job at a not-for-profit supporting the Department of Defense, the military has been the focus of my professional life. Indeed, when I first started the PhD program at Virginia Tech, I intentionally planned on not focusing on U.S. military topics in order to segregate my full time job from academic study. A series of events led me back to the fascinating topic of counterinsurgency and, in particular, its adoption at the height of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Having served in the Pentagon during the “Surge” in 2007 and beyond, it was truly an amazing time to watch the immense changes that came along with the decision to adopt COIN and employ it in Iraq. As with many, I watched the Surge unfold with fingers crossed to see if the war could actually be salvaged and an Augustinian “better peace” forged in its wake, and also engaged in sidebar debates about the war on multiple occasions. From my own perspective, the decisions to engage in the conflict in 2003 needed to be segregated from the decisions to continue it at the height of the violence in 2006. To me, the Pottery Barn rule mattered and Iraq was clearly broken and we had to buy it. That didn’t have to mean COIN, but it surely meant that we owed the Iraqis a chance to have some level of security. I freely admit that I didn’t have a better idea and no way to make it happen if I would have had one.

I also continue to believe that the U.S. arrived at the height of violence in 2006 due to a failure of planning. Military operations are conducted in standard phases – Phase 0-V. Phase 0 is the steady state prevent or prepare period. Phase I is aimed to deter. Phase II is the seize the initiative phase. Phase III is the dominate or the period of Major Combat Operations as it has

become known. Phase IV is the stabilize phase, and Phase V is the transfer to civil authority and redeploy phase. The focus in 2003 and still today, in my mind, remains focused on how to best execute Phase III instead of identifying what is required in Phase IV. Phase IV is the translation of operational success into to strategic advancement, something that the U.S. has not had great success with in recent times. I would argue that despite the widespread mantra of having no plans to “win the peace” in the aftermath of past conflicts, the lesson has not been learned and the door to insurgency is opened much wider in spaces and places where stability is not achieved. To be certain, this is not the only reason for insurgencies to arise, but it provides opportunity. That is part of what lead me down the path of studying insurgency and counterinsurgency, as I had significant interest in understanding how COIN came to the forefront in Iraq despite the political winds, inside of DoD and in the wider sense of politics, being aligned against it. I had marveled at the change COIN had wrought, how it went from a backwater doctrine to front and center in 2007, and wanted to trace the ways in which that happened.

This is my “view from somewhere” – a policy analyst who works within DoD and that has been around the military for significant portion of my life. It is an organization that I have great respect for and have enjoyed being associated with, through good and bad. Needless to say that all of the views expressed in this dissertation are my own and in no way are endorsed or representative of views within DoD.

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ACRONYM LIST

AEI – American Enterprise Institute

AFPAK – Afghanistan Pakistan Region

ANSF – Afghanistan National Security Forces

AQI – Al Qaeda in Iraq

ARVN – Army of the Republic of Vietnam

BRIAM – British Advisory Mission

CAC – Combined Arms Command

CAP – Combined Action Platoons

CFR – Council on Foreign Relations

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

CIP – Counterinsurgency Plan

CJTF – Combined Joint Task Force

CNAS – Center for New American Security

COIN – Counterinsurgency

COMINTERN – Communist International

CORDS – Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support

CPA – Coalition Provisional Authority

CSA – Chief of Staff of the Army

CSBA – Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

CSIS – Center for Strategic and International Studies

CT – Counterterrorism

CTs – Communist Terrorists

DoD – Department of Defense

FBI – Federal Bureau of Investigation

FID – Foreign Internal Defense

FM – Field Manual

FOB – Forward Operating Base

GVN – Government of Vietnam

GWOT – Global War on Terrorism

HIMARS – High Mobility Artillery Rocket System

IED – Improvised Explosive Device

ISAF – International Security Assistance Force

ISF – Iraqi Security Forces

JCS – Joint Chiefs of Staff

JSOC – Joint Special Operations Command

MAAG – Military Assistance Advisory Group

MAC-V – Military Assistance Command-Vietnam

MNC-I – Multi-National Corps-Iraq

MNF-I – Multi-National Force-Iraq

MNSTC-I – Multi-National Security Transition Command – Iraq

MOOTW – Military Operations Other Than War

MSUG – Michigan State University Group

NGO – Nongovernmental Organization

NLF – National Liberation Front

NSAM – National Security Action
Memorandum

NSC – National Security Council

NVA – North Vietnamese Army

OEF – Operation Enduring Freedom

OIDP – Overseas Internal Defense Policy

OIF – Operation Iraqi Freedom

SEAL – Sea, Air, Land Team

SOF – Special Operations Forces

SOFA – Status of Forces Agreement

TRADOC – Training and Doctrine
Command

USAID – United States Agency for
International Development

USMC – United States Marine Corps

USOM – United States Operations Mission

VC – Viet Cong

Chapter 1

Introduction

*“He who predicts the future lies, even if he tells the truth.”
Arab Proverb in Peter Schwartz’s (1991: 6) **The Art of the Long View: Planning for the
Future in an Uncertain World***

In the foreword to *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency* (U.S. Army, 2006), the Army and Marine Corps manual for combatting insurgency published in 2006, John Nagl argued:

Population security is the first requirement of success in counterinsurgency, but it is not sufficient. Economic development, good governance, and the provision of essential services, all occurring within a matrix of effective information operations, must all improve simultaneously and steadily over a long period of time if America’s determined insurgent enemies are to be defeated. All elements of the United States government—and those of her allies in this Long War that has been well described as a “Global Counterinsurgency” campaign—must be integrated into the effort to build stable and secure societies that can secure their own borders and do not provide safe haven for terrorists.

That the University of Chicago Press chose to publish the manual is a very atypical event, and the idea of a foreword for a field manual is just as rare of an occurrence. Field manuals are rather dry “how to” books that detail the ways in which military operations should be executed and are seldom read outside of the military formations tasked with engaging in operations or scholars examining strategy. In addition, counterinsurgency doctrine, as opposed to the more common focus of FMs and war strategies that center on attacking command and control nodes,

seizing key terrain, and neutralizing enemy formations, deliberately brings the civilian population to the forefront of the conflict. Indeed, it argues that the noncombatant population is the “prize” in such conflicts (Kilcullen, 2009: 73). For in counterinsurgency theory, it is the mass of opinion amongst noncombatants that serves as the key to victory; as the undecideds must be won over through the protection that separates them from the insurgents and through the provision of services that will bring their loyalty back to the host nation government. As Nagl (U.S. Army, 2006) noted, COIN theory emphasizes the provision of good governance and the delivery of services, tasks that fall well outside of the norm for military operations, expertise, and skills.

Indeed, these notions are generally very foreign to the normal ways of fighting wars, which is most commonly seen as the engagement of an enemy in order to create the conditions necessary to impose one’s will on a defeated foe. In this typical form of warfare, speed, firepower, and relatively short, sharp periods of engagement are expected and, indeed, sought, to draw the war to a conclusion. A recent example includes the 100 hour war of Operation Desert Storm that pushed Iraqi troops out of Kuwait in rapid fashion. Instead, counterinsurgency theory and doctrine speaks openly of the requirement for the expenditure of significant resources for sustained periods of time. Rather than the vaunted Revolution in Military Affairs with its focus on technology and the ability to precisely target enemies from increasing distances, counterinsurgency advocates an up close and personal engagement with noncombatants, with soldiers living in close proximity to or among the population.¹

This leads directly to the research questions that this dissertation will address.

¹ The initial invasion of Iraq, the so-called Shock and Awe, reflected the RMA with a relatively small invasion force and the use of precision weapons. This was accompanied by the idea that the war would be a quick, sharp and decisive engagement and U.S. forces would be quickly withdrawn.

First, why does COIN emerge as a solution to warfighting failures, how is it presented as a solution in moments of political crisis over war fighting strategies, and how is it legitimized as “the” answer to struggling war efforts? In three cases of wars going poorly from a U.S. perspective and with the public arrayed against expanding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. turned to a COIN based strategy with increased U.S. force levels to right a war going poorly. For example, the Kennedy Administration found itself, both pushing for counterinsurgency as a central plank of its foreign policy and dealing with a collapsing position in parts of Southeast Asia. The government in Laos was teetering on the brink of falling to a communist inspired movement and the Diem government in South Vietnam was facing an increasing loss of influence and territory to National Liberation Front (NLF) guerrillas in the period shortly after Kennedy assumed office in 1961.² The situation in Laos served to reinforce the growing capability of the NLF and their NVA backers, further destabilizing the U.S. supported regime in Vietnam. The Kennedy Administration subsequently put on a sustained drive to establish, codify, and train counterinsurgency across the U.S. foreign policy and national security oriented departments, to develop a workable counterinsurgency plan for Vietnam, and to encourage the Diem government to accept and employ this plan. The result was the Strategic Hamlet Program of 1962, a counterinsurgency inspired effort to separate rural villagers from insurgents, by relocation if necessary, and snuff out the NLF.

Nearly forty five years later, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) was clearly in a downward spiral by 2006, with open sectarian fighting, the dumping of bodies around Baghdad, and ever more powerful improvised explosive devices (IEDs) creating carnage among Iraqi civilians, the

² The Kennedy Administration also was concerned with Thailand and the potential for insurgency to break out there as well.

Iraqi Security Forces, and U.S. military forces.³ At the same time, U.S. domestic support for the war had collapsed, George W. Bush's Republican Party had been thrashed at the ballot box, and the Secretary of Defense had been forced to resign. Yet, ironically, during this period of crisis, the Administration opted to deploy an influx of U.S. forces to apply counterinsurgency as a solution to the failing war effort.

By 2009, the U.S., seemingly on the upswing in Iraq and with a new Democratic Party President, prepared to change its strategy in the ongoing war in Afghanistan. Afghanistan had played second priority to OIF for most of the previous six years, and after the initial success of removing the Taliban, violence had continually risen across large swathes of the country, while the Taliban had made fresh inroads against the fledgling Afghan government and its International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) backers. Shortly after assuming office, President Obama appointed a new commander and set COIN as the strategy. After agreeing to that strategy, the Obama Administration struggled with the number of troops recommended to execute COIN in Afghanistan, touching off a prolonged debate over what to do in Afghanistan. Despite the rise of an alternative counter-terrorism strategy and discourse, Obama approved the COIN objectives and most of the requested forces, though on a time limited basis.⁴ The battle for Marjah then commenced, with very restrictive rules of engagement and the "government in a box" notion that would oversee the area once it was finally seized (McChrystal, 2013: 477). Indeed, the Marjah operation seemingly sought to "out COIN" the Petraeus led COIN operation

³ As will be noted later, the bombing of the Al Askari Mosque in February 2006 led to the uptick in violence in what was an already chaotic and violent environment.

⁴ Bob Woodward suggests that President Obama chose to impose the timeline to signify disagreement with COIN and push the CT strategy. While possible, it derives motives that were never articulated.

in Iraq with its restrictions on the use of firepower to aid the clearing operations (McChrystal, 2013: 478).⁵

There is no particular reason why COIN, versus another type of doctrine or strategy, should be seen as the answer to the failing war efforts. Indeed, there were multiple options for Kennedy in Vietnam, Bush in Iraq, and Obama in Afghanistan. Yet all three chose a COIN based option to right the flailing war effort. This is particularly curious in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, as the U.S. had been simultaneously engaged in the wars for multiple years, the public had wearied of the conflicts, the economy was struggling, and yet, a COIN based strategy, with its heavy resource demand was selected and implemented.

This leads to a second question, how is COIN defined and what form does it take? While the general discourse of counterinsurgency has proven to be a remarkably stable one, the exact form in which it is produced and undertaken has differed. Form, in this sense, is the way in which doctrine identifies the role and size of the U.S. force engaged in the execution of counterinsurgency in the host nation. For example, Kennedy and his national security team argued that COIN was largely an advisory effort that should not be undertaken by masses of U.S. forces lest it spark a nationalist backlash, while the COIN of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) demanded large numbers of U.S. forces in order to secure the populace. Again, there is no particular reason for a heavy or light footprint of U.S. forces to be adopted, as both can be justified under the rubric of a fairly constant COIN discourse.

The notion of counterinsurgency is not a new development in military doctrine, or in academic research. Indeed, small wars, brush fire wars, guerrilla wars, or insurgencies have no shortage of academic literature in analyzing various aspects of these types of conflicts. As such,

⁵ McChrystal notes in memoirs, not out COINing Petraeus, but that there were no preparatory fires from planes or artillery and that “it would have been vastly simpler” had there been.

before outlining the argument and layout of this research, it is important to engage critically with the other potential answers for exploring how COIN or counterinsurgency rose to prominence in the midst of failing wars and the potential objections to these theoretical accounts. The following chapters will engage with these potential answers and detail the argument of this dissertation.

Chapter 2

Prevailing Answers and Organization

The Prevailing Answers

Conventional understandings of these puzzles can be found in both theoretical and empirical approaches to analyzing foreign policy and military strategy. The most common theoretical approaches still rely on some element of rational choice, a cost-benefit analysis based on power, security, or reaction to systemic change. Less conventional theoretical approaches assign more weight to social and cultural factors, while empirical explanations offer insights as well. This section will critically engage with these explanations to establish the degree of concurrence with each, set the theoretical grounding of this effort, and suggest shortcomings in regards to explaining the shift to counterinsurgency in the context of failing wars. This chapter considers the leading explanations for the identified puzzle and provides an introduction to the approach and arguments developed in this dissertation.

Realism

Power, security and survival have been major considerations of international relations and foreign policy studies since the inception of the field. From Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War (Thucydides and Lattimore, 1982), to Carr (1939) and Morgenthau's (1967) classical realist approaches, to Waltz's (1979) neo-realist theory, realism has served as the most prominent theoretical underpinning for understanding state behavior. Realism is guided by the notion of states as the sole actors of importance on the international stage, that the environment they interact in is characterized by anarchy and competition, and that the guiding interest is

survival and self-help (Brooks, 1997: 446). Waltz further refined the concept with a systemic approach, arguing that the international system consisted of a number of “great powers and that weaker states would balance against, rather than bandwagon with, more powerful rivals” (Walt, 1998: 31). These broad themes serve as the lens for understanding the reason behind state policies and actions under the realist theory of international relations.

Barry Posen (1984) applies the realist lens to the formation of doctrine as means of determining what form of doctrine a nation-state would adopt: an offensive, defensive, or deterrent doctrine. He examines this approach in the context of the interwar years between World War I and World War II. Posen examines the explanatory power of technology, geography, organizational theory, and balance of power theory to determine which best accounts for the type of doctrine assumed by the military.⁶ In this analysis, Posen argues that balance of power theory provides the most powerful explanatory tool (1984: 239). In this analysis, the militaries are typically left to themselves to determine doctrine without interference from political leaders on the civilian side. If left to themselves, militaries are more likely to adopt offensive doctrines that reflect their interests in minimizing uncertainty, establishing stable budget appropriations and maintaining continuity within their branch of service, regardless of whether it serves the national interest or not (Posen, 1984: 44-46). However, as international tensions and perceived threats to the particular state arise, civilian leaders, and indeed, some military leaders become more focused on developing the appropriate doctrine for the state to address the threats arrayed against it, leading to a shift to the most appropriate category of doctrine (Posen, 1984: 239-240). This also reflects the rational actor model that underpins the realist approach to international relations and the notion of the state as the unitary actor

⁶ I focus on Posen’s analysis of organizational theory and balance of power theory, as he argues that geography and technology have very limited explanatory power in determining the type of doctrine pursued.

possessing singularly defined interests, singular views of perceived threats, and whose actions can be determined based on systemic reactions to changes to the balance of power in an anarchic world order.⁷

The realist approach to international relations comes with several challenges in determining military strategy and they are indeed reflected in Posen's analysis. First, the level of abstraction required serves to obscure more than it clarifies, as counterinsurgency does not fit neatly within the categories of offensive, defensive, and deterrent. COIN, at a simplified level, supports host nation governments in securing the population, removing irreconcilables, and encouraging institutional, political, social, and economic reform. As such, its categorization does not fit neatly into Posen's schema, making it unclear how specific military doctrines are arrived at and operationalized as strategy.

Second, by aggregating action to the state level, as the state is the principal actor in realism and its components are presumed to act in concert toward a conception of self-interest, the organizational elements of the national security bureaucracy are outside the scope of the analysis. As such, the exploration of the interests, alternatives, and actions produced from within the bureaucracy is limited by this failure to break foreign policy and military strategy decision-making down into its constituent parts.

At a more theoretical level, the notion of reified state interests tends to obscure the politics and policy making for state decisions. For example, the Eisenhower Administration employed the strategy of Massive Response to perceived Soviet aggression large and small as a means to preserve U.S. security, while the Kennedy Administration adopted the Flexible

⁷ The singular actor is the "State" in this case and the President, as the leader of the state is seen as the sole decision maker despite the impacts of the various defense and foreign policy organizations that construct alternatives and execute the strategy or doctrine developed.

Response doctrine that included counterinsurgency. Either could be justified under the tenets of realism, as Eisenhower sought to husband scarce resources in order to deter the principal threat, while Kennedy sought to ensure the balance of power in Southeast Asia. Potentially, both of these options were in the interest of the United States, and the actions taken were to further this interest in different ways. To understand the reason for one versus the other would require a thicker analysis and reflects the lack of unity in how military strategy and state interests are given meaning and operationalized. As such, the mechanism by which one determines the “correct” doctrine that addresses threats or rectifies a perceived balance of power is unclear.

As such, this parsimonious approach to determining the adoption of doctrine or strategy presumes a rationality, coherence, and a flow of information that does not necessarily exist in the definition of threat, the development of doctrine, or in the defining of a response to a failing war effort. There is also limited explanatory power in determining why one course of action, in this case counterinsurgency, prevails over a containment or counterterrorism strategy in a particular set of circumstances. These limits are particularly exposed in dealing with non-state actor insurgents and “small wars” that do not rise to level of conflict that produce existential threats to the mainland U.S. Indeed, much of realism reads back into history a view of the outcomes sought by a strategy as announced, without examining how the methodology to achieve that desired end was assembled and put to work as state policy. In so doing, it treats the national security bureaucracy as an impenetrable “black box” where doctrine and strategy are produced, agreed upon, and enacted. As such, realism and balance of power theory are of limited value in determining why the particular strategy of counterinsurgency was adopted in these cases.

Rational Actor Model

In a second and closely related IR tradition, the rational actor model also treats the state and the executive as one and the same. The politico-military decisions made are synonymous with the actions taken by the state. In one of the models in Allison and Zelikow's (1999: 18) work on the Cuban Missile Crisis, the actions of the US and the Soviet Union are driven by cost-benefit calculations. The authors (Allison and Zelikow, 1999: 14-15) point to Schelling's (1960) work on *The Strategy of Conflict* and the "stable balance" of nuclear deterrence as central elements that explain the rational actor model. Each actor cannot initiate a nuclear conflict without accepting an unacceptable amount of retaliatory damage, leading to a "stable" deterrence as the "rational" response (Schelling, 1960). The Rational Actor Model is made up of four constituent parts. Goals or objectives are the elements of strategy that are the ends which the strategy seeks to achieve (Allison and Zelikow, 1999: 18). They require the decision maker to be informed of the trade-offs and potential risks associated with achieving each goal. The alternatives, or the courses of action, are those ways and means that can be applied to achieve the goals and objectives (Allison and Zelikow, 1999: 18). These alternatives are those courses of action that have been defined in enough detail to enable the decision maker to differentiate among them, and build a decision tree that facilitates ranking the alternatives (Allison and Zelikow, 1999: 18). Consequences are then attached to each alternative and the choice, or decision, is made based on which alternative and its consequences provide the highest payoff in alignment with a cost benefit model of decision making.

In such a model, the question of strategy is then a calculated approach in which alternative courses of action are ranked according to their utility or their returns on investment. As such, Kennedy, Bush, and Obama simply evaluated the available information and chose

counterinsurgency because it provided the highest potential payback as a means of defeating the insurgencies in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan and securing the ultimate objectives.

The first challenge with such a model is in defining what the presumed return on investment or the utility is, and, as such, why this particular strategy will produce that return in the future. Indeed, each of the Administrations spent little time considering the option that the highest utility, or the best return on investment, was to simply withdrawal from the conflict given the large investments in human and capital resources that were being applied to these fights. President Obama, in particular, in the midst of a financial crisis that had hit the developed world spent a limited time evaluating the idea of simply preparing a withdrawal and instead added to the troop commitment twice in less than a year. Instead, what was considered a “rational” choice was a delimited set of options for consideration. The analysis of what could be adopted as strategy is then screened to produce the courses of action considered and the full gamut of options that could be rationally evaluated are not included. Therefore, some alternatives are screened out of consideration prior to the ranking of each option because they are deemed odd, unworkable, beyond the pale, or irrational.

Second, the notion of a risk-reward calculation presumes a level of information and knowledge that is not generally available to key decision makers on most occasions. As Steinbruner (1974: 65) argues, there is rarely enough information for a calculation of risks to rewards that serves as the basis for the rational actor model of decision-making. The risk, particularly of wars in the midst of crises, would have the potential to very quickly outweigh the reward. This is particularly true given that each strategy relied on dramatic change and significantly increased the number of U.S. forces. Further, there is a questionable supposition of what meaning is applied to risks and rewards, and why one particular set of recommendations,

which quantify the risks and rewards differently, are given preference over a different alternative that applies a different risk to reward calculation. As Krepinevich and Watts (2009: viii) note, strategy by definition is a look into the future, and as such, it is a best guess of outcomes. Therefore, the calculation of risk to reward requires a comparison of unlike options with limited ability to quantify the risks to reward ratio. In such instances, there must be some way of differentiating which set of risks to potential outcomes is considered “correct” versus another set that is deemed an “incorrect” calculation, and a process for determining the overall correctness of the cost to benefit ratio for each alternative. Again, that produces a situation in which one is left in the position of determining what is correct, and what is deemed beyond the pale in terms of calculating risk to reward.

This further removes the human, political, and social elements from the development of strategy as well as the production of knowledge about war, COIN, and strategy to the periphery of the debate, while at the same time tending to reduce decision making down to the gut feel of the President at a particular point in time. Bias, ideologies, and the ways in which meaning is applied to a particular circumstance are by necessity extracted from the debate and a simple calculation of those particular courses of action that are deemed acceptable, are evaluated and applied, without an analysis of why an option is deemed acceptable for consideration. Indeed, this represents one of Jackson’s philosophical wagers, in that the rational actor model applies a mind-world dualism, in which there is an objective world that does not require interpretation, categorization, or classification (Jackson, 2011: 35-36). There is an objective truth that can be rationally evaluated and acted upon separate from the ways in which decision makers construct meaning and understanding about the circumstances they are facing (Jackson, 2011: 35). This mind-world dualism precludes us from understanding how the alternatives, risks, and rewards

were determined within the debate over the wars and limits our ability to fully and sufficiently understand the decision to adopt COIN based strategies for failing wars.

Organizational Behavior Theories

A third potential explanation lies in the use of organization theory to determine why particular doctrines are adopted or not. While multiple works on the formation of doctrine have been produced using organization theory, the focus here will be on the works of Posen, Allison, and Avant as a subset that highlight the key theoretical and methodological elements of organization theory.

Allison and Zelikow's (1999) work on the Cuban Missile Crisis highlights several elements of organization theory that could be applied in an analysis of the acceptance of COIN doctrine as the solution to war fighting failure. They argue that organizations have culture, identities, and standard operating procedures that are reflected in the options produced for the president's decision and that these cultures are reflected not only in the production of alternatives, but also in the execution of the strategy once it has been adopted (Allison and Zelikow, 1999: 144-145). Unlike realism and the rational actor model, in organization theory the development of strategy is a function of the output from the various organizations that operate in the national security bureaucracy (Allison and Zelikow, 1999: 64). The executive presides over these agencies and departments, that all are capable of determining their mission, rewarding their employees and have standard operating procedures for implementing their capabilities. In doing so, the organizations are able to shape the alternatives that the executive can select in particular situations and can be resistant to change, even if that change is directed from the President. They also have scope for defining how they execute the President's decision. Hence, Allison and Zelikow (1999: 234) highlight the U.S. Navy procedure of warning Soviet submarines with

small depth charges that nearly pushed the crisis into higher intensity levels after the order to implement the blockade was given.

Posen (1984: 43) further highlights the central elements of organization theory in the context of military doctrine in arguing that organizations are complex structures that are produced for a purpose, are composed of people to pursue that purpose, and are a product of their environment. The environment is often fraught with uncertainty, and organizations will react to reduce that uncertainty (Posen, 1984: 43). Posen (1984: 49) argues that this account for the military's tendency to adopt offensive doctrines as a means to reduce that uncertainty. In addition, they will innovate or adapt when under pressure from without, as a result of failure, and/or in order to expand (Posen, 1984: 57).

Avant argues that while Posen is partially correct in arguing that the realist theory of IR is the largest single shaper of military doctrine and that direct executive engagement during times of crisis can result in changing military doctrine, he discounts institutional elements that make resistance or acceptance of the directed change more likely (Avant, 1993: 410). Institutional theory focuses on how people's need to maintain political power influences their behavior and the relationships between politicians and bureaucracies (Avant, 1993: 410). This relationship then conditions the ways in which domestic actors respond to changes in the international system and in the production of military doctrine (Avant, 1993: 410). In particular, she notes the institutional fear that they will be absorbed and lose their institutional independence. Avant examines Kennedy's attempt to have the military services take on the counterinsurgency mission set during the 1960s and the U.S. Marine Corps' (USMC) adoption of the Combined Action Platoons (CAP). She argues that the USMC accepted Kennedy's direction to take on counterinsurgency and produced CAP, a tactic that deployed platoons to defend Vietnamese

villages and train local security forces (Avant, 1993: 420). In contrast, Avant (1993: 419) argues that the Army failed to adopt the push for COIN due to both an organizational preference for fighting large force on force wars and because it held a secure position in the military hierarchy. The Marines, were, and are an element of the Department of the Navy and feared that they would either be absorbed into the Army or downgraded into serving as guards for Navy ships. Hence the USMC adopted COIN tenets as a way to demonstrate their relevance to the new priority mission, while the Army resisted the change (Avant, 1993: 420). In this way, institutional theory's elements of resistance to change on the part of organizations was demonstrated by the Army, while the fear of being absorbed or downgraded was reflected in the action of the USMC.

There are four potential shortfalls in using organization theory to explain why the shift to COIN was made in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. These include: the limited constituency for COIN within the military services, the lack of pressure from without to adopt COIN in Iraq and Afghanistan, the lack of fear on the part of the Services of losing their place in the military hierarchy for Iraq and Afghanistan, and the limited explanatory power for why COIN became the doctrine and strategy to adopt in particular cases.

Within the military services, COIN is generally a primary mission for Special Operations Forces, and has a limited constituency beyond those small elements of the services. The Army and the U.S. Marines are both heavily mechanized forces with high technology weaponry that COIN largely eschews. Both the lived experience of training with those weapon systems and the culture that is produced by having done so requires dramatic change to disregard their advantages to dismount and interact with the population. As such, the shift of culture from the

one produced within the predominant force structure to the mission set of the small, SOF component is difficult to explain within an organizational model.

The potential solution is the notion of Posen's pressure from without and the adaptation to failure. To be certain, Kennedy was pushing the services to adopt COIN, but within a week of taking office had already received a Counterinsurgency Plan (CIP) for Vietnam. While there were disagreements over the scope and scale of counterinsurgency training in the military in the 1960s, as Birtle (2006: 226) argues, those were over the degree to which COIN was emphasized. The Joint Chiefs were required to produce forces that could still be prepared for their deterrence and potential near peer competition with the Soviet Union in Europe and provide forces for COIN in Vietnam. Indeed, Birtle (2006: 228) further argues that the Special Group Counterinsurgency (Special Group (C.I.)) was established to force the State Department and USAID to adapt to COIN over their institutional preferences, not due to foot dragging on the part of the Services. As such, the pressure from without would appear to have had limited impact on the decision to adopt COIN, as it was already underway. However, what COIN actually meant in the context of the 1960s brush fire wars remained to be defined and codified.

In the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, there was no external pressure from the President to adopt COIN. Instead, as Kaplan (2013) argues, the shift to COIN was brought about by a small group within the military. Again, leaving the question of how they were able to capture that space open to exploration.

The notion of organizational change in response to failure is the other element that provides a limited insight. While organizational change did occur, there is no requirement for that change to be population centric COIN. Multiple changes could have been adopted, but instead it was COIN. While many options were available, COIN was the option that was

produced, operationalized, and enacted. Reading back into history an inevitable shift to COIN disregards exploring the mechanism for why COIN became the reaction to warfighting failures. It instead accepts that COIN was the necessary change and analyzes the organizational response to implement it. This delimits the options that could have been adopted and focuses on what was adopted as the inevitable reaction to failure.

Finally, Avant's (1993) notion of fear driving the adoption of COIN is debatable in the case of Vietnam and has limited explanatory in the context of Iraq and Afghanistan. In the 2000s, there was no challenge to the place of the Services within the military hierarchy and the budget outlays for all of the Services were increased, along with efforts to grow the size of the Marines and the Army. Indeed, the potential loss of relevance for the Air Force and the Navy in a COIN dominated military would have potentially led to a movement away from COIN that did not occur. In the case of Vietnam, the question of the Army's adoption of COIN at Kennedy's urging is at a minimum debatable. Indeed, both Shafer (1988) and Birtle (2006) argue, the Army did adopt COIN, the challenge was determining what that actually meant while the policy and doctrine were still under development. Avant (1993) specifies the failure to adopt counterinsurgency as exemplified by the Marine CAP, as opposed to a reaction to a doctrine in production. In that case, the determination is based on an evaluation of a reified notion of what COIN should be, instead of what COIN was produced as in the context of the times.

As such, while organization theory may provide some insights into the development of military doctrine, there are some challenges remaining in determining what innovations are produced, how they are deemed acceptable by the organization, and how they capture or are endorsed by the Administration as the basis for strategy in providing a detailed understanding of why COIN was adopted versus counter-terrorism or some other form of war fighting.

Organizational Learning

Building on the precepts of organization theory, organizational learning theory provides another approach to determining why COIN was, or was not, adopted in the context of small wars. Nagl's (2002) work on the Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam War took the approach of applying organizational learning models to questions of how militaries do or do not adapt to counterinsurgency. Nagl highlighted two elements of military organizations ability to adapt to circumstance and perform as "learning organizations". The first, much like organization theory, deals with the development of the strategic culture within the organization. Strategic culture, in this conceptualization, is the "persistent, patterned way of thinking about the central task of and human relationships within an organization" (Nagl, 2002: 5). These patterned ways of thinking then play a critical role in the organization's ability to adapt, and in the way in which it adapts to changing circumstances. Nagl (2002: 5-6) argues that the British army had long experience in dealing with "brushfire wars" throughout the empire, while the American Army focused on the core tasks of the combat arms, with limited tolerance of sub-cultures within the larger whole.

Second, Nagl (2002: 8) details the elements of the organizational learning cycle which begins with the identification of a performance gap. Next, the organization undertakes a search for solutions and reaches a consensus on the proper course of action to remedy the gap (Nagl, 2002: 8). The solution is then transmitted throughout the organization and the cycle repeats itself. For military organizations, the production of doctrine serves as the method for transmitting knowledge throughout the organization (Nagl, 2002: 7).

From this theoretical perspective, Nagl argues that the British Army in Malaya was a learning organization, as they successfully adapted to the Maoist insurgency, while the American Army did not successfully adapt in Vietnam. Nagl (2002: 11) traces the "changing nature of

revolutionary warfare from Napoleon through Mao” and “the definition of a successful counterinsurgency strategy” to evaluate whether the British and U.S. Army were learning organizations. This determination of the parameters of a “successful counterinsurgency strategy” then serves as the basis for determining whether an organization is learning to fight an insurgent conflict or not. It also serves as the basis for identifying why the organization is able to adapt to the challenges of insurgent warfare.

With the framework of organizational learning and the establishment of the successful counterinsurgency standard as the base line for determining if an organization is a learning one, Nagl then considers the historical development of the British and the American armies’ organizational culture. He concludes that because the British Army accepted that colonial policing and administration were essential elements of the army mission, they were able to adjust to the counterinsurgency standard. The American Army, in contrast, had maintained a focus on large scale warfighting, limiting its ability to adapt and construct consensus among the senior leaders for adjusting to the requirements of “new” COIN wars (Nagl, 2002: 216-217).

The first potential problem with this analysis of organizational learning theory begins with the notion of defining a successful counterinsurgency strategy. This presumes that there is a single method for achieving success, the population-centric counterinsurgency advocated by Nagl. This dismisses the idea that the advisory effort in the Philippines that put down the Huk Rebellion was not a “successful” counterinsurgency strategy or that the Sri Lankan government’s brutal offensive against the Tamil Tigers was not successful. If the elimination of an insurgent movement is the goal, then both of these efforts “worked” without following the precepts of COIN as advocated by Nagl. As such, the evaluation of whether an organization learned is based on whether the organization adapted in a specific manner, not whether they were identifying

performance gaps and acting to address those gaps. Instead, there is a predetermined “right” answer that must be learned. Throughout the Vietnam War, the Army captured and applied many “lessons” including the use of helicopters for airmobile operations, on the application of firepower, on the use of maneuver, and on advisory efforts. The notion that they were not a learning organization, again, is premised on what Shafer (1988: 37) identified as the reified notions of classical counterinsurgency. To learn COIN as executed in the Malayan model is “the lesson” and to not adopt that model is to not be a learning organization. As with other theoretical challenges to answering why COIN was adopted, the organizational learning approach assumes that lessons are objective, and that they exist outside of the agents and discourse that produced the lessons about how to fight the war.

Also, the evaluation of the two cases fails to account for the significant differences between Malaya in the 1950s and Vietnam in the 1960s. The British had several advantages not available to the American Army. First, they had both military and political control of Malaya as it remained a British colony throughout the Emergency. As such, they did not have to work through the Malayan government to undertake specific strategies, whereas the Americans had to work for more than a year to get the acceptance of Diem to implement a counterinsurgency plan and the British had the added element of offering an incentive by promising independence as soon as the Malayan insurgency was tamed. Second, the insurgency in Malaya was largely confined to the ethnic Chinese population in Malaya, a minority group, that was more identifiable and that allowed for the effective segregation of the population from the insurgent in the New Life villages. Third, there was no outside power supporting the Malayan insurgency and certainly no regular Army divisions such as the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had operating in the northern regions of South Vietnam. In short, the potential for success, regardless

of the specific strategy employed was significantly higher in the Malayan Emergency than in Vietnam. As such, the particular method that was set as the standard for if an organization was a learning organization, did not account for the very different contexts and conditions in which the wars took place. It was much easier to employ the decentralized COIN that Nagl envisions without having the potential of engaging, or being engaged by, an NVA division.

So while organizational learning theory provides some insights into the ways in which organizations adapt to changing circumstance and, in particular to the ways in which military organizations learn battlefield lessons, it does not fully account for the adoption of COIN or other strategic options. First, it presumes that an objective, reified lesson for countering an insurgent movement exists and that to learn is to recognize that lesson. Second, it assumes that the lesson applies regardless of the context in which the war is fought. As such, the presence of regular NVA divisions on the battlefield is not considered as a particular challenge in the Vietnam context. Finally, it fails to specify the mechanism by which consensus is achieved in the organizational adaptation model, as the lesson exists outside of the organizational discourse and debate. This limits the analysis to a binary choice and fails to explain why a particular strategy was adopted, to the exclusion of others.

Bureaucratic Politics

Another potential model is the bureaucratic politics model of decision making. This includes Allison and Zelikow's (1999: 307) famous where you sit is where you stand precept for judging political outcomes of government decision making processes. The bureaucratic politics model identifies governmental action as an output of the interaction of the various actors involved in the debate (Allison and Zelikow, 1999: 294). A crisis, or crises, will cause certain government actors to have a stake in the ways in which the issue is dealt with in particular

situations. In the case of military action, Allison and Zelikow (1999: 311) argue that decisions for the use of force, or of a more forceful military response, will be a function of the preferences of the heads of the key national security agencies that become involved in the debate. The more hawkish or dovish the National Security Council, the Joint Chiefs, the Department of State and the Intelligence Community are, the more likely that a more or less forceful response will be initiated (Allison and Zelikow, 1999: 311). Presidents are less likely to decide for a more hawkish response without the support of their principal advisors. The preferences of those advisors are a result of their particular positions within the bureaucracy, as their view of the proper response will be shaped by the interests of their organization. Action will be determined upon the basis of negotiations between the various actors, as they will attempt to convince others to endorse their position (Allison and Zelikow, 1999: 303). The final decision, therefore, is a function of that negotiation, and will be determined by the recommendation of the majority of the actors engaged in the debate. Further, the determination on the use of force is heavily weighted toward the recommendations of the military services, as their viewpoint enjoys an elevated stature in debates of military action and few actors or presidents will opt to employ force against the advice of the military chiefs of staff (Allison and Zelikow, 1999: 312).

While providing some insight into the ways in which particular decisions are arrived at in the national security bureaucracy, there are some elements that the bureaucratic politics model fails to explain. First, the question of employing force does not easily flow from a negotiated response among various actors, particularly when the final response is a counterinsurgency based strategy. If where you sit organizationally is truly where you stand on the issue and on the employment of the force, counterinsurgency has a very limited constituency within the military

services that would be served by that option.⁸ Avant (1993), Posen (1984) and Nagl (2002) all argue that organizations tend to be resistant to change and that counterinsurgency largely falls outside of the preferences of the majority of each service's cultural predisposition. All of which raises the question of how counterinsurgency is not screened out as an alternative in the debate among the various actors who would have little stake in the adoption of that strategy. This is particularly puzzling in the context of Iraq and Afghanistan, in which a predominately heavy armor based force that relies on high tech weaponry, becomes invested in the *FM 3-24* based doctrine that to a large degree eschews the advantages of that weaponry for the largely dismounted operations required by COIN.

Further, the less hawkish the military service, then the less likely resultant is the deployment of tens of thousands of additional troops to the conflict as occurred during the Surge in Iraq. Conversely, while the military is often painted as opposed to counterinsurgency as is often suggested during the Vietnam era, it provided Kennedy a Counterinsurgency Plan (CIP) for Vietnam within weeks of his inauguration and prior to the Administration's push to codify COIN doctrine across the U.S. government. These raise questions as to how the bureaucratic politics model produces decisions in these cases. The ability to persuade other actors in the debate over strategy would appear to be based on the construction of a shared understanding of the problem and the means by which to deal with that problem. In effect, the debate, as Jackson (2006: ix) argues is one of legitimizing a particular response, as legitimacy, or the appearance of legitimacy is essential to winning supporters, enacting a policy, applying resources, and reconfiguring particular elements of the services to execute that strategy.

⁸ Indeed, COIN is generally a Special Operations lead mission area, a sub-culture as Nagl terms it, and not the primary focus of the combat arms branches of the services.

Further, the persuasion of the players in the debate is an inherently discursive activity. Without some means to identify how the persuasion takes place, one is left with limited tools to understand how particular actors within the bureaucracy are convinced to align with other players in the debate and potentially vote against their organizational positioning and interest. Indeed, as Hajer (1995: 63) argues, storylines and the discourse that they carry into the debate are critical devices for overcoming the political fragmentation of various actors in debates over policy. Without the construction of shared meaning to physical and social realities, there is a challenge in determining why particular actors endorse actions that may not align with their positional preferences to secure the political resultant that produces an agreed upon strategy.

Cognitive Models

Finally, there are various cognitive models of decision making that are provide insights into policy and strategy development. Cognitive models approach the questions of foreign policy decision-making from the perspective of the psychology of the decision-makers and their ways of making sense of particular situations. These theoretical approaches employ a variety of tools for examining these issues. This review will highlight the approaches of Khong, Steinbruner, and Shafer.

Khong (1992) applies an analogical reasoning framework supplemented by schema theory to determine how leaders determine what actions are required in wartime situations. His focus is on the Johnson Administration's decisions on the Vietnam War in the mid-1960s and contends that this framework demonstrates why the Johnson Administration chose to go to war in Vietnam and what tactics the Administration believed necessary to prosecute their chosen strategy. In Khong's (1992: 22) approach, analogies are drawn on to define the nature of the problem, to determine the stakes of the outcome, and to produce the policy prescription for

dealing with the problem. These analogies also take into consideration issues of morality, the prospect for success, and the risks associated with the analogy that is applied (Khong, 1992: 10). Khong (1992: 24) further specifies this framework by employing schema theory, which holds that decision makers make sense of new information by linking them with old experiences stored in their memory. These serve as the building blocks of cognition that allows a decision maker to determine how to manage the new crisis at hand. Finally, the framework employs congruence theory to demonstrate how the chosen analogy fits the decisions that were taken (Khong, 1992: 66).

A second cognitive approach employs the cybernetic theory of decision-making. Steinbruner's (1974) work focuses on the challenges of decision making in complex and fragmented bureaucracies and examines how leaders deal with information that conflicts with their goals, as well as the inherent uncertainty of foreign policy decisions. Steinbruner (1974: 65) rejects the notion of rational calculation on the basis that there is rarely enough information to allow for such a decision making process. Instead, he develops a model composed of two elements, a cybernetic element and a cognitive element. Cybernetic theory holds that decisions are fragmented into small segments that can be treated separately (Steinbruner, 1974: 85). In this process, complex problems are separated into smaller pieces that are analyzed by organizations and their sub-units that specialize in that policy arena (Steinbruner, 1974: 72). The analysis is conducted via the established processes with those organizations (Steinbruner, 1974: 87). Those results are then provided back to the decision maker. The decision maker is unable to reassemble the constituent parts into a coherent whole, as their fragmented nature creates conflicting goals and activities (Steinbruner, 1974: 108-109). The cognitive element of the cybernetic theory holds that in dealing with uncertainty, the unconscious mind will process

information, and draw inferences in such a manner to keep internal beliefs consistent (Steinbruner, 1974: 115). As such, policy makers will have particular judgments about what policies or actions should be considered, those that they believe are attainable given the situation, and that they will not construct the value tradeoffs necessary when the sequential elements of these complex issues come into conflict (Steinbruner, 1974: 138-139). Instead, they will argue that that the one result will support the other in order to maintain consistency with their policy preferences.

Finally, Shafer (1988) employs a cognitive content theory to what he terms the counterinsurgency paradigm. Cognitive content analysts contend that decision makers “derive policy content and change from the shared ideas and analytical frameworks with which policymakers analyze the international situation, generate policy options, and choose among them” (Shafer, 1988: 34). Cognitive content seeks to identify the assumptions and range of alternatives that underpin a policymaker’s decisions and holds that shifts in the decision making are a result of changes to the underlying assumptions or to changes in the paradigm through which policymakers make sense of a particular problem. Shafer (1988: 280) argues that counterinsurgency served as a paradigm whose underlying assumptions, and the paradigm they support, have not shifted, accounting for the consistency of COIN doctrine for more than forty years. The notions that support COIN, according to Shafer, were accessible to policymakers, had utility in that they could be operationalized through international development practices, and fit the belief systems of American exceptionalism (Shafer, 1988: 280). As such, these elements account for the long standing hold of COIN despite what Shafer argues were clear failures.

From a theoretical perspective, as O’Tuathail (2002: 604) argues, “the general utility of the psychology approach is hindered by its methodological individualism, its reduction of

psychological processes to the cognitive processing of individual decision-makers” and its reductions of “beliefs” to positivistic conceptions that fail to explain how we develop views through argumentation and debate. As such, these psychological processes, as argued by Steinbruner (1974: 81) demonstrate a tendency toward incremental change and a desire to maintain consistency that would preclude dramatic changes in policy direction. As the Surge in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate, the shifts to COIN were wholesale changes to the strategies that were currently in place and did not reflect an attempt to maintain that consistency. Further, Bush and Obama were not fixated on COIN as the solution or imbued with a view that COIN was required. Even Kennedy’s push for counterinsurgency required a defining of what COIN meant and how it was to be deployed, an element that required debate and argumentation to shape the notion of what COIN actually meant and required.

In addition, the idea of the lessons of a particular historical event are contingent on what those lessons are, a process that is a function of argumentation and debate. Indeed, while analogies are critical elements of foreign policy and strategic decision-making, and some are hegemonic, the debates over what strategy to follow and how it is to be employed is a largely a function of defining the meaning of particular analogies at particular points in time. In this sense, the “lessons of history” are not reified or set in stone, but are can, and often are, subject to debate and argument as opposed to fixed lessons.

Therefore, while the various cognitive approaches to foreign policy decision-making can provide insights, they are not sufficient to identify the reasons for adopting COIN in the context of Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The ways in which meaning is applied to particular situations, itself a product of the discourse in the debate is critical to identifying how a particular strategy is settled on and what that strategy requires of the forces employed. Further, the shift in

war time strategies were not incremental changes, but significant shifts with thousands of more troops and resources provided to Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. While all may have explicitly sought to win the wars, only Kennedy had a fix on counterinsurgency. Bush and Obama did not predetermine a specific operational approach. Yet all chose to drastically shift their efforts in failing wars toward COIN.

Other Potential Answers

Additional potential solutions can be found in more functionalist approaches to understanding the reason for COIN, such as presidential character and the bureaucratic gatekeepers approach to understanding decision-making. In the presidential character approach, Kennedy was widely seen as a “Cold Warrior” who in that memorable inaugural speech pledged to contain the Soviet Union at any price. As such, his decision to engage Vietnam is a product of that approach to the Cold War. Likewise, Bush was seen as stubborn and for refusing to “cut and run” in Iraq and therefore was open to continued U.S. engagement. Finally, Obama, widely seen as deliberative and pragmatic on foreign policy, would seek to extend debate and attempt to curtail the potential for extended engagement in Afghanistan. As such, each acted according to their particular styles and mental coda for engaging military operations.

The challenge to this approach is first and foremost that it doesn’t determine what type of action would be required to remain under the rubric of each person’s character. To not “cut and run,” does not mean apply counterinsurgency. There were multiple options developed that did not include leaving Iraq and that were not COIN. So while President Bush may not have wanted to “cut and run” there were alternatives to COIN that would accomplish that task. Colonel Mansoor’s “Go Long” approach for one, would have reduced American troops and maintained them in Iraq for extended periods to ensure the training of the Iraqi Security Forces continued,

the Iraqi government did not collapse, and to provide the U.S. had leverage to influence decisions inside Iraq to contain the immediate problem of sectarian violence and ultimately, hold out for an agreement among the political opponents (Mansoor, 2013: 45).

Likewise, while Woodward (2010: 236, 245) quotes a source that argues that Obama did not ever buy in to the COIN mantra and inserted the timeline to break it apart, the objectives determined in the Riedel report were never changed from COIN and more than 100,000 forces were deployed within his first year in office. Beyond that, the notion that as a Democrat he needed to demonstrate his hawkish bona fides is dispelled by President Obama. He told Secretary Gates and Secretary Clinton that he could pull troops out of Afghanistan immediately and see his poll numbers rise (Gates, 2014: 378). As such, if political pressure to demonstrate toughness was present, Obama did not articulate that he felt it personally. In addition, Vice President Biden was advocating for a counterterrorism based strategy as an alternative that would have allowed for military action without the deployment of large troop numbers. Obama did not side with that approach when it was available to him. In short, the notion of character also does not fully account for why the specific option for COIN was adopted in Afghanistan either.

While Kennedy was assuredly a Cold Warrior, he also showed great divergence and care in terms of what he was willing to commit force to achieve. For example, the Cuban Missile Crisis was tightly managed to prevent escalation and he refused to allow for the use of air power to back up the Bay of Pigs invasion force. While potential insurgent challenges existed in multiple places, Kennedy chose to employ the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam and was openly concerned that South Vietnam would collapse without the rapid employment of

counterinsurgency. In that regard, it is again difficult to ascertain from a reading of presidential character the reasons for employing COIN in Vietnam and how it was conceptualized to be used.

Another approach is the idea of bureaucratic gatekeepers enabling or hindering the emergence of COIN. A bureaucratic gatekeeper, in this conceptualization, serves to determine what is allowed to move forward for consideration in terms of policies, plans, and strategies. In the cases discussed above, this solution truly only appears in the case of OIF. In this approach, Secretary Rumsfeld was against the notion of COIN and denied the presence of an insurgency in Iraq, and, therefore, his resignation cleared the way for COIN to move forward. The challenge with this approach is that it does not address the other areas of resistance to COIN that were present. The Joint Chiefs of Staff did not want to employ COIN and, as Allison and Zelikow (1999: 311) point out, they serve as a significant deterrent to moving forward with a particular strategy the chiefs of the military departments do not endorse. So while Rumsfeld's resignation may have made things easier for COIN advocates, significant and politically powerful resistance remained. As such, this approach doesn't adequately or fully address the notion of why COIN was adopted in Iraq.

While each of these international relations traditions provided some insight into the ways in which the state choose to employ force, there are challenges to adequately identifying why a particular doctrine and strategy is adopted versus the universe of options that were available. This is particularly true in the case of COIN, which has limited constituencies within the national security bureaucracy and a challenging history in the context of U.S. warfighting.

Case Selection

As such, the determination of why COIN and why COIN in this particular conceptualization requires a thicker analysis than is available in large N case studies or positivist

approaches to foreign policy decisions making. Case selection was based on three factors for this research. First, I employed George and Bennet's (2005) notion of the deviant case. In the critique outlined above, I argued that in each of these cases, the U.S. commitment to COIN is not fully explained and demonstrated the challenges in the explanations that traditional IR theories or other empirical factors would suggest, making them worthy of further exploration to understand COIN's emergence.

The second element was the construction of COIN doctrine. The time periods chosen were also periods in which doctrine was being produced for counterinsurgency, giving the research the opportunity to tease out and unpack how "counterinsurgency" was conceptualized in the context of the wars. Finally, each case included one in which there was the appearance of losing a war and the engagement of additional forces. So while many COIN advocates during OIF sought to portray the post-Tet U.S strategy as a "better war" due to the turn to a counterinsurgency strategy, the actual Vietnamization approach with its focus on diplomacy, training Vietnamese forces, and reducing the U.S. footprint looked much more like the strategy proposed by the Iraq Study Group that was spurned for counterinsurgency. As such, the initial engagement in Vietnam enables the exploration of COIN as conceptualized in the 1960s and the deployment of forces into a war effort that the Administration saw as failing.

It is also important to recognize the differences between these cases. The Strategic Hamlet Program occurred in the context of the Cold War, the Maoist takeover of China, and the stalemate in Korea. The U.S. had supported anti-communist forces battling insurgent movements in multiple places, including the Philippines, Greece, and South Korea. The broader policy of containment had been in effect since the Truman Administration and continued to provide the basis for U.S. strategy towards the Soviet Union. Counterinsurgency was in its

infancy as a U.S. military doctrine, despite the numerous insurgent battles that the U.S. had fought, to include its own revolutionary struggle in the 1770s. Counterinsurgency was also immersed in the Cold War struggle, in that operational and tactical actions were often measured against their potential to engage a broader conflict with the Soviet Union or China. Indeed, one of the intellectual underpinnings of counterinsurgency in the 1960s was Modernization Theory and its all-encompassing solution to development and supposed answer to Marxist communism (See Rostow, 1960). It was also at a different stage of the conflict, in that it was closer to the beginning of U.S. engagement. The crisis of desperation was one felt within the Administration over the survivability of the Diem regime, not one broadly felt across the country. It was in this atmosphere that the Strategic Hamlet Program came to be in Vietnam and it served as the opening sequence that would provide much of the discursive resources that future COIN advocates would draw upon.

The Surge in Iraq occurred in a completely different geopolitical context, as the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) was at its peak and the U.S. remained the predominant global power. Further the insurgency was a more identity based movement than an ideological or even nationalist movement. As the war had ground on from 2003-2006, the public had grown tired of the conflict and support had collapsed. A blue-ribbon panel, the Iraq Study Group, had produced a report detailing a regional diplomacy based approach to managing the Iraq conflict and the doctrine of counterinsurgency remained a lesser included case in the context of military doctrine. Further, while economic development still occupied a prime place in COIN doctrine, it was not as closely connected to a particular theory of development as modernization theory in the 1960s. To be certain, economic reforms were largely neoliberal in their orientation, but there was

limited discussion of an underlying theory of development to be followed; only that development was a requisite element of the COIN strategy.

By 2009, with the OIF Surge seen as successful, the notion of counterinsurgency had moved to the forefront of military thought. However, the financial crisis of 2008 was still pushing up unemployment and concerns over war and terrorism had been shifted from the top issue in American politics in favor of jobs and the economy. The transition from a Republican to a Democratic Administration had brought a more skeptical eye toward the military and counterinsurgency. In this atmosphere, COIN was to compete with a so-called counterterrorism strategy that focused on attacking Al Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan versus the nation-building of COIN.

As such, these three cases allow for the exploration of COIN from its first modern incarnations in U.S. military doctrine through its renaissance in Iraq, and finally to its final period of dominance during its most recent emergence in Afghanistan. It facilitates the tracing of its myths and logics from its arrival in U.S. doctrine, its early and later conceptualizations, and the ways in which the drama of COIN has played out across the different contexts, settings, and political periods. It also serves to highlight an assumption that is central to COIN success. That assumption is the notion that there are universal values that are conceptualized and internalized in universal ways. That conceit produces the idea that security, government services, and economic development will ultimately sway the population to the host nation side as a result of the universality of those values as conceptualized by the West. Indeed, Latham (2000) argues Modernization Theory, and the foreign policy it provided the intellectual underpinnings for, recast the ideology of Manifest Destiny, and included the Strategic Hamlet Program as evidence for that claim.

The approach in this study does not follow a neo-positivist methodology. Instead these cases were interrogated from the perspective of how particular actors produced arguments and legitimized those arguments through communication practices in order to condition actions. This analysis of each case enables that thicker approach to understanding how each policy was produced, made to operate as a solution, and employed despite different contexts.

The next section will highlight the argument that will be advanced in this study in examining U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine development and implementation in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

The Argument

This research will address these curious questions of COIN's adoption in the context of U.S. strategy development during the Cold War and the GWOT and advance several arguments relative to the adoption of particular war strategies, their use in crisis situations, the forms that they take, and in particular, the ways in which counterinsurgency arises as the answer to failing wars. It begins with the conceptualization of war strategy as a narrative. It serves to detail a storyline in which particular means are applied in particular ways to generate an end state deemed acceptable by the political leadership of the nation-state or organization. This narrative tells a story about the future, in which the execution of certain actions will produce a desired set of results. This narrative or storyline does not exist in a vacuum, and is contested, in a geostrategic discursive space in which multiple storylines compete for legitimacy. Hence, COIN arises as the solution to war fighting failures by capturing that geostrategic discursive space. It is, therefore, the only "realistic" option for winning and producing the desired results.

These storylines, while critical to producing the overall result and overcoming political fragmentation in the national security bureaucracy, are not sufficient to detail why one particular

storyline prevails over another in the contest for legitimacy. Instead, the narrative is a function of a multiplicity of actors undertaking the discursive work of creating lessons learned from historical references, and, particularly in the case of COIN, serving to mystify and romanticize the notions of this form of warfare. These actors occupy particular subject positions and possess symbolic power/capital that serve to either boost or muffle their voice in the geostrategic drama that is the war debate.

The ways in which subjects are positioned then determines the weight of their argument, and, indeed, whether they are heard at all. The use of hegemonic analogies and commonplaces to define particular lessons from historical events supposedly analogous to the war fighting challenge being faced are deployed as legitimizing rhetorical devices to supplement the narrative and subject positioning. Finally, the mystical and romanticized nature of COIN, a constant in the times in which it has come to dominate U.S. military doctrine and strategy, serves to reinforce the ability of the COIN narrative to capture the imagination of the foreign policy establishment and, indeed, much of the public and press following the debate, further entrenching and legitimizing the status of COIN as “the answer” to a failing war.

As such, I argue that counterinsurgency surges to the fore as the answer to failing war efforts as a result of its capture of the geostrategic debate space as the best answer to small wars going badly through the narrative of securing the populace, clearing out insurgents, holding the territory, and building services, facilities, and loyalty amongst the populace in geographically phased operations. Further, the ways in which the strategic narrative is constructed produces the ways and means to achieve the ends of a COIN based strategy. For example, the Strategic Hamlet program in Vietnam was a product of the concept that COIN was an advisory effort that would train local forces to execute the clear, hold and build, while COIN in the Iraq and

Afghanistan became associated with the deployment of a heavy U.S. footprint with contentious debates over just how many forces would be required to execute the primary task of “protecting the populace”.

Certain enduring themes that support the mystical aspects of COIN operated across the COIN eras, and indeed could be tied back to colonial era figures and tactics for securing empires in distant lands. First, the idea that COIN is a special and more difficult form of warfare and that it is constructive versus destructive has remained (ODCSOPS, 1962: 25). For example the notion of winning hearts and minds is often associated with COIN, as opposed to the notion of defeating enemy forces in order to impose one’s will on a vanquished foe that is seen as the more conventional form of warfare. Second, the notion that COIN warfare was so difficult that even those that could grasp the doctrine could not always execute it, gave rise to the “best and brightest” (Halberstam, 1969) and the “warrior scholars” (Kaplan, 2013) memes that were associated with COIN doctrine. This privileged subject positioning added legitimacy to the narrative being put forward, as the “best and brightest” must know more than, by default, the not best and brightest, about how to secure victory in the war. A warrior scholar must know more than someone who is simply a warrior, and therefore, their voice and narrative is more legitimate, more often heard, and more “correct” in the strategy debate. Indeed, this is a reflection of Foucault’s power/knowledge concept in which power is constituted through the production of accepted forms of knowledge (Foucault, 1980: 98). In this case, the accepted form of knowledge is how to fight insurgencies, in which those that adhere to the COIN narrative “know” and those that do not adhere, do not “know” how to fight the war.

Again, each element of this argument serves to reinforce the operation of the other elements in producing the COIN as the only viable option at discrete points in time. In keeping

with Khong's (1992) analysis of the use of historical analogies in wartime decision making, I argue that these operate in two fashions. First, there are hegemonic analogies with widely shared consensus on their lessons and meaning, which are operationalized in the debate. Second, I conceptualize others as rhetorical commonplaces, in which the debate serves as a vehicle for providing meaning to those analogies, and employing them in novel ways as rhetorical devices to legitimate the notion of COIN as the acceptable solution to wars going badly (Jackson, 2006: 44). These rhetorical commonplaces, or analogies, had weakly shared or more malleable meanings, allowing the actors to produce, define and employ them to substantiate the broader COIN narrative (Jackson, 2006: 44). As such, the Malayan Emergency and the Huk Rebellion served as hegemonic analogies of the "right way" to conduct counterinsurgency. While, the most contentious analogy, Vietnam, served as a commonplace which was employed to define the "correct" lessons of the war that could be applied to the conflict at hand. Hence the Huk Rebellion was a model for the Vietnam War in 1960 and the Vietnam War served as "lesson" on how the supposed U.S. failure to adapt to counterinsurgency and apply its lessons, created the disaster that was the Vietnam War. In particular, the war fought by Abrams in the post-Tet period gives rise to the Vietnam War based commonplace of "a better war" that can be had if one adopts COIN principles and applies them appropriately (Sorley, 1999).

In short, by conducting an analysis of the strategic narratives for fighting the war in Vietnam, in Iraq, and in Afghanistan, one can sufficiently answer the three questions posed: why COIN, what form does it take, and how is it legitimized in the debate.

The remainder of this chapter will then highlight the way in which this dissertation is organized.

Organization of the Dissertation

The remainder of this dissertation proceeds in five chapters. Chapter three outlines the framework for geostrategic reasoning that will be employed to analyze counterinsurgency's rise to prominence in the U.S. national security apparatus during Vietnam, its high water mark during OIF, and in OEF. The focus will be on outlining the theoretical commitments and analytical reasoning in how each element contributes to the capture of the geostrategic discursive space during the debates over how the wars should be fought.

Chapters four through six represent the heart of the analysis of this study, as I examine the debates over the wars and the strategies to be employed in the early 1960s, in the 2005-2007 timeframe in OIF and from 2009-2010 in the OEF. The focus for each is to explore the ways that the narrative of counterinsurgency is employed to drive the adoption of counterinsurgency as the strategy for wars considered, at least in the eyes of decision makers, as being in crisis. Further, each applies the framework to identify how key figures are positioned within the war debate, how particular analogies and commonplaces are deployed to legitimize counterinsurgency as the answer to warfighting failures, and the mystical, romanticized nature of counterinsurgency as a discourse. These elements are then analyzed, as they feed into, enable and empower a geostrategic narrative that make COIN the only logical course of action to adopt and employ in the midst of wars going badly.

Chapter four takes up this task with an examination of the counterinsurgency discourse emanating from the Kennedy Administration. Kennedy's push to embed COIN across the U.S. government served as the opening act and established many of the themes of COIN that would be recycled, redefined, and reemployed in the service of future "small war" debates. I focus on the "best and the brightest" identifying the challenges of new wars that must be fought using different means and methods in the Cold War struggle against a global communist threat. The

analysis examines the means through which COIN was defined and codified in Administration policy and in military doctrine, along with the ways in which the Huk Rebellion and the Malayan Emergency were both mined for lessons and produced as models for these new wars. I further explore the ways in which Special Operations Forces, academia, and even, popular culture, served to romanticize the notions of counterinsurgency warfare. Finally, I turn to the attempts to convince the Diem government to take up counterinsurgency and how policy, doctrine, and the deployment of the Malayan and Huk rebellion commonplaces secured the decision to move forward with the Strategic Hamlet Program.

Chapter five turns to the debate over the Iraq War surge. Again I examine the discourse of counterinsurgency and its reimagining in the surge debate. Special focus is given to the positioning of key people in the debate and the redefining and redeployment of the Vietnam War commonplace and Malayan Emergency analogy, as well as the mystical notions of COIN in which even those who understand it may not be able to execute it. Finally, I turn to the narrative over the war and the ways in which COIN discourse captures the argumentative space.

Chapter six examines the transition to counterinsurgency in the context of the Afghan war in 2010. In this analysis, special focus is given to the debate over the “lessons” of the wars in Iraq and Vietnam and how these two commonplaces support the COIN narrative for the war and the process the Obama Administration follows in producing the strategy for the war in 2009-2010. The Afghanistan war debate saw the rise of the counter-terrorism discourse and the attempt by some in the Administration to contest the COIN storyline with the alternative of CT and traces this challenge through the debates in the Afghanistan war councils before the Afghan war surge is announced and the battle for Marjah is engaged.

Chapter seven concludes the study by revisiting the framework for geostrategic decision making and the implications of the research findings. It argues that geostrategic reasoning and strategy development is best understood as a narrative about the future. The violent interaction of animate organizations on the battlefield produces actions and reactions that cannot be predetermined. As such the development of strategy is inherently a discursive task to produce a narrative. This narrative is the theory of victory that can overcome the political and organizational fragmentation within the national security bureaucracy and provide the means for understanding geostrategic change. This allows for the look inside the national security bureaucracy to understand how strategic and political fragmentations are overcome when the drumbeats of war grow louder.

Chapter 3

Theory and Methodology

Let us say that we are obliged to produce the truth by the power that demands truth and needs it in order to function: we are forced to tell the truth, we are constrained, we are condemned to admit the truth or to discover it.

Michel Foucault Lectures at the College de France, 1975 —76: Society must be defended

So how do we account for the turn to counterinsurgency and its relatively infrequent employment in U.S. military operations? In order to identify the means by which COIN moves to the fore in the context of failing wars, this research employs a framework for understanding those geostrategic arguments, essentially the strategic narratives for how to right the wars, and traces the strategy debates as argumentative processes in order to identify both the necessary and sufficient elements of causation that produce COIN as a solution. This chapter will outline the theoretical commitments and the ways in which those commitments are connected to produce the answers to the questions posed in chapter one.

Discourse Analysis

I begin with my philosophical wager on the ways in which the physical and social world we inhabit can be understood. That wager is what Jackson calls a mind world monism in that there is no separation between the physical world that we inhabit and the ways in which we give meaning to that physical reality (Jackson, 2011: 35-36). For example, if the strategic narrative, in a take on the popular Napoleon credited quotation, intimates that we should “take Vienna,” then there is some system of representation that produces what Vienna is and why taking it is

important to the overall war effort.⁹ In other words, the strategic narrative has produced an argument that identifies Vienna, defines what Vienna is in the context of the war, produces and legitimizes it as a location whose capture eventually facilitates victory. Without that underlying meaning making process, Vienna is simply a location that physically exists, but provides war planners and policy makers with no means to identify, describe, categorize or clarify what it is and why it is important to the war effort. This stands in contrast to the mind world dualism wager, which holds that the world not only physically exists separately from the ways in which humans make sense of it, but has meaning that transcends and exists outside of the significance given to it by planners, policy makers, and pundits opining on its importance and role in a strategic debate (Jackson, 2011: 35). In the mind world dualism paradigm, Vienna is important because objectively it is, and not because it was produced to be important in the geostrategic argument and debate.

This has implications for the methodology chosen and the earlier critiques applied to other theoretical approaches for determining the reasons for counterinsurgency or not counterinsurgency. First, this research, in alignment with the mind world monism wager, holds that in the context of the debate over war policy and strategy, that there is no objectively correct answer to the question. For example, the OIF Council of Colonels summoned by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to review the current strategy and provide alternative courses of action, arrived at three options: go big, go long, or go home. Go big was essentially the Surge (Mansoor, 2013: 45). Go long was a smaller footprint for an extended period of time, and go home was to transition security to the Iraqi government and redeploy U.S. forces back to the United States. In order to develop and select among these options required some process of building an

⁹ Napoleon is famously quoted as saying that if you are going to take Vienna, then take Vienna.

understanding of what each strategy was, how it would operate, and what it meant to the ends of U.S. Iraq policy, in which all had elements that could have operated as the “truth” within the meaning making process that was applied to them. All could have been the “correct answer,” or none could have been the correct answer. Until they were produced, imbibed with meaning, argued and legitimized through debate, there were no means by which to determine which strategy was/is correct, and which were unworkable and outside of the mainstream of rational geostrategic thought. Further, they were the subject of an argumentative process, in which participants sought to persuade the others to join their side. As per Billig (2001: 214) persuasion is a rhetorical exercise, and further demonstrates that any of those positions *could* have been adopted. Yet only the Surge was actually employed, as the boundaries of acceptable action produced the decision that made COIN the solution. In short, there is no necessity or inevitability of employing COIN, or any other strategy. Instead, they are a product of the argumentative process that produces a dominant narrative over how to fight the war.

This leads directly to the first element of the framework that will be applied to analyze why counterinsurgency becomes the strategy in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. That first element begins with the notion of discourse and discourse analysis. Discourse, generally in the form of language, constructs the objects in the physical world in that it gives one the ability to identify, categorize, classify, assign meaning to objects and develop knowledge about their use. As Milliken argues, “things do not mean (the material world does not convey meaning); rather, people construct the meaning of things, using sign systems” (Milliken, 1999: 229). Hence discourse in this sense represents a system of signification. Additionally, discourse, as per Foucault, is productive, and represents a form of power (Foucault, 1980: 119). Power, as conceptualized by Foucault is not only a negative, but a productive phenomenon. It does more

than repress, censor, and discipline. It also produces what Foucault (1980: 131) terms regimes of truth. The regime of truth is that discourse that is made to operate as true. Conceptualized in this way, truth is “a thing of this world,” in that truth is not a given, objective fact that operates separate from the discourse in which it is embedded (Foucault, 1980: 131). Instead, truth is produced out of discourse and is reinforced by those who are positioned as tellers of truth. The truth tellers are those positioned within the discourse as qualified to produce knowledge about a specific subject and whose “truth” is permitted and made to operate as such. As with our Vienna example, the truth about taking Vienna is that it is strategically important because a regime of truth determined that it was, in fact, strategically important. This was part of the broader dominant strategic discourse that produced the notion that taking Vienna was required in order to enable a successful war effort. There could have been competing discourses that argued that bypassing Vienna, isolating it, and controlling the territory around it were more strategically important, but the regime of truth operating at the time, discounted those ideas, co-opted and redefined them, or made them appear wrong or illegitimate.

Further, discourse is more than language, but is an essential element of practice (Milliken, 1999: 230). The production of common sense and regimes of truth determine the practices necessary for the implementation of policy and strategy. The hegemonic discourses, those regimes of truth, produce the concept of particular practices and policy as acceptable and others as unacceptable. In this sense, discourse is about more than the ways of providing meaning to objects and events, but it disciplines the social and political world through the legitimation of particular ways of acting and, at the same time, delegitimizing other forms of being and acting.

Discourses are not fixed or stable, but are temporary and in a constant state of being produced and reproduced, challenged and rearticulated in novel ways that reconstruct the boundaries of action for particular policies and strategies. As such, policy and strategy are not evolutionary, but contingent, in that they are in a constant state of production and reproduction. The work of stabilizing a dominant discourse is a continuous process as alternative discourses arise to challenge and destabilize that particular regime of truth. As such, discourse and its study provides the means for analyzing the ways in which social, political, and strategic change can occur.

Discourse, its modalities, power/knowledge structures, and its regimes of truth serve as the building blocks of the geostrategic framework to analyze the decisions to employ COIN to failing war efforts. It enables the analysis of how knowledge about the wars and the strategies to fight them were created, argued, defined, redefined, and re-employed to reinforce the notion that COIN was the strategy necessary to secure victory in failing wars. The remainder of this chapter will then sketch out the framework for analyzing this discourse and trace the ways in which it legitimizes COIN and produces a regime of truth as to how COIN could right wars going wrong.

Subject Positioning and Symbolic Power

The initial element is identifying the “who” in particular discourses and how they are positioned within that discourse. Foucault’s work radically decentered the subject, as one that is produced within discourse in his analysis of prisons, sexuality, and the medical field (Hall, 2001: 79). In this theorization, the subject is not separate from the discourse, but is instead a product of it. The discourse that surrounds particular objects, policies, and plans, produces the subjects that are allowed to speak about it. Indeed, as Hall argues, subjects “may produce particular texts, but they are operating within the limits of the episteme, the discursive formation, the regime of truth,

of a particular period and culture” (Hall, 2001: 79). As such, a subject is then positioned within a discourse in alignment with the power/knowledge concept. A subject is allowed by the discourse of the particular time to produce knowledge accepted as operating as true about the subject at hand. The discourse itself disciplines the subject to accept particular discursive positions, ways of talking about, and producing meaning about a particular subject (Hall, 2001: 79).

While in general agreement with Foucault on the notion of how particular subjects are disciplined by discourse, this research argues that there is a certain element of discursive entrepreneurship available to participants in the war debates and in the production of strategy for how to prosecute the war. As Jackson (2006: 34) notes, “individual and social forces are *always* implicated in every social situation, and neither individuals nor social forces stand in complete autonomy from one another”. In other words, the political and social contexts and discourses of the time do matter and individuals are not free to operate independent of those elements and the discourse that makes those contexts operable. However, within the particular contexts and the restrictions, there is room to maneuver to produce texts, speeches, and discourses that operate in new or novel ways that facilitate the production of knowledge about, ways of understanding, or the assignment of meaning to particular subjects within debates. This is the contingency of debate, where arguments and rhetoric are deployed and seized upon by the actors within the discussion to produce these different understandings. While not free from the constraints of the discourse of the time, they are capable of supporting the work of destabilizing the meaning of a particular commonplace, narrative, or way of understanding within the context of the organizational and social structures and discursive resources available to them.

In addition to how subjects are positioned, there is the concept of their symbolic power. As Pierre Bourdieu (1991:170) argues, symbolic power serves “as a power for constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world, and thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself”. As such, symbolic power serves to make things appear normal. This power “derives from the recognition of authority as legitimate, be it authority based in political, economic, or cultural power” (Loveman, 2005: 1655). The accumulation of this power enables the agent to establish the parameters in which debate takes place. As Loveman (2005: 1656) argues, symbolic power establishes the “practices, categories, and cognitive schemes through which the game is understood”.

In combination with the subject positioning, symbolic power determines who is allowed to speak, write, or produce knowledge about the wars and COIN. As with the restrictions that newspapers publish editorial columns and academic journals determine who is allowed to speak within their pages, the discourse of war debates defines the actors that can produce knowledge about the subject, as well as the weight of their arguments. For example, during the debate over the Surge, the COINdnistas were producing manuals, opinion pieces, and articles for *Military Review* and *Foreign Affairs*, which espoused the principles of COIN as they defined it, and how those principles could resurrect U.S. fortunes in Iraq. They were further dubbed the “Warrior Scholars” and offered laudatory pieces in influential newspapers, magazines, and other media. This privileged position, and the symbolic power that came with it, within the debate and the discourse about COIN served to amplify their voices, provide them with the position, as Warrior Scholars, of producing knowledge about COIN and the wars, and lent legitimacy to their narrative of how to fix the wars. At the same time, Nagl and the COINdnistas worked within the

organizational and social structures available to them to effect this shift within the military to the COIN based approach they favored by targeting military journals and conferences, producing the COIN manual, and making themselves available to discuss their expertise on the subject of COIN within military and foreign policy groups that could potentially influence the debate. As Kaplan (2013), and indeed Nagl (2014), argue they set out to change the way the military fought wars from within the military structure and discourse of strategy. In so doing, they operated from a privileged position within the boundaries of strategic discourse and military structures.

At the same time, Generals Abizaid and Casey operated from a different subject position and without the benefit of the symbolic power wielded by the COINdniestas in the OIF debate, as they argued that only the Iraqis could solve the problem and for the need to move U.S. troops outside of the populated areas and toward withdrawal. These were not the “warrior scholars,” not equipped with PhDs on COIN, and despite being the two senior most leaders of the war; their voices in the debate were marginalized, as they argued against the Surge. Ironically, in some ways, Abizaid and Casey were arguing in accordance with the COIN precept that foreign troops could not solve the problem and T.E. Lawrence’s dictum that it was better to let the indigenous population fight the war in their way, than to step in and fight the war for them.¹⁰ This reflected their lack of mastery of COIN language and position outside of the COIN as solution narrative. Despite their senior positions and leadership of the wars, or perhaps, because of their leadership of the wars, their voices, or right to speak were limited in the debate.

As subject positioning and symbolic power are embedded within the web of discourse and debate, it is a central element of the strategic storyline and narrative. The ways in which particular actors are positioned and make use of their power in those positions serve to produce

¹⁰ Better known as the famed Lawrence of Arabia and drawn from the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (2008).

the “common sense” that surrounds the option that is finally accepted. Their positioning either serves to privilege or degrade their ability to craft meaning about the war and legitimizes or delegitimizes particular courses of actions, narratives, hegemonic analogies or rhetorical commonplaces that are part and parcel of the debate and policy/strategy making process. By tracing the “who” of the debate, I am able to identify what narratives benefit from, or are degraded by, the actors within the debate.

Rhetorical Commonplaces and Hegemonic Analogies

A second element of the geostrategic discourse analysis applied in this research builds on the works of Khong (1996) and Jackson (2006) to employ rhetorical commonplaces in the legitimation of counterinsurgency as the strategy for failing wars. Khong (1996), as discussed earlier, applies the learning from history model with his analogical framework to understand how geostrategic decisions were made in the context of the Johnson Administration’s decisions about the Vietnam War. In this analysis, the Administration relied on historical analogies such as the Munich agreement of 1938 and Neville Chamberlain’s “appeasement” that allowed Nazi Germany to annex Czechoslovakia and the U.S. involvement in the Korean War in 1950. These analogies served as the means through which the Administration made sense of the situation in Vietnam and produced the decisions regarding the U.S. deployment of forces and the bombing campaigns that followed (Khong, 1996).

Jackson (2006) examines the role of the rhetorical commonplace of Western Civilization in the reintegration of Germany into the “Western” community of nations in the aftermath of World War II. Rhetorical commonplaces in the sense are those bits of discursive material whose meanings are weakly shared among policy makers and the public (Jackson, 2006: 28-29). They are then deployed in the argument in which opposing sides attempt to define, redefine, co-opt

and redeploy them in the midst of policy debates in order to legitimize one option and to make others appear as illegitimate or strange. Crucially, the meaning of these commonplaces are weakly shared, in that if the meaning of Western Civilization or other commonplaces were strongly shared, there would be little reason in attempting to redefine and utilize them in novel or different ways, as the broad social and political agreement would make their redefinition difficult (Jackson, 2006: 28). Additionally, these commonplaces are used in particular contexts. As Jackson (2006: 28) highlights, Slobodan Milosevic giving a speech on Serbian nationalism in the U.S. would have little power in the broader debate due to a lack of shared background surrounding that commonplace. Finally, Jackson (2006: ix) employs the notion of legitimacy in that any policy, or strategy, must be made to appear as legitimate, as the reconfiguration of organizations and resources to make a particular strategy work must meet some level of legitimacy, or appear as common sense, in order for it operate. Legitimacy and legitimation in this conceptualization does not mean a rational actor theory model of reasoning to arrive at an objectively correct answer. Instead, legitimacy is employed, as per Jackson (2006: 24-25), as shaping and arresting the acceptable parameters, or boundaries of action that could be considered. In this conceptualization, legitimacy is a function of being made legitimate through the process of debate, the deployment of narratives and through the defining of actions deemed acceptable.

As part of this analysis, this framework adopts both the notions of learning from history through analogies and the notion of commonplaces as discursive materials that produce legitimacy in the context of war strategy debates. As opposed to Khong's (1996) view of analogies as constituting a shared view of what is required; this research conceptualizes two types of analogies. The first is that of hegemonic analogies. Hegemonic analogies, such as

Khong's (1996) Munich, have well circulated and engrained meaning that is widely shared. The destabilization of such an analogy is therefore difficult and the views of its "lessons" are hegemonic. These analogies are often deployed within debates to legitimate particular conclusions and strategies. The COIN debates were no different, as various actors called on these hegemonic analogies to develop COIN doctrine and legitimate COIN as the strategy.

In addition, I conceptualize other analogies as operating more like Jackson's commonplaces, in that their meaning is more weakly shared and, therefore, open to redefinition, co-option, and redeployment in debates over Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In this sense, a particular commonplace, or analogy, may be operationalized in the debate but its meaning is contested and shaped through the argumentative process, allowing it to be used to call on the broader strategic narrative for correcting the wars and producing novel readings of that analogy or commonplace.

The Vietnam War serves as one example of a commonplace that was contested in the counterinsurgency debates of the mid to late 2000s. Vietnam was deployed by OIF Surge opponents as an analogy of the quagmire, in which U.S. forces were caught in the midst of a civil war in Iraq, just like in Vietnam, which they could not hope to resolve for the Iraqis. As such, the only common sense response was to train Iraqi Security Forces, begin the phased withdrawal of U.S. troops, and undertake a diplomatic push to contain the fallout of the war in Iraq. This was the only way to avoid the disaster that was Vietnam. Conversely, COIN advocates argued that Vietnam was indeed a quagmire, but one that resulted from the failure to adapt to and adopt classical counterinsurgency as strategy. Indeed, this use of the Vietnam commonplace argued that the U.S. stuck to the big unit conventional war strategies in Vietnam until the Tet Offensive produced a change in the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MAC-V) and General

Creighton Abrams applied the Accelerated Pacification Program to produce a “better war” (Sorely, 1999). In this deployment of the Vietnam War commonplace, the lesson of Vietnam was that with the right leadership and the crucial shift to a COIN based strategy, Iraq, like Vietnam from 1969-1972, could be “saved” and the war could produce a successful conclusion as long as COIN was applied in alignment with the precepts of the COIN advocates.

The Vietnam commonplace also featured prominently in the OEF debate as both a “lesson in disaster” (Goldstein, 2009), and the same “better war” (Sorely, 1999) meaning. In the disaster deployment, the lack of vetting of options and strategies produced the disaster that was Vietnam, while the better war theory continued to legitimize the idea of COIN as the solution to a small war going bad.

These examples of the Vietnam War analogy illustrate how the commonplaces operate in geostrategic debates, as particular analogies and the lessons gleaned from previous historical events are produced to support particular strategic narratives and memes. Conceptualized in this way, commonplaces allow for the empirical tracing of particular analogies and the ways in which particular actors attempt to produce the *lessons* or meaning that *should* be associated with each. The Vietnam War commonplace provides an example of how these *lessons* were redefined and reconfigured to support the legitimacy of particular courses of action. Further, the commonplace concept demonstrates how some historical lessons are not as fixed or as stable as hegemonic analogies, but are often in flux and subject to redefinition. Indeed, much debate is an attempt to stabilize the meaning of these commonplaces as legitimizing rhetorical devices for the narrative that they support. The stabilization and destabilization of particular commonplaces and the deployment of particular hegemonic analogies then allow for the tracing of how particular

policies and strategies are adopted, the mechanism for how policy and strategy changes occur, and the forms that they take when such change occurs.

Mystification

Perhaps more than most discourses of war, mysticism and romanticism play roles in the ability of COIN to capture the imagination of policy makers, the press, and the general public. The discourse of COIN is wrapped in the ideals of development, hearts and minds battles, specialized knowledge, and the work with indigenous and tribal elements of states at war. Nearly from the beginning COIN has been wrapped in the veneer of a form of warfare that is markedly different from the conventional and one that requires a much different form of expertise and leadership than would a “normal” war.

This use plays directly into the narrative as well as supporting its capture of the geostrategic discursive space. For example, paradoxes of COIN produced by Nagl et al. specifies such principles of COIN such as the “sometimes the best weapons don’t shoot” and that “the more force protection measures you employ the less secure you are” as discursive tools to demonstrate that COIN warfare is distinct, special, and different (Cohen, et al, 2006). Kennedy’s (1962) West Point address that claims that graduates will face a “whole new kind of war” that requires them to understand the foreign policies of countries that they could not previously identify on a map, further highlight the critical elements of making COIN more mystical in its application.

So the production of this mystical and romanticized language further defines the separation of COIN from the conventional form and serves to reinforce the rhetoric and themes that are associated with counterinsurgency as theory, doctrine, and as a discourse. The ways

these elements are produced in the narratives all serve to create the “specialness” of COIN as a form of warfare.

The notion that COIN is battle for hearts and minds as opposed to an attempt to break the resistance of an enemy provides one of the central themes of the theory as well as the central notion of the mysticism that surrounds COIN as a form of warfare. Produced in this way, the notion of COIN is reversed from the destruction of something or someone, to the protection of someone and the production of something. Hence the COIN manuals of the 1960s referred to COIN as constructive versus a destructive form of warfare (ODSCOPS, 1962). Again, as with the rhetorical commonplaces that are advanced as legitimizing the notion of COIN, the use of the hearts and minds, protect and build meme of the theory suggest something more productive and reinforces the idea that COIN can produce a “better war,” as a war that builds versus destroys provides more to capture the geostrategic imagination. It further builds on the commonly accepted ideographs within the U.S. of an America that “makes the world safe for democracy” and provides aid to support the needy etc. that support the notion of this form of warfare as “kinder and gentler”.

The specialness argument is further served through the use of academia, the Special Operations Forces and other elements that demonstrate that this war is different from the norm and therefore, must be recognized as different from these normal precepts. Cultural sensitivity, analysis of tribal structures, and the romanticized notions of Special Forces with tribal leaders, riding on horses, and other elements feed into the geostrategic narratives of why COIN and how COIN is performed. Indeed, as O’tuathail (2002: 607-608) argues, geostrategic discourse can be conceptualized as a theatrical drama, where the images, metaphors, and symbolism involved in the drama “serve as the building blocks for the storylines that are pieced together” into the

narrative of the war and how to fight it. These mythologies and romanticisms support the concept of the war council and debate as a drama and theater.

This mystical apparatus of COIN with soldiers crowded around tent drinking tea, the paradoxes of COIN, and their reassembly, redefinition, and insertion into a storyline and narrative helped provide the building blocks for making the COIN narrative not only more appealing, but more capable. The special type of war, required special types of people to prosecute it, so the romanticism and mysticism of the discourse, along with the stored images, analogies, and metaphors that are captured in the COIN narrative support the discursive means to produce the hegemony that COIN captured in the debate over the wars.

The romanticized and mystical language, then serves as the enabler to the storyline and the discourse of COIN. It supports the warrior scholar, best and brightest, and special rhetoric that surrounds COIN and its productive versus destructive war elements. Reinforced by the subject positions of its advocates, which are in turn promulgated by this mystical discourse of COIN, it provides the discursive materials that are deployed within the broader narratives of how COIN can produce victory in the midst of failing war. As with each other element of the COIN narrative, the production of romanticized language coupled with those deemed capable of executing this form of warfare amplifies the notion of COIN as the savior that can overcome the failing war efforts faced by the U.S. in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan at distinct points in time.

Having outlined the major building blocks of how I intend to analyze the questions of why COIN, how is it legitimized, and how is undertaken, I turn the final element where each of these merge into the narrative of COIN as strategy for fighting the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Narratives

Each of these elements feed into the alternative narratives for the wars in question. As Hajer argues, storylines are “narratives on social reality through which elements from many different domains are combined and that provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding” (Hajer, 1995: 62). Storylines combine the elements of the commonplaces and analogies into a metaphor for the larger narratives at play in within the debate. As Ringmar (1996: 451) argues “we first see something as some thing,” and “narratives become the process through which human beings make sense” of these things. Again using the Vienna example, Vienna is first seen as a city, then as a city whose taking facilitates the collapse of the opposing force, and then a narrative is constructed to explain why taking Vienna produces that desired result. It serves to open the possibility that the strategy should center on the capture of Vienna and the subsequent deployment of resources to that end. This storyline then competes within debate space, using the available rhetorical and discursive resources to naturalize and arrest the policy parameters such that taking Vienna is the solution to the strategic problem. In this manner, the storyline combines the elements above, the subjects, the symbolic and romanticized resources into a narrative that serves to define the policy problem, produce the proposed approach to addressing the problem, and serve as a discursive resource for actors to call on within the political debate over what strategy should be enacted. Together with their constituent elements, the storylines produce the strategy that “sounds right,” and make the alternatives to that strategy seem to be strange, odd, or unrealistic (Hajer, 1995: 63).

The Framework

Together these elements of the narrative produce the means by which COIN becomes the dominant storyline. Adopting the work of O’Tuathail (2002), this research conceptualizes geostrategic reasoning as a problem solving discourse that achieves its dominance through three

mechanisms. The first concept is the development of the common understanding of the problem. As O'tuathail (2002: 622) argues, how “problems are defined and delimited - what is included in or excluded from the description and specification of a policy challenge — is crucial in understanding how geopolitics operates. Indeed, I argue, as does Hajer (1995), that policy making, or strategy making, is a function of defining the problem as one that policy or strategy can engage. The meaning applied to and the interpretations of an issue, in this case Iraq, allow for the driving of particular policy decisions and actions. For example, if you are fighting against “dead enders,” they are irreconcilable to the new Iraqi state and the center of gravity for the war must be to remove them from the battlespace. COIN, however, posits a different theory – that insurgency exists because most people are on the fence – if won over to the counterinsurgent side, the war will end. Therefore different tactical and strategy decisions must be made.

In effect, the notion of problem definition serves to condition the choice of strategy that can be made. For example, in 2006, Iraq could have been in the midst of a civil war as argued by then Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, or it could have been facing a multi-faceted insurgency. The development of a common picture of the policy challenge then produces different answers for the operational strategy. If the conflict is a sectarian civil war, then the notion of training security forces and containment could provide a more compelling strategic solution. Different analogies and commonplaces, such as Bosnia or Somalia, could be deployed to legitimize different strategic options and support the development of a different narrative. Conversely, if Iraq is in the midst of an insurgency, then different storylines, different commonplaces and different strategies become available to strategists and policy makers. The production of the policy challenge then serves as the initial step to determining the strategy that *can be employed*.

The second element is then the production of strategy (O'tuathail, 2002: 622). As noted, with the policy challenge produced, the subset of options for an operational strategy is then delimited. The challenge is then to assemble the elements of the storyline into the “ends, ways, and means” construct of geostrategic discourse. The ends provide the overriding policy goals and are derived from the construction of the policy problem. The ways and means are now the argumentative focus of competing narratives for the force that is to be applied to achieve those ends. The storyline, analogies, and commonplaces are deployed into the various sessions of the war councils. As in the bureaucratic politics model of decision-making, particular actors are engaged in the development of the strategy and are in the process of persuasion to accept an agreed upon strategic choice. However, this research problematizes the notion of how that persuasion is conducted. In the bureaucratic politics model, the notion of action channels is engaged to bring policy makers to broad agreement. However, the mechanism by which persuasion occurs, as Billig (2001: 214) argues, is inherently an argumentative and rhetorical exercise. The assemblage of storylines and the legitimation of the strategy through the deployment of narratives act as the discursive resources to generate that broad agreement amongst the various actors in the debate. As per Jackson (2006: 25), I do not refer to “agreement” in the sense of peering into the minds of participants to determine their views of the debate, but instead regard it as arresting the parameters of acceptable action within the context of the debate. Persuasion in this sense is not a mental function, but a discursive one, in which particular actions become acceptable and others are screened out. The process then is not one of engagement of action channels, but the deployment of discursive resources to shape the discursive space in ways that are favorable to the strategy options that emerge from problem identification.

The final element is decision, in which the final solution to the problem is agreed upon and promoted as the answer to the policy challenge identified (O'tuathail, 2002: 622). So President Bush's speech from the White House on January 7, 2007 that specifies the strategy and the ways in which it will be pursued or President Obama's speech in December of 2009 provided public evidence of the achieved consensus. The strategy for the war had been decided, the solution found, and the public notified of how this new strategy would produce different results than the previous one. Whether or not the strategy did or did not, could or could not work is the not the subject of this research. Instead, it is the identification of the process by which the decision was determined and where the acceptable boundaries of action were temporarily arrested.

As such, this framework identifies the key elements that will be identified and analyzed in the research that follows. Taken together, they provide a window into determining how particular war fighting strategies are selected at particular points in time based on the ways in which COIN discourse developed knowledge about the wars and produced a narrative that captured the imagination of policy makers, the press, and the public at large.

In doing so, this research provides multiple advantages over other approaches to determining war strategy. First, this analysis is grounded in the context of the times in which it was produced. As Jackson (2006: viii) argues, I am able to avoid a reading back into history an inevitable choice to employ COIN that was not necessarily there. That is not to say that COIN required the specific elements of this framework to be produced in the manner that they were in the Vietnam War and GWOT contexts, but that absent them, another set of subjects, commonplaces, and narratives would have been required to produce COIN's capture of the discursive space. As such, the engagement of COIN could have been produced in another way

or fashion, but it would still have required some narrative or legitimation process that enabled it to become hegemonic for a period in the geostrategic discourse and debate of the time.

Second, by following the statements made by the central actors in the debate, either in public or in the war councils that determined the strategy, I avoid the requirement to attempt to uncover hidden motives or biases attributed to policy makers. This is a methodologically questionable position of intuiting what was thought, but not expressed as an inner cognitive phenomenon that Wittgenstein argues does not exist (Potter, 2001: 53).

As with any contemporary history of security issues, I am challenged with the classification of materials and their availability to the public at the time of decision. However, the media coverage, interviews, memoirs, speeches provided windows into the debates over Iraq and Afghanistan. While memoirs can tend to be self-serving or paint a picture that puts the author in a more flattering light, the degree of agreement between what was produced in the memoir and the public records facilitate a satisfactory analysis.

Finally, with COIN doctrine being produced at nearly the same time as the debates over what strategy to employ in the wars, I have the advantage of exploring what COIN was meant to be in doctrine and, through an intertextual analysis how doctrine and debate served to reinforce, re-scope, and reconfigure what COIN meant, what lessons could be gleaned from past COIN experiences, and how those lessons were used to produce a strategy for victory.

Strategy, as with any other policy problem, is an attempt to make sense of a particular issue and to produce a mechanism for dealing with that issue. The problem must be first be produced as a problem that requires a policy response and then some level of legitimation of the course of action is required to make the policy operational. Agreement in this sense, is the production of a course of action that serves to make certain strategic options possible, while

denying the possibilities of other options. Further, strategy attempts to detail a story of how particular actions will produce results. In the case of Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, these stories had the added challenge of identifying why this particular strategy would produce better results than the ones that were operating at the time. I argue that determining the “correct” strategy is clearly a discursive task that requires argumentation, persuasion and legitimation as conceptualized in this research. This framework therefore, provides the means to trace that process in the context of failing wars.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to outline the theoretical and methodological commitments that underpin and allow for the analysis of COIN in the Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan conflicts. In doing so, I have sought to build on the works of O’Tuathail (2002), Hajer (1995), Foucault (1980), Bourdieu (1991), and Jackson (2006), among others to identify the ways in which geostrategic reasoning occurs, the ways in which knowledge is produced, and how policy and strategy are developed, legitimized and decided upon. I outlined the central elements of the research and how each element fit into and reinforced the ability of COIN to capture the geostrategic discursive space. The central element is the notion that the mind and world are not distinct and separate elements, but instead are a singular entity. The ways in which we make sense of the world and apply meaning to it are essential elements to understanding how particular strategies and policies are adopted. It is also the baseline for arguing that COIN in and of itself, nor any other strategy, is an objectively “correct” response. Instead it is embedded in the ways we reason about and produce knowledge about the geostrategic problem at hand. It is through discourse that we are able to produce the knowledge about a particular policy or strategy that

enables it to become the reasonable or correct policy or strategy to employ, while others are deemed deficient or strange.

From this flows the idea of narratives and the building blocks that support those narratives within the drama that is the policy debate over war, peace, or something in between. From that one can empirically trace the ways in which particular subjects occupy positions within that drama, how they are produced, and the ways in which they operate within the constraints of organizational rules, and the rules of the discourse itself, to take advantage of the contingent and fleeting nature of stabilizing meaning for some period of time. The construction of “lessons from history” in the form of analogies and rhetorical commonplaces that are produced, defined, and deployed to establish the legitimacy of particular strategic options and serve as short hand to call on particular storylines that support the COIN narrative, facilitate its capture of the argumentative space.

The mystical notions of COIN with paradoxes, specialists, and ideas of constructive war further this legitimizing process, reinforces the narratives and the subject positions of those that know versus those that do not know. Together these build and feed into a broad narrative that serves to classify the idea of the war as an insurgency that can only be defeated through the use of classical COIN tenets, be those the “advise and assist” notions of Vietnam or the mass troop deployment of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Finally, the narrative of COIN is deployed into the midst of the debates over wars going badly. As Hajer (1995: 62-63) argues, the storyline serves to pull together the various facets of a policy problem into a single narrative that constructs the common sense of what to do about that policy problem. The narratives of what to do about the war then compete in the private and public debates about the war. As the storylines compete, they also co-opt, redefine, and redeploy

elements of the narrative, as some become marginalized or discarded as illegitimate, strange, or unworkable in the context of the wars. This process of marginalization and non-marginalization then produces *the answer* for fighting wars going badly. At that point, the decision to opt for COIN is complete and the implementation of the strategy moves forward. In this sense, I can then answer why COIN was selected, how it was legitimized, and how it was to be fought.

The following chapters apply this framework for understanding why COIN became the solution to war fighting challenges in Vietnam in 1961-62, Iraq in 2006-2007, and Afghanistan from 2009-2010. To be certain, these were not the final debates over the wars and war strategies for any of these conflicts. Indeed, as this research is underway, the debate over both Iraq and Afghanistan is in full swing (again), while Vietnam followed multiple strategies over the course of the conflict. In that, the contingent nature of discourse is reflected, as no commonplace or narrative is defined and established in perpetuity, but is instead contingent and continually challenged by competing discourses that attempt to redefine and reproduce strategies or policies in war debates, or indeed in another policy debates. In so doing, I argue that, as per O'tuathail (2002: 606), with sufficient skepticism toward my own methodology and openness to the play of human creativity, this framework would facilitate exploration of those debates as well.

CHAPTER 4

The Opening Act of U.S. Counterinsurgency: The Strategic Hamlet Program

There is another type of warfare—new in its intensity, ancient in its origin—war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins; war by ambush instead of by combat, by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him. It preys on unrest.

John F. Kennedy Speech to the U.S. Military Academy Graduating Class on 6 June 1962 at West Point, NY.

Background

The post-World War II era provided the backdrop for the opening scene in the drama that was and is the U.S. engagement with counterinsurgency, counter-guerrilla warfare, low intensity conflict, and the politics of small wars, within the military and amongst the political class. It was the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the largest, and until recently, longest, of the counterinsurgency operations led and largely conducted by U.S. forces that began this drama. The scars of that conflict would color the views of politicians for decades, and serve as an argumentative space for advocating particular policies/strategies for different wars, in different places, and in different geostrategic contexts. The debates over Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm, interventions in Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan would all refer back to and attempt to define and appropriate the “lessons” of Vietnam into war debates. Vietnam spawned the Weinberger-Powell doctrine, as a means of insulating the U.S. military from engagement in the type of open-ended conflict that Vietnam transitioned to over the course of the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, the

Vietnam War produced the so-called “Vietnam Syndrome” and many premature efforts to declare that syndrome’s demise.

The Vietnam Syndrome is classically identified with the notion that U.S. forces would get dragged into a “quagmire” upon entry into conflicts, battling hit and run operations from indigenous forces that would melt into the population, resulting in high U.S. casualties and a loss of political support domestically. As such, it was seen as a brake on military adventurism or engagement in small-scale conflicts. In response, the Weinberger-Powell doctrine argued that before committing U.S. forces to war, the U.S. must commit to using overwhelming force, have clearly defined objectives, and an exit strategy, or not engage at all.

This supposed lack of appetite for overseas wars would be declared dead following Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada, Operation Just Cause in Panama, and Operation Desert Storm in Kuwait/Iraq, though ultimately each would fail to fully bury the specter of Vietnam that continues to hang over all questions of U.S. military engagement. Produced as an element of containing the Soviet Union and its perceived expansionist policy in the aftermath of World War II, the powerful hold of Vietnam over national security policy is rooted in this opening U.S. foray into counterinsurgency.

It was the challenge of growing revolutionary movements, particularly in Asia, that opened the aperture to counterinsurgency in the 1950s and 1960s. The “loss” of China to Maoist rebels, the Malayan Emergency, the Huk rebellion in the Philippines, and the Korean War reinforced the idea of a “domino theory”, in which the loss of Vietnam to communism would lead to a crippling of the U.S. position across Southeast Asia. With the Korean War at a stalemate on the 38th parallel and Laos in danger of communist takeover, the concept of how to defeat these smaller, “brushfire wars” entered the debate.

Concerned about budget deficits and spending, Eisenhower focused his defense policy on the premise of “massive retaliation” for Soviet threats to American interests, large or small. While the U.S. provided military aid and advisory support to Laos, Thailand, and South Vietnam, the CIA played a large role in the “brushfire wars” that would come to dominate the strategic discussion in the U.S. The bulk of the military budget went to the newly created U.S. Air Force and to the U.S. Navy, as Eisenhower’s doctrine relied primarily on the capability to deliver nuclear weapons, and the deterrence that their potential use would provide. The Army, starved of funding, converted to the Pentomic Division, a structure that would supposedly allow for the operation of infantry divisions on both atomic and non-atomic battlefields in a bid to demonstrate relevance in the Eisenhower security construct.

The Kennedy Administration came to power advocating for a new defense policy and strategy. In a critique of the perceived limits of massive retaliation, the new strategy would include a “Flexible Response,” in which the promise of deterrence through massive retaliation and mutually assured destruction would be replaced by the ability to apply graduated pressure and a range of capabilities that would allow policy makers to apply a more measured force to meet different scales of conflict. Indeed, the Flexible Response approach in large measure was a reaction to Massive Response. Central to this new policy was counterinsurgency or counter-guerrilla warfare. It would serve as the linchpin of the Kennedy Administration’s policy and would ultimately produce much of the conceptual foundations that continue to permeate U.S. counterinsurgency thought today.

Drawing heavily from the British in Malaya and the U.S. experience in the Philippines, the Kennedy Administration began the drive to institutionalize counterinsurgency in the U.S. military and government writ large, to define terms and tactics, and increase the focus, use, and

capabilities of Special Operations forces in counter-guerrilla war operations. The Kennedy Administration had three tasks: produce counterinsurgency doctrine, ingrain that doctrine across the national security bureaucracy, and apply counterinsurgency to Vietnam. The test bed of these efforts became the Strategic Hamlet Program of 1961-1963.

The remainder of this chapter will apply the methodology outlined in chapter three to explore why the Strategic Hamlet program and counterinsurgency came to fore in the Vietnam context of 1961-1962. In doing so, I first examine the symbolic power of some key Kennedy advisors that helped drive the turn to counterinsurgency and uncover one of the major themes associated with COIN and its advocates. That COIN is a special form of warfare that can only be executed by the smartest breed of soldier and statesman would bridge the divide from the Kennedy Administration to the Iraq War debate in 2006. The establishment of this notion put the Kennedy Administration in a position to, if not fully transform, significantly move a military establishment geared toward Massive Response to the Flexible Response of the first U.S. counterinsurgency era¹¹ (Ucko, 2009).

Second, I examine the ways in which the “lessons” of Malaya and the Philippines were brought into to the debate over COIN and Vietnam. In the case of Vietnam, all the participants, to include LTG Lionel McGarr, the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) chief in Vietnam, and President Kennedy, eventually endorsed the Malayan Emergency paradigm as the basis for the Strategic Hamlet Program plan. Further the “lessons” of Malaya and the Philippines were incorporated by the doctrine writers struggling to produce COIN manuals and insert COIN theory and tactics into existing manuals for the U.S. Army and the MAAG. Indeed, Vietnam serves as the entrance of the “Malaya as model” discourse into U.S. doctrine and strategy. In

¹¹ David Ucko book “The New Counterinsurgency Era” published the notion of two COIN eras: Vietnam and the turn to COIN in OIF.

doing so, it serves as a hegemonic analogy for Vietnam, and also spans the COIN eras as providing the lessons for conducting successful COIN operations.

Third, I examine the mystified rhetoric that defined counterinsurgency. Certainly the notion of the smarter leader and soldier factors into this romanticized discourse, but it is complemented by additional factors present in the Vietnam context. First, the Kennedy Administration rhetoric on the “new war, ancient in its origins” and the new challenges laid out by this war, serve to both romanticize and mystify the discourse. Further, the establishment of the Navy Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) teams, the introduction of the Green Beret and the emphasis on COIN and Special Forces served to further popularize the notion of “overseas internal defense” and helped capture space within popular culture, despite the eventual flagging of support for the war effort. Finally, the inclusion of academic institutions that would measure, monitor, assess and recommend elements necessary to pacify villages, encourage modernization and stabilize South Vietnam, helped reify the concept of COIN as “special” form of warfare, that required specialists and subject matter experts in fields other than war to reach a successful conclusion.

Once I have established the building blocks of the COIN narrative, I explore the two related ways in which that narrative produced the Strategic Hamlet program. First, I demonstrate the formation of the narrative and its institutionalization through the production of Kennedy Era policy and doctrine. The second element traces the ways in which that narrative resulted in the Strategic Hamlet Program. Finally, the conclusion looks at how this first step into counterinsurgency in the modern era produced many of the myths, themes, and substance that was reborn in the GWOT. The remainder of this chapter details that argument.

The Symbolic Power and Positioning of the Kennedy Administration

The Kennedy Administration swept to power in 1961 intent on restructuring the Eisenhower security strategy. The conservative Eisenhower's focus on balanced budgets and the use of the nuclear deterrent was to be replaced by the New Frontier and its youthful, credentialed leadership. The Whiz Kids in McNamara's Pentagon and the action intellectuals in the Kennedy White House and State Department were to come into power and accomplish great things. Complete with the mythology and symbolism of Camelot, the key advisors that were set to push COIN came with tremendous capital and high approval ratings to go with that perception. As Halberstam (1969: 38) notes, with the election of Kennedy in 1960:

It was a glittering time. They literally swept into office, ready, moving, generating their style, their confidence – they were going to get America moving again. There was sense that these were brilliant men, men of force, not cruel, but men who acted rather than waiting. There was no time to wait, history did not permit us that luxury; if we waited it would all be past us. Everyone was going to Washington, and the word went out quickly around the Eastern seacoast, at the universities and in the political clubs, that the best men were going to Washington.

For the particular drive to produce COIN policy and doctrine, and put that doctrine into practice, key members included Walt Rostow, Roger Hilsman, Maxwell Taylor, and, indeed, John F. Kennedy.¹²

Kennedy, himself, was lauded for his style and his rhetorical ability, even among the White House press corps (Sloyan, 2015: 1). This positioned Kennedy well to articulate his

¹² While there were a large number of these “Action Intellectuals” that populated the Kennedy Administration, in the initial stages of the debate, Rostow, Hilsman, Taylor and Kennedy were the primary players.

preferred approach to dealing with the brushfire wars of the 1960s, as his popularity ratings among the general public were high, and it allowed him the space to force acceptance of increasing the role of Special Forces on a suspect and doubting military bureaucracy (Sloyan, 2015: 37). Indeed, the positioning of Kennedy as the modernizer of a staid bureaucracy that was being outmaneuvered by the Soviet Union, that would correct the “missile gap,” send a man to the moon, and fix the economy led to his portrayal as one who understood the challenges of the 1960s. Indeed, Kennedy was Time magazine’s “Man of the Year” in 1961, as the man who had the most impact on the news (Time, 1962).

Kennedy was lauded for having “saturated Washington with the most dazzling assemblage of brains that it had known since the early days of the Republic” (Greenberg and Walsh, 1963: 1151). This collection of talent was touted for its critical understanding of the ways in which the new wars against Soviet expansionism were to be fought and the critical tools that were to be employed to arrest that expansion. As the intellectual chief of the “action intellectuals,” Kennedy brought the youth and charisma that produced symbolic capital and power (Dumbrell, 2014). Even the embarrassing Bay of Pigs invasion did little to diminish this perception, as Kennedy was able to turn that embarrassing episode into a reason for increasing and improving American ability to defeat Soviet Communism.

Kennedy’s position and power thus provided the means by which he could push a reluctant bureaucracy toward counterinsurgency. Youth, intellect, the Camelot mythology, and the notion that he was surrounded with incredible talent served to reinforce the notion that his approach to the insurgency would succeed. The “new frontier” in dealing with the space race, the economy, and the new wars of the 1960s, were all framed within this status as the leader that could refresh a tired American defense system for a new generation. Indeed, Greenberg and

Walsh (1963: 1151) argue that Kennedy took “the Pentagon away from the Admirals and Generals and turned it over to a remarkable crew of intellectuals”. This notion obviously cascaded down to the youthful, credentialed, published advisors and government officials charged with leading the transition to Flexible Response and counterinsurgency.

As noted, the call for the best “went out through the universities and political clubs” for those to join the President’s ascension to power (Halberstam, 1969: 38). One of these key advisors was Walt Whitman Rostow, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) who specialized in economic development. Rostow, a Yale graduate and Rhodes Scholar, had also served with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during World War II, selecting bombing targets for Allied bombers in Germany (Economist, 2003).

Rostow (1960) had produced *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*. This theory detailed the ways in which all societies moved through stages from the traditional society to final stage of the “age of high mass consumption” (Rostow, 1960). More importantly, Rostow, in his answer to Marxism, detailed a theory of development that was all encompassing in the ways in which political and social transformation would occur (Rostow, 1960: 102). *The New York Times* argued that Rostow’s work was “a bolt of lightning” for development economics (Schwartz, 1960: 6). Bauer and Wilson (1962: 193) note that Rostow’s work was “highly acclaimed” and lauded widely. It’s tying of political, social and economic development, nested with the circulating theories of counter-guerrilla conflict and the causes of such conflicts in the Cold War context. With a wide acclaim that meshed well with Kennedy’s notions of counterinsurgency and development, Rostow fit well into the team of advisors Kennedy was assembling. More importantly, his recognition as an expert on developing societies provided him the position and capital to help formulate the new COIN

policy. His theory of modernization “was a clarion call and remained a basic text in the growing sheaf of doctrinal writing on the subject, referred to and assigned as reading in the various specialized courses that sprang up in response to presidential urging (Blaufarb, 1977: 59). This ensured that Rostow’s notions of COIN, the reasons for insurgency, and the ways to combat it were spread throughout the government.

Hilsman also fit the bill as a youthful, credentialed and experienced hand that was produced as a counterinsurgency expert that would help formulate doctrine and strategy for the war in Vietnam. A West Point graduate and professor who had served in the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA, in Burma during World War II, Hilsman had written the foreword to Vo Nguyen Giap’s book on “people’s war” when it was published in 1961. He had also given a speech in August of 1961 titled “Internal War: The New Communist Doctrine” that later became a book with a foreword by Kennedy (Blaufarb, 1977: 60). Hilsman had both publications on the subject of counterinsurgency and the practical experience of having conducted insurgent operations, providing him legitimacy within the academia heavy administration and the military. As Blaufarb (1977: 59-60) argued, by “virtue of his experience, Hilsman was both interested in and accepted as an administration spokesman on counterinsurgency matters”.

Hilsman added more detail to the ideas of COIN that Rostow had surmised from his work on modernization theory, namely that political and social reforms were required to enable, and expand it. He argued that modernization itself created some of the pressures that resulted in insurgencies in developing societies. As such, while reforms were critical, they also required the build-up of the administrative power of the state to effectively tamp down insurgent movements (Blaufarb, 1977: 62). As such, the notion of the Strategic Hamlets was grounded in these two

concepts: that reform was required and that the state had to establish an effective presence in the rural areas. Hilsman would ultimately produce the document that established the “Strategic Hamlet” as the title of the strategy in Vietnam (Pentagon Papers, 1971B: 14). As such, Hilsman’s positioning and power as a counterinsurgency expert and inclusion in the Kennedy selected “talent” was able to drive these elements into doctrine from his posting in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the Department of State.

Taylor (1960), a retired U.S. Army general, who had written the book *Uncertain Trumpet*, as a critique of the Eisenhower Doctrine of massive retaliation, also became a key Kennedy Administration adviser. Again, Taylor fit the mold of the Kennedy advisors and their acclaim as intellectuals and the smartest people in the room. Having retired from military service, Taylor served as the president of the Lincoln Center for Fine Arts in New York, when he was called back into service by Kennedy (Bacon, 2003: 76). Taylor had written books, had parachuted into France during World War II and had the ear of the President. As Halberstam notes “if Harvard made generals,” then Taylor would have been the one it made, foreshadowing the warrior scholar trope of future COIN debates (Halberstam, 1969: 123). Indeed, Halberstam notes that during the counterinsurgency meetings that the other participants regarded Taylor with “some awe” (Halberstam, 1969: 123). Taylor was “their general,” who could write books, jump out of airplanes, and grasped the need to push back against communist subversion (Halberstam, 1969: 40). Kennedy created the position of the Military Representative to the President in order to bring Taylor back onto active duty. Taylor’s reputation and experience as a soldier, his early adoption of the notion that the U.S. Army needed to prepare for limited war in *Uncertain Trumpet*, and linkage to Kennedy provided him the positioning and ability to drive COIN from

the chair of the Special Group: Counterinsurgency and his missions to Vietnam on Kennedy's behalf.

While other advisors were also players in the counterinsurgency drama, those detailed here played arguably the largest roles. They are also typical of the officials that populated the Cabinet and key advisory roles, credentialed, published, and acclaimed as experts in their field. They were representative of Greenberg and Walsh's (1963) "saturation" of intellectuals that swept to power in the Kennedy Administration. Each brought the symbolic power of their experiences, publications, reputations and was produced as an expert in the field of insurgency.

As such, I argue that the symbolic power and the positioning as experts is a critical component of determining who is permitted a voice in the debates over issues, the power of their voice in the debate, and the power/knowledge formations that they enable to function as true. Kennedy's mystique upon election, as the youngest president ever elected and his ease in front of the television cameras, had captivated the press. The highly credentialed and accomplished advisors who had produced influential academic theories or written books on the critical issues of the day further gave rise to the notion that these were men who would change the fortunes of the U.S. With this power, position, and popularity in the polls, which the Administration frequently sampled, the President and his team of advisors were well positioned to push for the revamping of the U.S. government to combat insurgencies.

The Emergence of Hegemonic Analogies

While the Kennedy Administration may have been positioned to drive the change to COIN, the ability to legitimize those actions remained a critical element to turning the initiative into a reality. The doctrine building process and the push to get Diem to implement a counterinsurgency program saw the rise to the hegemonic analogies of COIN that continued to

operate beyond Vietnam. Malaya and the Philippines were deemed successful examples of combating a subversive, communist inspired insurgency. As such, they provided the discursive materials for incorporating their lessons into the new counterinsurgency doctrine being developed and in legitimizing a war plan for South Vietnam.

Malaya and the Philippines took center stage in debate over doctrine and the war plan as the perception that the war was being lost began to take hold in the Kennedy Administration. They were, in effect, the models for determining what doctrine should be and how that doctrine should be applied to Vietnam.

Defining the lessons of these successful counterinsurgency wars began with the Administration's production of the Overseas Internal Defense Policy, or (OIDP). The OIDP began by describing the challenges of "subversive war" and insurgencies and noted the takeover of China and Cuba by communist insurgent movements as representing evidence of the threat (OIDP, 1962: 1). However, it further noted that although "recent history illustrates the successful application of subversion and organized violence, the post-war examples of Greece, Malaya, and the Philippines demonstrate that such movements are not invariably successful" and that "success in preventing and defeating these movements depends on identifying and understanding the nature of the threat and combatting it with the properly balanced action" (OIDP, 1962: 2). Here Malaya and the Philippines were used to illustrate the balance of social, political, economic, and military action that could either prevent the rise of, or defeat an ongoing, insurgent movement. Further, it drew on the theme of war amongst the people, arguing that the "U.S. must always keep in mind that the ultimate and decisive target is the people" and that society "itself is at war and the resources; motives and targets of the struggle are found almost wholly within the local population" (OIDP, 1962: 7). As such, the centerpiece of the OIDP, as

Sir Robert Thompson had argued in Malaya, was the population (Thompson, 1966: 51).¹³

Counterinsurgency, as defined in the ODP, was about subduing the war in society itself, and the means to do so were to be found in society itself.

To further this point, the ODP specifically identified the Huk rebellion and the actions of Ramon Magsaysay as the model for countering insurgent movements: “The Philippine Campaign against the Huks, led by Ramon Magsaysay, is a model of countering insurgency, and winning back the allegiance of the domestic popular base, thus destroying the foundations of guerrillas support” (ODP, 1962: 10). It further noted that “Magsaysay’s strategy of combining the use of force with reform measures demonstrates what can be done” and “is a pattern of action that which may be applicable, with local modifications as necessary, to other vulnerable less developed countries facing the reality or threat of communist-directed insurgency” (ODP, 1962: 10). Again, the model of reforms aimed at the population and military action to defeat and deplete the insurgents, were identified as the critical elements to defeating the subversive movements in the developing world.

As the guiding document of U.S. counterinsurgency strategy, the ODP served to define what the lessons of the “successful” examples of counterinsurgency included. These were the lessons to be captured in the rest of COIN doctrine, while also serving as short hand for calling on the larger narrative of COIN to determine the future policy. So the ODP served as the opening gambit for appropriating and legitimizing a particular form of counterinsurgency into U.S. government policy and doctrine. First, it identified these wars as successful examples and models to follow. It then laid out the central elements that made them successful. From Malaya, the notion of focusing on the population and the centrality of the population’s security to any

¹³ Demonstrating the durability of counterinsurgency themes, the notion of the “population is the prize,” remains a key tenet of COIN doctrine and theory.

COIN effort was appropriated. From the Philippines, the use of force against the guerrillas in combination with a set of political reforms that serve to win back the populace to the government's side was identified.

As Birtle (2006: 229) notes, the Philippines and Malaya were the central elements of study for the COIN doctrine writers of the 1960s, and as such, COIN doctrine of the 1960s largely reflected the lessons that the ODP identified and promoted.

Indeed, one of the Army's first counterinsurgency field manuals, *FM 31-22*, argues that under Magsaysay, "the government instituted positive military civic improvement measures which it exploited skillfully by means of psychological operations to eliminate the communist inspired and controlled Huk rebellion" (FM 31-22, 1963: 5). It further argues that the Philippines served as a model for counterinsurgency action (FM 31-22, 1963: 5). As such, though written separately, the Philippines campaign was produced with the "model" tagline for counterinsurgency operations in both the ODP and the U.S. Army doctrine. Indeed, there was often discussion of whether or not Diem could act as Magsaysay in Vietnam, righting the ship of state and saving the country from collapse.

The Malayan conflict had not ended when the doctrine was produced in the U.S.; however, its presence was heavily felt in the persuasion of Diem to adopt counterinsurgency and in crafting the plan for Vietnam. In the spring of 1961, the sense of crisis about the situation surged to the fore in light of the increasing attacks and the problems in Laos. The State Department sent a memorandum out to the Embassy with a list of actions to prop up a teetering Diem Government. Among these ideas was a push to provide spaces for advisors from the Philippines and Malaya to support the training of police and military forces in counterinsurgency operations (Wood, 1961: Document 16). As the perception of the lessons of these campaigns

grew more dominant, the notion of including advisors from these areas would, by default, improve the performance of the Vietnamese security forces, reflecting the growing power of these analogies.

Second, the Malayan model became the mirror of the Strategic Hamlet program that was adopted. The slow build to the Malayan model included the standup of the British Advisory Mission (BRIAM) in August of 1961. Shortly after BRIAM's establishment, a follow on meeting between Sir Robert Thompson, Maxwell Taylor, and General Lyman Lemnitzer was arranged by the hero of Malaya, Sir General Gerald Templer (Landa and Sampson, 1988: Document 132). Shortly after this session, Thompson went to Vietnam and produced the Delta Plan in September of 1961 that introduced the notion of strategic hamlets and defended hamlets, along the lines of the Malayan New Life villages (Busch, 2002: 139). During his visit to Saigon in October, Taylor received the plan, and provided it to both Hilsman and Kennedy (The Pentagon Paper, 1971: 13). The Delta Plan and its Malayan references would become the basis for Hilsman's strategic concept for Vietnam in February of 1962 (Hilsman, 1962: Document 42). Indeed, the authors of the Pentagon Papers note that it was an "unabashed restatement" of the Delta Plan and that it had the approval of Kennedy and Taylor (Pentagon Papers, 1971B: 14).¹⁴

More importantly, the notion of Malaya was more influential in getting the Diem government to move towards adopting a counterinsurgency plan. While the U.S. advisory team had been attempting to get the Counterinsurgency Plan (CIP) adopted throughout 1961, Thompson was able to provide the Delta Plan and gain Diem's tacit acceptance (Busch, 2002:

¹⁴ Indeed, the Strategic Concept, the Delta Plan, the Geographically Phased CIP, and ultimately Diem's strategy to restore security in the Third Tactical Zone were largely mirror images reflecting the strength of the counterinsurgency discourse and its production of knowledge on how to fight insurgent wars.

142).¹⁵ As the Malayan model was focused on the security of the population and less on the reforms of the Philippines model, the notion of the Malayan model was more palatable to the Diem regime. Within a year of the Delta Plan's presentation to Diem, the combined Delta plan and Geographically Phased Counterinsurgency Plan were adopted under the rubric of the Strategic Hamlet Program.

The power of these two analogies served two purposes in Vietnam. First, they were incorporated, sometimes directly, into doctrine and policy. While these lessons of the Huk Rebellion were named the model, much British doctrine was directly written into U.S. manuals (Birtle, 2002: 242). In particular, the notion of population resettlement from Malaya was adopted in both doctrine and plans. This idea was reflected in the doctrinal emphasis on Philippines style government reform and was included in the CIP and its geographically phased variant. At the same time, Thompson's Delta Plan supported the legitimization effort with the Diem regime that ultimately enabled action in 1962. The particular power of the Malayan Emergency should also be noted. It served as a tool to gain Vietnam's acceptance of the plan, and retained its hegemonic status as COIN paradigm throughout the resurgence of COIN during OIF.

As noted earlier, the Kennedy Administration faced the dual challenge of producing doctrine for COIN at the same time that it was attempting to get the Vietnamese to agree to implement a COIN based program to counter the NLF. As such, there was not the same degree of debate on whether to adopt COIN. Instead they grasped the recent examples of success in Southeast Asia as analogous to the challenges of COIN in Vietnam. In this opening act of U.S. counterinsurgency efforts, Malaya and the Philippines underscored the fundamentals of what

¹⁵ Much of the U.S. challenge was in getting acceptance of the plan, in large part due to its emphasis on political reforms that Diem felt threatened his power base.

COIN continues to be conceptualized as today. These include population security, reform, development, and advisory efforts for host nation security forces. As such, the Kennedy era produced the blueprint that would inform COIN doctrine production in the future.

It also helped produce the mystical notion of COIN warfare. The idea of war as “constructive” and the extraordinary skill requirements for the counterinsurgency soldier first arrived in the U.S. during the Kennedy Administration and set the stage for future romanticized encounters with COIN. The next section details some of those critical elements that served to make COIN “special”.

The Mystification of COIN – the Opening Chapter

COIN in the early 1960s had only begun to take on the name of counterinsurgency, moving away from counter-guerrilla warfare, to encapsulate the broader notion of the full political, military, social and economic elements that the Kennedy Administration was attempting institutionalize across the executive branch. This effort began the process of romanticizing and mystifying the concept of countering insurgencies and involved much of the same discursive materials that would permeate future U.S. COIN debates. First, the production of COIN was enmeshed in the language of a new type of warfare. Kennedy and his administration would push the rhetoric of COIN as special, as well as the new requirements for the military to accomplish its new missions in the new frontier. Second, the Kennedy Administration began to create, highlight, and generate more “specialness” within the Special Operations Forces across the Department of Defense. Third, the involvement of academe into the study of COIN war and the development of metrics to determine where on the continuum of success the U.S. found itself in Vietnam and, potentially, other locations furthered reified the notion of COIN as “special”. Finally, the emphasis on “civic action” and development through

Modernization Theory served to make scientific the notions of COIN warfare, its goals, measurements, and end states. These ideas and mechanisms that supported the mystification of COIN were also durable, as they are continually revisited in future debates over “small wars,” the ways in which these wars should be fought, and the “special” skills that are required to produce success. These ultimately lead to the notions of Hanson’s (2013) savior generals, the romanticized concepts of advisors made sheiks and chiefs, and the idea that COIN is a much more difficult form of war, that requires expertise and knowledge that a traditional conflict does not. In the early 1960s, as Kennedy began his push for the development of COIN doctrine across his administration, the Vietnam War was not associated with the angst, anger, and vitriol that followed in the later stages. That fact made possible the romanticized and mystical view of COIN and its most adept practitioners, despite the military, the State Department, and the Intelligence community only beginning to conceptualize and define the details of how it should be fought.

Kennedy took on the task of mystifying the notion of COIN warfare from the beginning of his administration. One of his first questions upon taking office was to enquire about what was being done about counterinsurgency (Blaufarb, 1977: 52). This came in large part in response to Khrushchev’s comments to a gathering of World Communist Leaders, in which he professed support for “wars of liberation” and foreshadowed the push to identify and instill more focus on COIN throughout the government (Blaufarb, 1977: 52).¹⁶ Special focus was given to the military and the need to develop more training, professional military education, and doctrine for counterinsurgency.

¹⁶ There is debate over the degree to which Khrushchev’s comments reflected any real intent by the Soviet Union to support these movements, but the notion was clearly taken seriously within the Kennedy Administration.

In a speech to the graduating class of the United States Military Academy in June of 1962, Kennedy moved further in mystifying the notion of COIN warfare, noting that graduates would face “another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin – war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of combat; by infiltration, instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him” (Kennedy, 1962). Further, this war would require “a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training” (Kennedy, 1962). Kennedy was continuing the process of pushing his vision of a new military force that would be structured and configured differently to support this “other type of war,” that had grown from “ancient origins” to take on an added intensity in the context of the Cold War.

In addition to the rhetoric of an ancient form of warfare, Kennedy’s speech further demonstrated the stability of counterinsurgency discourse with its notions of a different war and different force requirements. It drew on the long history of rhetoric surrounding counterinsurgency and colonial warfare. Indeed, Porch argues that the French Army in Africa during the colonial wars argued that colonial forces needed to be a separate entity within the French Army, as warfare in a European theater had little comparison to wars against the insurgents and raiders on the African continent (Porch, 2013: 30). Indeed, the flying formations that the French produced to execute the “ghazzia” raids, were championed as a new and different configuration for fighting insurgencies, while the Bureaux Arabes served as the colonial administrators that managed the politics and economics within pacified areas (Porch, 2013: 30).

Kennedy called on this notion of a new force; configured to take on an apparently new yet old enemy, whose ancient origins belied a new intensity, in the Cold War context. He began, at least in the discourse of the United States, the notion of “COIN as special” argument.

Kennedy argued that the new military roles would involve: “Men risking their lives, not as combatants, but as instructors or advisers or as symbols of our Nation’s commitments;” and that these graduates’ “decisions would not be confined to traditional tenets of military competence and training” (Kennedy, 1962). These graduates would give orders in “different tongues and read maps by different systems” and would be required to “know and understand not only the foreign policy of the United States but the foreign policy of all countries scattered around the world that 20 years ago were the most distant names to us” (Kennedy, 1962).

Officers and soldiers in the COIN mode needed to know languages and politico-economic systems, understand the foreign policy of countries across the globe, and have intimate knowledge of the cultures and systems of these various places. Graduates would be “involved with economic judgments that most economists would hesitate to make” and be charged with guarding the newfound “freedoms” that the people of these countries had recently gained (Kennedy, 1962).

In this speech, Kennedy gave voice to the rhetoric of COIN that would continue from the Cold War Era to the War on Terrorism. Insurgency and counterinsurgency were “special” and the requirements for people to fight those wars were drastically different from the kinds required in traditional warfare. Social, political, and economic factors were the critical elements and these new soldiers would need to have broader skill sets than their predecessors, and be more capable of dynamic diplomatic, economic, and political decision-making than would those veterans of World War II and the officer corps that had come before them. Indeed, less the managers of violence conceptualized by Huntington (1957), these new warriors, trained in the ancient forms of insurgency and how to counter it, would be more like Janowitz’s (1960) officer corps that

were more political actors and managers who were required to have a firmer grasp on the politics and policies of the day.

This notion was furthered by Dr. Rostow, then Chairman of the State Department's Policy Planning Council, in a speech to the graduating class of the U.S. Army Special Warfare School.¹⁷ Rostow (1961) argued that the course that these soldiers had completed, was “designed to press on you this truth: You are not merely soldiers in the old sense;” that “Your job is not merely to accept the risks of war and to master its skills.” These soldiers were to “work with understanding with your fellow citizens in the whole creative process of modernization” (Rostow, 1961) They would take their place “side by side” with doctors, teachers, economic planners and agricultural experts to prevent the rise of an insurgency, or to eliminate it should deterrence fail (Rostow, 1961).

Again, Rostow elaborates on the specialness of COIN as a form of warfare. Traditional war is the job of the soldier in the old sense; flexible response required more of its soldiers and civil servants. They would need new skills, new training, and new organizations to meet the challenge of midwifing countries through the modernization process to the take off stage of development. This new form of warfare required the ability to work “side by side” with USAID planners already out in the field deterring conflicts in South America and Africa, and tamping down insurgencies that had arisen in Asia.

So began the process of mystifying the rhetoric of counterinsurgency that would take on conflicts that were “ancient” in their origins, but required a new form of soldier with new and expansive skill sets for potential brush fire conflicts that might arise around the globe. The Kennedy administration rhetoric on the prevention of subversive insurgency and its close ties to

¹⁷ Rostow also served as the Deputy National Security Advisor during the Kennedy Administration.

Modernization Theory, gave rise to the concept of “civic action” being taken by military forces (Latham, 2000). In civic action, military forces would be undertake missions to build schools, dig wells, and provide other forms of assistance that would, at least in theory, help rural societies develop, as well as produce loyalty to the host nation government.

This was the kinder, gentler war of COIN mythology that focused on hearts and minds. COIN in this mode was the delivery of services to ensure that the rural, less developed people were prepared for the rigors of the transition through the stages of modernization. The new COIN warriors, who were not just soldiers, but diplomats, scholars, and development professionals, would facilitate this modernization process. They would take action to prevent insurgency from arising with their civic action and development activities, and defeat insurgencies should efforts to prevent it not succeed. Indeed, as Latham argues, the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Peace were intimately involved with the notion of preventing the rise of insurgencies by providing the development and administrative training prior to a rebellion (Latham, 2000).

In addition, Kennedy became a champion of the Special Operations forces across the military and saw them as the vanguard of his attempt to reorient the military on COIN. After attending a demonstration of Army Special Forces capabilities in October of 1961, Kennedy sent a note to the Brigadier General Yarborough, the Special Warfare School commander, stating “The challenge of this old but new form of operations is a real one and I know that you and the members of your Command will carry on for us and the free world in a manner which is both worthy and inspiring. I am sure that the Green Beret will be a mark of distinction in the trying times ahead” (Kennedy, 1961B). He further made it official with the publication of a White House memorandum dated April 11, 1962, which authorized all Army Special Forces to wear the

Green Beret (Kennedy, 1962B). This made official what would become the symbol of Army Special Forces and end attempts by the conventional military leadership to deny the SOF their preferred headgear. Kennedy also oversaw an expansion of Special Operations forces, with the addition of 4 active duty groups and 4 National Guard and Army Reserve groups coming into the force structure within two years of his taking office. But more importantly, the symbol of the Green Beret furthered served to mystify the notion of COIN given Army SOF's lead in that particular mission area, their lead in Foreign Internal Defense (FID), and their task to work with indigenous forces across the world. This was in addition to the special nature of their equipment, which included such items as jet-propelled backpacks used to move around the battlefield (Blaufarb, 1977: 56). This romanticized picture of the SOF and the Green Beret, the title by which many continue to refer to Army Special Forces in the contemporary period, is reflected in their capture of the popular culture and imagination in the early 1960s.

John Wayne filmed the movie "Green Beret" in 1967, prior to the January 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam (Company). It was released in 1968, at arguably the height of resistance and protest of the Vietnam War. Despite that challenging climate, the film took in an estimated \$7 million at the box office and grossed nearly \$22 million (IMDB, 2015). This was a reflection of the degree to which the Green Berets had captured the imagination. Their work with the Montagnards, an indigenous group in the Vietnamese Highlands, featured prominently in the film, serving to further popularize particular notions of Special Forces. While roundly panned by critics, the film still managed to capture a significant portion of the public's imagination, despite the turmoil and growing anti-war sentiment. It also served to further romanticize COIN, as its lead protagonists were displayed in heroic fashion on the silver screen across the country.

The Green Beret reached deeper into the popular culture earlier in the 1960s, with the recording of the “The Ballad of the Green Berets” (Saddler, 1966). The song, a tribute to the first Special Forces soldier killed in Vietnam, spent five weeks as the No. 1 hit on the Billboard Top 100 list in 1966, and was the top single of the year, selling more than an estimated 9 million singles and albums (History.com, 2015). This was all the more stunning given that 1966 saw the Beatles and the Rolling Stones continuing the British invasion of the American music scene (Billboard.com, 2015). The song continues to play today as the part of the march for the University of Texas A&M marching band and corps of cadets. The popularity of the “Ballad” and its notion that the “the silver wings on his chest, make him one of America’s best,” demonstrates the symbolic power of the Green Beret and its close connection with fighting insurgencies across the globe (Saddler, 1966). Again, this was a reflection of the ways in which COIN warfare and its leading military unit, despite the hostile environment of the 1960s, continued to capture the imagination of decision makers and the broader public.

The Kennedy Administration’s fascination with all things SOF did not end with the Green Berets. Convinced of the need for additional Special Operators to take the lead in the battling against communist subversive insurgency, Kennedy enabled the founding of the U.S. Navy Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) teams in 1962. In a special message to Congress on “Urgent National Needs,” Kennedy argued that our Special Forces and unconventional warfare units will be increased and reoriented, and that “new emphasis must be placed on the special skills and languages which are required to work with local populations” (Kennedy, 1961A). This emphasis, along with a \$100 million request for funds to build and re-equip a reformed Army structure was also used to expand the unconventional warfare units (Kennedy, 1961A). As a

result, SEAL Team One and Two were stood up in 1962, increasing the number of special warfare units focused on the problem of unconventional warfare and insurgency.

In the time since the founding of the SEAL teams, like the US Army Special Forces, Naval special operations forces have captured the imagination, with movies and books that recount the tales of daring and dangerous missions. Vietnam served as the opening act of the dramatic story of U.S. Navy SEALs and the continued romanticism that surrounds them in large segments of popular culture.¹⁸ The expansion of the role of Special Operations Forces across the Services, along with their designation as the lead for counterinsurgency served to further the aura of the SOF across much of American popular culture and within the American foreign policy elite.

A third element that served to mystify the notion of counterinsurgency was the inclusion of academia into operations and planning for counterinsurgency. As the Kennedy Administration drew the conclusions that counterinsurgency was not a primarily military problem, the need to understand the political, social, and economic dynamics with these countries became a centerpiece of COIN (OIDP, 1962: 3). Therefore, unsurprisingly, academia became central players, as Michigan State University, Stanford University, American University, and others became central players in determining the economic and political reforms that were to be required of places like Vietnam. These universities worked across Southeast Asia and Latin American, in order to ensure that the nation-state's development continued apace and in order to create metrics to determine the security of hamlets and villages, development of budgets,

¹⁸ For example, SEALs were a key part of the Oscar nominated film *Zero Dark Thirty*, were the subject of another film depicting their role in U.S. counterterrorism operations in the mid-1990s, and Naval Special Operations have been the subject of numerous books since their founding in Vietnam.

policing and police administration, and advice on the development of political parties and civil society writ large.

As such, counterinsurgency warfare, from its inception in the U.S. was a form of warfare that required special expertise. Whether that expertise resided in the Special Operations forces that Kennedy grew and handed more expansive roles, or through the use of academic experts to determine the next steps required to win hearts, minds, loyalties, and promote stability throughout the development process, this new and special skill set needed to be found and developed. Both Michigan State University and the University of Kentucky, “sent political advisors out around the world to assist politically troubled and developing countries that communism threatened; MSU sent the most political advisors to Indochina” (Alster, 2013: 6). For example, MSU created the Michigan State University Group (MSUG), which focused on the war in Vietnam, advising the Diem government on Police and Public Administration (Alster, 2013: 8).

In concert with the notion of the best and brightest leading the charge to adopt counterinsurgency as a central element of the U.S. government strategy for the Cold War, the inclusion of academia into the war effort further magnified the notion that COIN may be ancient in origin, but required new tools in order to defeat it. Of these tools, the use of academia as essential partners in the development of war planning, and more peculiarly, in the execution of the underlying policy, made COIN a special brand of warfare. Only the smartest could engage in the complex phenomenon of bringing societies through the dangers of modernization to take their place amongst the free nations of the world.

These experts often strayed from their supposed lanes of expertise to provide advice beyond the scope of their focus areas. For example, the Stanford Research Institute, in the

summer of 1961, dispatched a team headed by Eugene Staley, to work with Vietnamese officials on budgeting and financing the war effort. This team became a vehicle for determining ARVN force levels. While arguing that while the group “does not consider itself competent to make specific recommendations as to the desired force levels,” it had adopted two alternative options for planning purposes; both of which included increased numbers of ARVN forces (Pentagon Papers, 1971A: 63). In August of 1961, Kennedy accepted the report of the Staley Commission, and supported an increase in the ARVN to 200,000, reflecting the power of these academic advisory teams in influencing policy outside of their supposed lanes of expertise (The Pentagon Papers, 1971A: 63).

Countering subversive insurgency was to be met with these new experts, who were developing new ways of ensuring that the political, economic and social reforms that were required to enable the country to progress through modernization were undertaken, and “to assist in the immunization of vulnerable societies not yet seriously threatened by communist subversion or insurgency” (OIDP, 1962: 9). These ideas trickled into popular culture with movies and songs about the Green Berets, a movement whose staying power outlived the souring on COIN that the end of Vietnam held for many in the Kennedy Administration. This special status served to further reify the notion of COIN advocates as the most imaginative and skilled, and as the ones that were necessary to execute COIN and prevent communist domination of the developing world. This further legitimized the notion that COIN was the answer to the challenges in South Vietnam. The persistence of the themes and actions undertaken during the Kennedy Administration in regard to COIN would survive and be revived in the arguments for COIN wars of the future.

With the construct of hegemonic analogies of successful COIN campaigns and the romanticized discourse of the struggle against subversive insurgency operating, the building blocks of the narrative for COIN doctrine and the Strategic Hamlet program were established. The following sections examine how the COIN narrative produced both the doctrine and strategy for Vietnam.

The Narratives

As noted earlier, the Kennedy Administration was faced with the twin challenge of determining a strategy for the war in Vietnam, while at the same time pushing forward with the development of COIN doctrine. This represents the key distinction between the two COIN eras in contemporary U.S. military history, as the development of COIN doctrine in Vietnam required the development of a common discourse, definition of terms, and understanding. Further, as Birtle argues, it required the insertion of COIN into military field manuals that were not constructed to convey COIN operations, nor scheduled for update at that point in the FM update cycle (Birtle, 2002: 250). This was an essential element of the challenge of imbedding COIN across the U.S. government in the Kennedy era, namely that before it could be embedded, it had to be developed and a common understanding conveyed. Marine General Krulak, the Joint Staff lead for counterinsurgency, cited *Alice in Wonderland* during a speech to the Army War College in 1962, noting that Alice had asked the White Queen what a word meant and received the reply: “What does it mean? Why it means what I mean it to mean” (Fitzgerald, 2013: 1). This reflected the immaturity and challenge for the Administration and the doctrine writers. At that point, there was a limited view and consensus on what counterinsurgency was and what doctrine should say. The following section details the narratives which led the doctrine development process and the

adoption of the Strategic Hamlet Program as a device to rescue a Vietnam in the throes of crisis in 1961.

Developing the Doctrine

For the development of COIN doctrine, the base narrative was one that was predicated on two theoretical perspectives, modernization theory and the domino theory. From a macro geostrategic perspective, the COIN narrative held that an expansionist communist movement supported by the Chinese and the Soviet Union threatened the U.S. position in Southeast Asia. Further, should Vietnam succumb to the communist insurgent movement, then, like dominoes, U.S. allies across Southeast Asia would be destabilized and U.S. influence would be lost across the region. Further, the doctrine of massive retaliation was a poor tool for addressing these challenges, as the use of nuclear weapons was not a credible threat against “brush fire” insurgent wars. As such, the capability to address these small, or limited, wars was a requirement to preserve U.S. influence, particularly in Asia and South America.

The second element of the narrative was based on the narrative of modernization theory. In Rostow’s *Stages of Growth*, developing countries proceeded through a series of stages that took them from rural, agrarian societies until they reached the “take off” phase that propelled them, through economic growth, into modern economies and societies as exemplified by the U.S. and Western Europe (Rostow, 1960). The challenge of moving through these stages, created dislocation and an impatience among the intellectuals and much of the social class, which made them susceptible to the insurgent movements stoked by the COMINTERN actions (Rostow, 1960). Again, this pointed to the need for a “whole of government” approach to dealing with these limited wars. In theory, U.S. action through the USAID providing economic development aid and police training programs, the U.S. State Department work to engender political and

social reforms that enabled development, and the USIA actions to promulgate support for the host nation government and U.S. development, would “inoculate” the country against insurgent action (OIDP, 1962). The military would develop an advisory and assistance activity that would train military forces to clear insurgent movements, provide security, and undertake discreet civic action programs that would support the efforts of the State Department country team.

Should an insurgency develop, the U.S. military would work more in depth to further strengthen the military forces, as security was seen as the critical enabler to facilitating the political, economic, and social reforms that were required to allow the country to make its way as a free and democratic state. These twin pillars of the narrative required the development of COIN doctrine and identified the elements that must be included to make such an effort successful.

Upon entering office, John F. Kennedy argued that nuclear arms “cannot deter communist aggression” and “cannot protect uncommitted nations against a Communist takeover using local or guerrilla forces” (Blaufarb, 1977: 53). National Security Action Memorandum 2 (NSAM 2) directed the Secretary of Defense, “in coordination with other interest agencies” to “examine the means for placing more emphasis on the development of counter guerilla forces” (Bundy, 1961).¹⁹ With this opening move, Kennedy started the path of building counterinsurgency doctrine as a pillar of U.S. strategy for the Cold War. The Bay of Pigs debacle served as an event that Kennedy used to focus on the need for counterinsurgency, as he argued that the U.S. faced “a monolithic and ruthless conspiracy that relies primarily on covert means for expanding its sphere of influence – on infiltration instead of invasion, on subversion

¹⁹ The NSAM served as the Kennedy Administration method for communicating decisions across the executive branch and tasking Departments to provide information or take action. As notes on sources, if the author of the NSAM is identified, then I include the name, where the author is left blank, I highlight the NSAM itself.

instead of elections, on intimidation instead of free choice, on guerrillas by night instead of armies by day” (Kennedy, 1962) In response, the U.S. would “re-examine and re-orient our forces of all kinds – our tactics and institutions” and “intensify our efforts for a struggle in many ways more difficult than war” (Kennedy, 1961B).

Kennedy followed these actions with a Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs May of 1961, stating that the U.S. had entered “extraordinary times,” in which communists guerillas were taking advantage of change in the Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and Africa (Kennedy, 1961A). While the statement contained more than a discussion of COIN, countering insurgencies was an area of emphasis. Kennedy argued that the U.S. would “be badly mistaken” to analyze the problems of developing countries in military terms alone, but instead realize that “no amount of arms and armies can help stabilize those governments which are unable or unwilling to achieve social and economic reform and development,” that “Military pacts cannot help nations whose social injustice and economic chaos invite insurgency and penetration and subversion” and that the “most skillful counter-guerrilla efforts cannot succeed where the local population is too caught up in its own misery to be concerned about the advance of communism” (Kennedy, 1961A).

As such, the President requested additional funds for providing aid to states facing insurgent challenges, to help the “the peoples of the less-developed nations to reach their goals in freedom--to help them before they are engulfed in crisis,” and additional funds for USIA to “communicate” with the people of Latin America and “in Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand, we must communicate our determination and support to those upon whom our hopes for resisting the communist tide in that continent ultimately depend” (Kennedy, 1961A). Finally, the military would “rapidly and substantially” expand “the orientation of our forces for the

conduct of nonnuclear war, para-military operations and sub-limited or unconventional wars” (Kennedy, 1961A). Special Forces would be increased and reoriented, and across the military, new emphasis would be “placed on the special skills and languages which are required to work with local populations” (Kennedy, 1961A).

With that statement on urgent needs and the issuance of NSAM 2, the Kennedy Administration had begun the process of embedding counterinsurgency across the government. Thus in the opening stages, the Administration elaborated on the central features of counterinsurgency to the Congress and the public. First, countering subversion and guerrillas was a more difficult form of warfare. It was tasked with taking on the challenges of the developing peoples and ensuring that economic, political and social progress was allowed to flourish. The military problem was but a small part of the overall need to move societies out of their “less developed state” and allow them to modernize in “freedom”. Secondly, it required the reorienting of the military services to this new threat. Language training and a broader role for Special Forces were necessary to defeat insurgent movements, as the military had to be able to interact with the population in their native tongue and understand the challenges they faced. Finally, the USIA was needed to communicate with these populations, to provide them with information about what was happening and to “counter propaganda” from insurgent groups. Having the set the stage and the themes of what COIN was to do and to be with NSAM 2 and the Statement of Urgent National Needs, the Administration then turned back to the NSAM process to stand up the Special Group Counterinsurgency (Special Group (C.I.)) to oversee and force change in alignment with the Administration’s views.

NSAM 124 established the Special Group (C.I.) whose functions where to ensure “proper recognition throughout the government that subversion insurgency (“wars of liberation”) is a

major form of politico-military conflict equal in importance to conventional warfare,” and to ensure that such recognition was reflected in the organization, training, and equipment of the U.S. Armed Forces and other agencies, and in the “political, economic, intelligence, military aid, and information programs conducted abroad” (NSAM 124, 1961). NSAM 124 also tasked the Special Group (C.I.) with the development “of broad lines of counterinsurgency policy” (NSAM 124, 1961). The group was chaired by Maxwell Taylor, the President’s Military Representative, and included the Attorney General, the Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and Director of Central Intelligence, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, and the USAID administrator (NSAM 124, 1961).

Special Group (CI) became the vehicle through which the Kennedy Administration drove the counterinsurgency narrative in the executive branch and through which it managed its implementation. With little publicized weekly meetings, the group moved to develop an overarching U.S. policy for the U.S. government to deal with the challenge of insurgencies, as well as to manage the portfolio of countries, initially Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, before its expansion to include 13 additional countries. Special Group (C.I.) tasked Charles Maechling to develop the overarching policy. Kennedy approved The OIDP on August 24, 1962 with the release of NSAM 182 (Bundy, 1962).

As noted earlier, the OIDP began by describing the challenges of “subversive war” and insurgencies and noted the takeover of China and Cuba by communist insurgent movements as representing evidence of the threat (OIDP, 1962: 1). It also identified the key elements of the Administration narrative of counterinsurgency: countering subversive insurgency required a focus on the population and the political, economic, and social reforms that were required to win

their loyalty. It also called on the Malayan and Philippines models to demonstrate how those elements of the narrative came together to produce success against insurgent movements. The OIDP, in a break with the ways in which future counterinsurgency doctrine would come be viewed, argued that “overly prominent participation of U.S. personnel in counterinsurgency operations can be counter-productive” in that it could create a nationalist backlash, bring charges of colonialism, and allow communist movements the ability to seize nationalist and anti-colonialist causes (OIDP, 1962: 11). As such, according to the OIDP, the U.S. was to stay in the background and allow successes to “accrue in the fullest possible measure” to the local government (OIDP, 1962: 11). As such, the OIDP called for a small U.S. footprint to defeat insurgent groups. This notion was seen as one of the lessons of the Philippines, in which military support and support to the reforms of Magsaysay were believed to have enabled the Philippine government to subdue the Huk rebellion. This notion of a small footprint was also reflected in the advisory effort of the MAAG and the Strategic Hamlet program, as the number of U.S. forces reached ~16,000 in the Kennedy years, as opposed to the 500,000 after the massive U.S. insertion of forces in 1966.

The next sections of the OIDP then identified the ways in which the U.S. would support COIN, listing, in order: land reform, civic action, community development, social projects, education, labor and youth, leader groups, police, and diplomacy (OIDP, 1962: 12-14). Ironically, military action and support to military action is not mentioned as a specific “method of support”, though it does task the country team with assisting the local government “to see the relation of insurgency to socio-economic development, and the blend of political and military measures required for an adequate internal defense” (OIDP, 1962: 11). This furthered the

Administration narrative that insurgencies were not primarily military problems, and therefore, could only be solved through the balance of reforms and security.

Finally, the ODP provided the roles and missions for the various U.S. agencies, designating the State Department as the lead for ODP and the Chief of Mission as responsible for coordinating the internal defense plan (ODP, 1962: 19). The military was tasked with planning and implementing civilian COIN programs with USAID and/or the CIA, such as for the development of police forces or paramilitary groups (ODP, 1962: 24). They also were to generate trained U.S. forces for employment in counterinsurgency operations and “develop language trained and area oriented U.S. forces for possible employment in training, or providing operational advice or operational support to indigenous security forces” (ODP, 1962: 24).

With the establishment of the ODP in August of 1962, the Kennedy Administration now had what U. Alexis Johnson termed “the CI Bible” and noted that with the “Bible” written, it was the Special Group CI’s role to “spread the gospel” (Johnson, 1984: 331-332). Central to this effort, as Jeffrey Michaels (2012: 47) notes, was expansion of military training for advisors beyond the advisors, defense attaches, and SOF, and included emphasis on “such topics as civic action.” The Foreign Service Institute, in an effort led by Rostow, developed five COIN courses for military and diplomatic personnel that served as another element to spread the gospel of counterinsurgency (Michaels, 2012: 48). This included having the first group of seminar graduates meet with President Kennedy at the White House, where he could personally emphasize the importance of COIN (Michaels, 2012: 48).

As such, the Special Group (CI) and the ODP provided the tools and means to define the terms of how to execute COIN and, as Michaels argues, the group brought the narrative of combatting subversive insurgency throughout the U.S. government (Michaels, 2012: 47). It

oversaw the development of the ODP, which spelled out in detail the narrative's elements and employed the Philippines and Malayan analogies to legitimize that approach. It further produced multiple training programs and schools across the U.S. Government in which its "gospel" could be spread. This narrative was reinforced by the symbolic power of many of its advocates, including Rostow and Kennedy, who spoke directly to graduates of the various courses in order to reiterate the Administration counterinsurgency narrative.

That effort paid dividends, as the Administration narrative was codified in the U.S. Army manuals of the era. During the Kennedy years, the U.S. Army, given the lead by the Joint Chiefs of Staff for developing COIN doctrine, produced three COIN focused manuals: *FM 31-15*, *FM 31-16*, and *FM 31-22*, as well as an update to the *FM 100-5: Operations* to include an unconventional warfare element.²⁰ The narrative of COIN as espoused by the Kennedy Administration rhetorically, and produced as government policy by the ODP, was fully embedded within the U.S. Army conception of how COIN wars were to be fought.

FM 31-15: Operations Against Irregular Forces, was the first manual produced in response to the Kennedy Administration push to institutionalize counterinsurgency in the U.S. government. Published in the spring of 1961, the manual described the conflict environment, arguing that insurgency was the "outward manifestation of a resistance movement among some portion of the population" and "is dependent on the support furnished from the local population, even though the irregular force receives support from an external power" (FM 31-15, 1961: 3). The manual then expanded on the planning factors required to operate against irregular forces, including the use of civic action. Civic action was defined as "any action performed by the military force using military manpower and resources" that was designed "to secure the

²⁰ Counterinsurgency was also included in additional manuals produced at the various Army schools, such as the infantry school.

economic or social betterment of the civilian community” (FM 31-15, 1961: 18). Such action “would be a major contributing factor to the development of favorable public opinion and in accomplishing the defeat of the irregular force” (FM 31-15, 1961: 18).

Further, the manual details the shift in the notions of war fighting, arguing that unlike conventional combat operations, the capture of key terrain “contributes very little” to the attainment of the objective, as the guerrillas will simply reform once the force moves to a new area (FM 31-15, 1961: 25). As Birtle (2002: 234-235) argues, *FM 31-15* identifies four central elements of COIN warfare that must be accomplished: first, there must be an intelligence system that allows for the identification of insurgents; second, police operations must be employed to separate the insurgent from the population; third, the destruction of the guerrilla force, minus those that surrender as they have changed their views, must occur; and finally, the host nation has to be prepared to rebuild, “reeducate” and address the sources of discontent within the society. Finally, the manual reflected the Malayan and Huk rebellion requirements to clear an area of insurgents, secure the population, and rebuild, while addressing the sources of discontent, an early indicator of the “clear, hold, and build” shorthand for future COIN operations. These notions would form the basis of the Strategic Hamlet Program of Vietnam in late 1962-1963.

The drumbeat of the COIN narrative continued with the publication of *FM 100-5 Operations* in February of 1962. *FM 100-5* was the “capstone” manual of all Army doctrine, laying out the ways in which broader campaigns were to be fought. Approximately 20% of the manual was dedicated to irregular warfare, though it largely reiterated the essential elements of *FM 31-15* (Birtle, 2002: 240). This was followed in March of 1962 by the publication of the *ODCSOPS Handbook for the Suppression of Communist Guerrilla/Terrorist Operations*.

The COIN handbook reiterated the story line of subversive warfare and emphasized that the “inadequacy of utilizing conventional military tactics, techniques and formations in combating “Revolutionary Warfare” has been amply demonstrated” and that the “assumption that the solution of the problem is solely a military one has been proven erroneous” (ODCOPS, 1962: 2). Indeed, the handbook argued that the success of insurgencies rested in the support of an “active minority” and the “tacit support or neutrality of the balance of the people” (ODCOPS, 1962: 2). Defeat or suppression only came when the underlying social, political, and economic grievances were addressed. Reflecting the conceptualization of COIN at the time, the handbook further argues that “major bodies of foreign troops” were both discrediting to the host nation and unacceptable to the indigenous population (ODCOPS, 1962: 3). Therefore, counterinsurgency required small teams of specialists conducting “suppression operations” over a protracted period of time (ODCOPS, 1962: 3).

As the war is for the “persuadable” 70% of the population, the “anti-guerrilla terrorist war is an attempt at pacification,” and it “consists of largely constructive efforts while a conventional conflict is largely destructive” (ODCOPS, 1962: 25). Therefore, the military can contribute to victory, but cannot secure it without “extensive changes and reforms to eliminate the causes of dissension and revolt” (ODCOPS, 1962: 25). As a result, the military element of COIN was to provide advice, assistance, and materiel support to help the host nation train, equip, plan, and execute counter-guerrilla operations, and aid and support the “rehabilitation” of pacified areas (ODCOPS, 1962: 30). The primary role of the host nation military was to destroy the guerrilla force, in a geographically phased operation, and turn the cleared areas over to civil authorities, police and civil defense forces for holding and pacification. Reflecting the Malayan and Philippine lessons of progressive clear and hold, the handbook was in line with the Kennedy

Administration COIN storyline, in which the military was a supporting force that enabled the Embassy, USAID, and the host nation to generate the political changes required to win back the loyalty of the populace. The handbook was followed by the publication *FM 31-16*:

Counter guerrilla Operations in February of 1963.

FM 31-16 continued deploying the essential elements of the COIN storyline of the early 1960s, namely that subversive insurgency was part and parcel of a larger global communist plot and that political, social and economic factors were the critical elements that drove the insurgency (FM 31-16, 1963). *FM 31-16*, then expanded on the deployment of U.S. forces, and, as Birtle argues, reflected the geographic dispersion of COIN warfare (Birtle, 2002: 241).

FM 31-16 made the brigade the center piece of the war effort, as it would be assigned a geographical area of the host nation to lead the suppression. Its first task was to link up with USAID, Embassy, host nation civil forces, police and local paramilitary groups to coordinate operations (FM 31-16, 1963: 30). Further, the element of cultural knowledge and the importance of intelligence to COIN operations were stressed. Indeed, the manual argued that in “counter guerrilla operations, the commander is even more deeply dependent on intelligence and counterintelligence that in conventional warfare situations” (FM 31-16, 1963: 92). As an insurgency is a product of the societal dissatisfaction, a “complete awareness and intimate knowledge of the prevailing situation is essential” and that an area study that included detailed examination of “geography, sociology, economy, politics, and other specific fields constituting potential danger points,” was required (FM 31-16, 1963: 92). *FM 31-16*, as Birtle notes, also lifted directly from British doctrine for resettlement tactics (Birtle, 2002: 242). As such, *FM 31-16* served to reinforce the COIN storyline and reflect the importance of the British Malayan experience in the codification of American COIN doctrine.

The final manual produced in the Kennedy COIN era was *FM 31-22* and focused on the advisory and assistance forces that would support foreign internal defense operations. It continued the conceptualization of COIN doctrine in 1963, and reinforced that COIN was a “war for men’s minds” and that every soldier was an ambassador of the U.S. presence in the host nation (FM 31-22, 1963: 81). It further included a section that focused on the resettlement programs, such as the New Life villages of the Malayan Emergency, which the Strategic Hamlet Program would emulate to a large degree. Indeed, the manual outlined a series of steps in determining whether to establish “village complexes,” providing for the economic development, and the extension of “democratic” procedures (FM 31-22, 1963: 98-99). It further elaborated that the village complex concept would integrate “military, political, economic and socio- logical activities into one operation” (FM 31-22, 1963: 99).

Given the production of COIN manuals throughout the early 1960s, one can trace the ways in which the COIN narrative of the Kennedy Administration was reproduced in U.S. Army doctrine. The OI DP both produced the Administration’s counterinsurgency policy, but also codified the counterinsurgency narrative. The doctrine developed from 1961-1963, then served to institutionalize that narrative within the military. Each manual provided an overview of the enemy, their ability to play on local grievances and ties to a “monolithic” global communist movement. Further, the essential elements of success were not to be found in military operations, but in addressing the social, political and economic challenges of the areas in which the insurgency had arisen. Civic action was a critical element, along with the isolation of the insurgent from the populace, which gave rise to the inclusion of Malayan Emergency based resettlement plans. In many case, the manuals directly called on the experiences of Malaya and

the Philippines to illustrate how success could be had in COIN wars. Further, the emphasis on small numbers of U.S. troops is reflective of the Administration conceptualization of COIN.

The above demonstrates how the COIN narrative espoused by the Kennedy Administration was driven into policy and doctrine. The principal actors and their reservoir of symbolic power, the mystical status of COIN, and the hegemonic analogies all were situated within the broader doctrinal and policy documents and served as the basis expanding U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The following section turns to that expansion and the operationalizing of COIN through the Strategic Hamlet Program. In doing so, I part company with a number of Vietnam and COIN scholars, who argue that the Army never accepted COIN as a form of warfare. Indeed, I argue that the Strategic Hamlet Program in fact was representative of the COIN strategy narrative found in Kennedy Administration rhetoric, policy, and U.S. Army doctrine.

The Strategic Hamlet Program

Kennedy took office with counterinsurgency as a central plank of his foreign policy and security strategy. Upon his first days in office he signed the Counters-insurgency Plan (CIP) for Vietnam. The CIP called for an increase of 20,000 in the ARVN, support for the Civil Guard and introduced the notion of progressive area control, much like the “oil spot” theory of COIN operations (MAAG, 1961: Document 1). In exchange for this support, the CIP called on Diem to embark on several reforms. Several of these reforms included addressing political problems in South Vietnam, such as the operation of the Can Lao party of the president, National Assembly access to government ministers, and the appointment of opposition members to government post (MAAG, 1961: Document 1). Other reforms included the building of an intelligence capacity and capability and the unification of command for the counterinsurgency program. Diem

maintained a web of command relationships, with many in the hamlets reporting either directly to the President, or to his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. The first draft demonstrated the counterinsurgency consensus of the early 1960s, that subversive insurgencies were primarily about reforming governments, hence the emphasis on Diem government reforms in the CIP.

The plan also called for the establishment of internal security councils at the regional, provincial, district and village levels. A program that aligned with British operations in Malaya, and that was favorably considered by the Diem government. Secretary of State for the Presidency, Thuan stated that the GVN was considering establishing these councils, “noting that the British had also recommended this idea since it was used successfully in Malaya” (Dubrow, 1961: Document 15). Despite U.S. engagement and support through the Military Assistance Program (MAP), the GVN showed little movement toward adopting the CIP or making reforms. At the same time, with the situation in Laos deteriorating, the Kennedy Administration grew more anxious to secure Vietnam.

Reflecting this sense of urgency to get the CIP moving, the State Department sent a telegram in the spring of 1961, noting the White House ranks the defense of Vietnam “among its highest priorities” and that the President was concerned about the ability of the GVN to survive under “communist pressure” for the 18-24 months required for the CIP to take effect (Wood, 1961: Document 16). Therefore, the Department of State was to identify actions that could be taken immediately to stiffen the resistance of the GVN.

The State Department produced a recommended series of options for implementation by various Departments, commands, and agencies. Among these included finding personnel “best qualified” to provide COIN training to ARVN and sending those personnel immediately, cutting short the tours of lesser qualified individuals (Wood, 1961: Document 16). Second, “in order to

use the experience gained by the British in Malaya” the State Department was to work with the British to identify British and Malayan officers that could support the “ARVN or Civil Guard counter guerrilla training program” and that it “was suggested that a place be found for British and Malaysians in the program (Wood, 1961: Document 16).

Additional recommendations included “with or without GVN participation” start operations to drive the Viet Cong from Vietnam and that unless “other methods can be proved better, this plan should be geographically phased” (Wood, 1961: Document 16). It also noted that “what VN peasants want can be listed in the following order of importance: a) physical security (purpose entire plan); b) more money; c) land; d) health; e) education; f) better farming methods” (Wood, 1961: Document 16). As such, the GVN and USOM should take action to increase rice prices and encourage land reform. Additionally, the Country Team was advised to study the methodology of Magsaysay and the Philippine Government in the treatment of VC prisoners to encourage defections (Wood, 1961, Document 16).

As the Laotian crisis took hold and the worsening situation in Vietnam became more apparent, the Kennedy Administration grew more desperate to establish a counterinsurgency program to address the ills. It stuck to the story line of COIN, a phased geographical approach that included addressing the economic issues and wants of the “peasants”, while calling on the expertise of the British from Malaya and incorporating the “lessons” of the Philippines. While the Embassy generally concurred, MAAG chief Lionel McGarr voiced his problems with the memorandum, noting that “neither the MAAG nor the Ambassador can direct the GVN to follow our recommendations – we can only work through persuasion and advice” and that withholding aid for failing to adopt the CIP could lead to the loss of Vietnam (McGarr, 1961: Document 17). McGarr identified a central challenge of COIN as conceptualized by the Kennedy Administration

that dogged their efforts in Vietnam. The U.S. could not force Diem to implement a U.S. COIN plan, as cutting off aid would like further destabilize the situation. Therefore, the US was forced to continue to providing support, while seeking to persuade Diem to adopt a counterinsurgency plan for Vietnam.

The British announced the formation of the British Advisory Mission (BRIAM) for Vietnam in August of 1961. Shortly after, Field Marshall Sir General Gerard Templer sent a letter of introduction for Robert Thompson to Maxwell Taylor, asking for a meeting while Thompson was in Washington (Landa and Sampson, 1988: Document 132). The State Department noted that Thompson put forward several ideas used in Malaya during the session, with the “most immediately promising” being the resettlement and amnesty plan to encourage defections, as well as food denial to hinder insurgent operations, demonstrating the power of the Malayan Emergency in crafting COIN plans in the 1960s (Landa and Sampson, 1988: Document 132).

In September of 1961, the MAAG produced an update to the CIP with the completion of the “Geographically Phased National Level Operations Plan for Counterinsurgency”. The plan laid out a three-phased operation: an intelligence preparatory phase to “pinpoint needed economic and political reforms in priority target areas (Pentagon Papers, 1971B: 8). Phase two was the military phase, in which designated areas would be cleared of NLF and local security transitioned to the Civil Guard (Pentagon Papers, 1971B: 8). The final phase transitioned security to the Self Defense Corps of local areas, and economic and social programs were to be initiated to “consolidate government control” (Pentagon Papers, 1971B: 8). The plan represented the classic clear, hold, and build mantra of counterinsurgency, as well restating the Administration COIN narrative that was being codified in policy and doctrine. Maxwell

Taylor's visit to Vietnam in October continued the push for the Diem government to accept the CIP, and stressed the "importance of the overall plan –military, political, economic, psychological etc. – for dealing with guerillas" (Nolting, 1961: Document 174).

The geographically phased plan, was followed up by BRIAM and Thompson's Delta Plan, which focused on the "clear and hold aspects" of COIN in populated rural areas. Thompson argued that "clear and hold" were the critical aspects of COIN and that ARVN could be used to protect villages in order to ensure that civilians would believe that they would be protected (Thompson, 1962: Document 51). The "strategic hamlet" would be employed to provide this assurance in areas needing lightly guarded defenses (Pentagon Papers, 1971B: 11). In areas near the Cambodian border, the "defended hamlets" with more population relocation requirements would be established to combat NLF influence (Pentagon Papers, 1971B: 11). Despite some objections, particularly to the role of Diem in controlling the Delta Plan directly, McGarr and the MAAG noted areas of agreement, including the development of strategic hamlets.²¹ As McGarr noted in his response, the MAAG field advisor handbook included "a secure village concept" (Pentagon Papers, 1971B: 13). While disagreements persisted over government reforms in Vietnam and the static use of ARVN in defense positions, as the Pentagon Papers (1971B: 13) point out, the plans were compatible enough, and the push to adopt the strategic hamlet program moved forward.

During Maxwell Taylor's trip to Saigon in October 1961, he was provided a copy of Thompson's Delta Plan, which he passed to Roger Hilsman. Hilsman's "A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam" largely restated the Delta Plan, adopting the notions that the problems in

²¹ Not to downplay the degree to which McGarr objected. McGarr was outraged that BRIAM had submitted a plan, not coordinated with American contingent and had no responsibility for implementing the plan should Diem accept it. His major objection related to the command issues and the use of police versus the Army. Once Thompson modified his concept, McGarr and the MAAG were more amenable to it.

Vietnam were largely political and that security of the population was the first element required to bring the Vietnamese loyalty back to the Saigon government (Pentagon Papers, 1971B: 14). Indeed, Hilsman argued that the Strategic Hamlet would “provide the people and the villages with protection and physical security (Hilsman, 1962: Document 42).

These ideas were widely circulated in the U.S. government by early 1962, and clearly aligned with the doctrine and policy proposals being developed in the Kennedy Administration. They reflected the Malayan lessons, and indeed involved the input of Malayan participants. Vietnam had been diagnosed as suffering from a subversive insurgency; therefore, counterinsurgency was the required solution. The challenge was to define that solution and persuade the GVN to adopt it. A meeting in Saigon in 1962 between the MAAG, the U.S. Embassy, and BRIAM lead to a revision of Thompson’s plan to remove MAAG objections to the command arrangements and the use of police, not ARVN for static defense, effectively defusing MAAG objections to the plan (Pentagon Papers, 1971B: 14). As such, the advisory teams had reached agreement, and the push to move forward in light of the near crisis situation that the Administration believed existed in Vietnam continued.

Secretary of Defense McNamara’s conference in December of 1961 approved the launch of a test case of the strategic hamlet concept, and in March of 1962, Operation Sunrise was launched in Binh Duong Province (Bagley, 1962: Document 103). Operation Sunrise employed classic counterinsurgency operations and aligned completely with U.S. doctrine of the period. It was a three phased approach that included intensive analysis of the population, determination of the resettlement requirements, and the training of the civil guard. That was followed by offensive clearing operations to drive out the insurgents and then turn over security to the civil guard. Finally, during the consolidation phase, there would be “civic action pursued on urgent

basis to regain normal living conditions; information program and facilities established; civic action teams (after 2-4 months) train local replacements and prepare to move to a new location (Bagley, 1962: Document 103). The actions aligned with the doctrine produced in *FM 31-15* and demonstrated the translation of the Administration's narrative into strategy.

In February of 1962, Hilsman had adopted the Strategic Hamlet Program moniker as short hand for the effort in Vietnam, and noted in a memorandum to Averill Harriman, the Assistant Secretary of State, that "The government of Vietnam has finally developed, and is now acting upon, an effective strategic concept" (Pentagon Papers, 1971B: 21). Further, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Lemnitzer argued that "the Strategic Hamlet program promises solid benefits, and may well be the vital key to success of the pacification program" (Pentagon Papers, 1971B: 21).²²

The Year of the Strategic Hamlets

In October of 1962, the Diem government announced in the *Times of Vietnam* that 1962 would be "The Year of the Strategic Hamlets" and noted that the strategic hamlets were "a means to initiate basic democracy in Vietnam" (Pentagon Papers, 1971B: 21). He further published the plan to restore security in the Third Tactical Zone, which spelled out as its goals to "control, protect and fight for the people, most of all rural people;" to destroy the VC political apparatus in the villages, isolate the VC, and establish "White Zones," such as the in the Malayan Emergency, that were free from VC activity (Diem, 1962: Document 113). The plan laid out the responsibilities and provided overall direction for the Strategic Hamlet Program among the South Vietnamese government (Diem, 1962: Document 113). Nolting noted that

²² This is one of the Generals often accused of being anti counterinsurgency, but the degree of resistance, as Birtle notes, is mostly one of degree. The military was concerned that a whole hearted turn to COIN would make the force incapable of defeating the Soviets in Europe and the North Koreans in the Pacific should that conflict restart.

Thuan had informed him that Diem had signed the “Delta Plan” and that this “could be an important breakthrough on commencement of a systematic counterinsurgency operation” (Nolting, 1962: Document 117). With that, the expansion of Operation Sunrise to the Strategic Hamlet Program was underway.

With the publication of Diem’s strategy, the Strategic Hamlet Program had captured the discursive space in the U.S. and Vietnam. The war in Vietnam had been designated a subversive insurgency, effectively delimiting the options available to combat it. The challenge was to define counterinsurgency, codify that definition into doctrine and gain GVN acceptance. The Thompson Delta Plan and the notion of Strategic Hamlets were critical to getting Diem’s support for a COIN program.

In practice, the Diem government began the process of installing Strategic Hamlets across Vietnam at a rapid pace. The program ultimately collapsed with the coup against Diem, and the U.S. decided to commit large numbers of ground forces to combat the NLF and NVA in 1966.

The Strategic Hamlet Program was the initial American foray in to the fraught waters of making counterinsurgency a central element of U.S. military strategy. The challenge to the Kennedy Administration was to build the doctrine and policy at the same time it hoped to implement the effort in Vietnam on a broad scale. COIN as conceptualized in the Kennedy Administration, was largely an advisory effort, led by the State Department and U.S. embassies, with the military supporting the development of forces in the field to handle the clear phase. Central to this effort was the COIN narrative that permeated discussions about Vietnam, as well as the appropriation of the perceived lessons from Malaya and the Philippines. As Birtle argues, even amongst the military, the COIN doctrine produced was widely followed despite the charges

that the military failed to adapt to COIN (Birtle, 2002: 225). Instead, MAAG accepted, adopted, and executed the Strategic Hamlet Program. Counterinsurgency captured its initial foothold on a broad scale in the military, though the Vietnam disaster would ultimately relegate it to the sidelines until it was rediscovered in OIF.

Conclusion

The 1960s U.S. counterinsurgency discourse set the groundwork for the much of the debates that would follow when counterinsurgency emerged to again capture the geostrategic discourse over the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. From the beginning of the Kennedy Era, the association of the “best and the brightest” with ideas of counter-guerrilla and counterinsurgency warfare, from Walt Rostow to Kennedy himself, established a sort of blueprint for how COIN advocates would come to be seen in future debates. The youthful, innovative, and smart came to be connected with the ideas of fighting the new kinds of wars that the U.S. had to be prepared to engage in to defeat a global threat. That theme would be repeated with the COINdnistas in the mid-2000s.

The special requirements for soldiers, that they learn the skills of diplomats, economists, and social workers in order to be effective, were contrasted with the base war fighting skills of the generations of military forces that had fought in World War II. These traditional skills, as Rostow and Kennedy both highlighted in speeches to military and diplomatic audiences, were not enough to battle the new threats and the new kinds of wars. Indeed, the mystical rhetoric of COIN, with its requirements to work through the host nation forces, engage in civic action, to build versus destroy, and the need to capture the hearts and minds of a disaffected populace, all had their start in the early 1960s COIN discourse. While establishing the dominance of COIN in the early 1960s, the rhetoric that surrounds COIN as a doctrine, the Special Operations Forces,

and its advocates helped romanticize the conduct of COIN operations. Again, all of these themes, while seemingly dying out in the long Vietnam conflict, were reintroduced into the American COIN discourse that would reemerge nearly fifty years later.

The analogies of Malaya and the Philippines were instrumental in deriving the lessons that would initially become ensconced in COIN doctrine and legitimize it as the commonsense solution to the challenges in Vietnam. Indeed, the Kennedy Administration faced the dual challenge of building the doctrine that Petraeus, Nagl, and others would draw on, while at the same time attempting to employ that doctrine in a South Vietnam that was struggling to stay afloat with the collapse of Laos and an unpopular Diem government. As Birtle argued, the lessons of the wars against the Plains Indian tribes were not the body of work that American doctrine writers were tracking, but instead it was the New Life villages of Malaya and the Huk Rebellion that served to populate the doctrine in the early 1960s (Birtle, 2002: 229-230). These doctrinal approaches were then operationalized in the form of the Strategic Hamlet program.

The narrative that ultimately captured the formulation of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine and became the Strategic Hamlet Program was built on and legitimized through these elements. The best and the brightest were urging a turn to COIN across the U.S. government and were working very hard to establish it as the centerpiece of Army doctrine, and indeed U.S. grand strategy for the Cold War. They employed the myths and mysticism of midwifing the host nation through the transitional phases of Rostow's modernization theory, through political reform, economic development and aid, and the capturing of the loyalty of the population for the host nation government. These ideas were meshed with the notion of geographic phasing, much like the oil spot theory advocated by Krepinevich (2005), and the village security complex of Lieutenant General McGarr to provide the security and space for delivering services and

capturing villager loyalty across South Vietnam in 1961. The notion, like in Malaya and the Philippines, was to gradually develop the Strategic Hamlets, or village security complexes in McGarr's proposal, throughout the countryside. As each hamlet and province was "pacified," forces would move to the next area. This process would be repeated until all of the South Vietnam was back under government control and the appropriate political, social and economic reforms were adopted.

The meshing of this doctrine to an operational strategy then saw a blending of BRIAM's Delta Plan and the U.S. geographically phased COIN program. This was supposed to provide a comprehensive plan to gradually pacify the countryside, win Vietnamese loyalty, and capture, kill, or starve out the NLF. It would be accompanied by economic and social services that would posture South Vietnam to emerge as a stable democracy and U.S. ally in the Cold War. Indeed, the war was to be completed by 1964 under this plan.

These themes would resurface, with the benefit of having had doctrine and development theories evolve and become more sophisticated over the course of multiple decades. While the Strategic Hamlet program would ultimately collapse in 1963 and the Vietnam War would turn into a bitter and bloody decade of turmoil for the U.S. and the Vietnamese, the Vietnam era themes of COIN wars were seeded in the discourse of COIN doctrine as a solution to wars going badly. The push to embed COIN in the military, and indeed, the whole of the U.S. government, was the result of a top down push from President Kennedy and his top advisors. The same notions of COIN would arise again in the Iraq and Afghanistan war debates, with the tables turned and a small group of military members pushing to move to COIN with a desperate Bush Administration and a cautious, if not hostile, Obama Administration.

COIN in the 1960s was the opening act of the 50 plus years of U.S. engagement with COIN and the stability of it as a discourse is reflected in the consistency of the themes and narratives that emerge in concert with COIN's rise to prominence as a military strategy. The following two chapters will demonstrate this consistency, as I examine the rise of COIN during the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) in the context of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).

CHAPTER 5

IRAQ: THE REBIRTH OF COUNTERINSURGENCY

*"If we don't stop extending our troops all around the world in nation-building missions, then we're going to have a serious problem coming down the road. And I'm going to prevent that."
George W. Bush, October 3, 2000 during the first Presidential Debate in Boston, MA*

Background

The Bush Administration came into office promising a “humble foreign policy” with a clear objective of avoiding the kind of “nation-building” missions that Bush argued the Clinton Administration had embarked on in Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo during the 1990s (Bush, 2000). That stance shifted with the September 11, 2001 attacks and, arguably, the most ambitious nation-building exercises the U.S. had ever undertaken in Afghanistan and Iraq, focused more on “building democracy in the heart of the Middle East,” Iraq, as opposed to the former Al Qaeda sanctuary in Afghanistan (Bush, 2003). By 2004-2005, it was obvious the quick removal of the regime in Baghdad was not going as planned with increasing violence and stubborn resistance from varied groups inside of Iraq. The deterioration continued throughout 2005 and surged in 2006 as a crisis atmosphere cascaded over Washington. Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) had spiraled into a cauldron of sectarianized violence in the aftermath of the Al Askari Mosque bombing in Samarra, Iraq. The golden domed mosque’s damage led already polarized sectarian groups to further escalate the violence gripping the country, led to the nightly executions and dumping of bodies across Baghdad, and military reports concluding that Sunni-dominated Anbar province was lost (Russell, 2011: 54-55). On the domestic front, the public had tired of the war, considered it not worth the blood and expense, and had delivered both houses of Congress to the

Democratic Party, in large part on the basis of their opposition to war. In January, 2007, President George W. Bush took to the White House library to announce that the U.S. would be deploying 20,000 additional soldiers to Iraq and outlined a new strategy based on the now ubiquitous notion of “population-centric counterinsurgency” (Bush, 2007). Again, the emergence of counterinsurgency at different points in time, different geostrategic contexts, and in different locations represents a puzzle: why does counterinsurgency emerge and take on the forms that it does, particularly given the political context and the historical resistance of Western armies to embrace the notion of counterinsurgency, guerrilla warfare, small wars, or military operations other than war (MOOTW)?²³

I argue that counterinsurgency reached its most dominant status as a geostrategic discourse during the Iraq war debate of 2006-2007 and that it was this dominance that allowed COIN to become the “common sense,” and indeed, only approach to turning around the failing war in Iraq. COIN’s emergence can be traced empirically through the geostrategic framework outlined above. The following sections trace the emergence of COIN through this framework in the context of the debate over the Surge into Iraq.

The COINdnistas – Position and Symbolic Power

Within counterinsurgency discourse and the Iraq strategy debate, COIN advocates became positioned as the smart, modern, “warrior-scholars” who grasped the true nature of warfare in the 21st century and that were attempting to change the direction of a staid, tradition-bound force that was incapable of adjusting to the type of war they were fighting. The COIN advocates argued that they were attempting to keep the military from violating the Clausewitzian

²³ Counterinsurgency and counter-guerrilla warfare are used interchangeably. Counterinsurgency or COIN is often referred to as Low Intensity Conflict and is closely related to Stability Operations or Stabilization, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction Operations (SSTRO).

command that the “first, the grandest, and most decisive act of judgement which the Statesmen and General exercises is rightly to understand in this respect, the War in which he engages, not to take it for something, or to wish to make of it something, which by the nature of its relations it is impossible for it to be” (Clausewitz, 1968: 121).

This produces the “who” in the discourse and narrative that captured the argumentative space for counterinsurgency in the context of the Iraq War. The following sections detail the ways in which particular people were produced, positioned, and their relative symbolic power within the Iraq War debate and demonstrates how this positioning and power privileged particular narratives for the war’s strategy and disadvantaged others.

Perhaps the most important subject produced in the Iraq war debate was that of General David Petraeus. Petraeus was the highest ranking of the counterinsurgency advocates and maintained the highest profile throughout the second U.S. counterinsurgency era. Steeped with a doctoral degree from Princeton University, a dissertation about the Vietnam War, and a skeptical eye towards the Iraq War and its conduct, Petraeus was editorialized in numerous subject positions: the reluctant warrior, the warrior-scholar, the rebel inside a rigid bureaucracy, and as brilliant strategist steeped in military history with a unique skill set for setting Iraq back on the right course.

The beginning of the Petraeus positioning came with the reporting of Thomas Ricks on Petraeus’s 101st Airborne Division in 2003. Ricks went on to produce two volumes on the Iraq war and numerous articles for the Washington Post that introduced Petraeus to wider audience and helped generate the “savior general” mythology that surrounded his rise to prominence

during Operation Iraqi Freedom.²⁴ His book *Fiasco*, published in 2006, gave an account of Petraeus's work in Mosul as understanding how to stabilize that city. Ricks continued documenting Petraeus during the Surge and produced *The Gamble* in 2009 tracing Petraeus's COIN strategy through the Surge.

A fit, well-spoken General officer, during a period in America in which the U.S. military was the only organization that maintained a high degree of public trust and admiration, Petraeus became an instant hit. Petraeus was introduced as the West Point graduate with a strong standing that chose the “most demanding” of the Army's jobs, infantry; who became a paratrooper, earned an elite Ranger qualification, and rose quickly through the ranks (Cloud and Jaffe, 2009: 18). His interest in counterinsurgency began early, with his first assignment in Vicenza, Italy and continued throughout his career (Cloud and Jaffe, 2009: 37).²⁵ The biography continued with the story of Petraeus being shot in the chest during a training exercise, and operated on by a future Senate Majority Leader. Petraeus was doing push-ups days later to gain his release from the hospital, a story that was cited “as evidence he was destined for great achievement” (Cloud and Jaffe, 2009: 97). The initial portrayal established Petraeus as the tough, ambitious and skilled warrior, who had overcome adversity and injury to achieve command of one of the most famed divisions in the U.S. Army, the 101st Airborne Division, at the outbreak of Operation Iraq Freedom.

Next Petraeus became known as both the rebel and the creative thinker who in fact understood how the war would end. The 101st Airborne Division occupation of Mosul after the

²⁴ Victor Davis Hanson's book *The Savior Generals: How Five Great Commanders Saved Wars That Were Lost - From Ancient Greece to Iraq (2013)*. Hanson includes Petraeus as one of those saviors. Gentile often spoke in similar fashions when critiquing the fascination with COIN.

²⁵ In another Vietnam parallel, and part of the COIN folklore, Petraeus became fascinated with the book, *The Centurions* by Jean Larteguy, a fictional account of French paratroopers in Vietnam. In Vietnam, *The Ugly American*, would be read by JFK, sell millions of copies, and was sent to every Senator (Marlowe, Ann. “The Picture Awaits: The Birth of Modern Counterinsurgency”. World Affairs: 2009.)

collapse of the Iraqi regime began the narrative that Petraeus understood the type of war he was in and was in fact, that soldier-statesman that could bring it to a successful conclusion. Again, Ricks, multiple newspaper articles, and the Army War College all reflected positively on the job Petraeus was doing in Mosul: quickly establishing an Iraqi council to advise him, rehiring police officers and pairing his units with these groups, coordinating with the police members in and around Mosul and bringing back other government employees to resume the provision of government services and functions within Mosul (Ricks, 2006: 228-232). At the same time, Petraeus continued the hunt for high ranking officials of the Hussein regime, resulting in a highly televised assault on a home containing Saddam Hussein's sons, Uday and Qusay.

Petraeus was also rebelling against the mandates flowing from Combined Joint Task Force 7 (CJTF 7) and the Coalition Provisional Authority. De-Ba'athification decrees restricting the hiring of police and civil servants, and disbanding the Iraqi army were resisted by Petraeus, and his efforts were identified as the antidote to a flailing post-war occupation, that if it had not blossomed into a full blown insurgency in late 2003, was not moving decisively towards a stable, democratic Iraq in the "heart of the Middle East". Again, Petraeus was positioned as uniquely understanding the dynamics of "war amongst the people" and as a rebel skirting an Army that continued to operate in a conventional sense with no plans for the occupation that followed the invasion.²⁶ Compared to the "heavy handed" tactics of General Raymond Odierno's 4th Infantry Division in Tikrit, Petraeus became the embodiment of the familiar counterinsurgency discourse of winning hearts and minds and as the one capable of bucking the Army to bring the war to a successful end (Ricks, 2006: 232-233).²⁷

²⁶ "War Amongst the People" was popularized by Rupert Smith's *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*. Deckle Edge: 2007.

²⁷ Odierno would later serve as the Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) commander. MNC-I provided operational control and direction of the Surge forces and Odierno was celebrated as a "redeemed" hero that mastered the COIN.

This construction of the Petraeus myth continued to build with his return to Iraq in June 2004, as the head of Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq (MNSTC-I). His appointment to the post prompted a *Newsweek* cover featuring Petraeus with the title “Can this Man Save Iraq” (*Newsweek*, 2004). MNSTC-I was the centerpiece of the American strategy at that point in the Iraq war, as the training of Iraq Security Forces and police to replace the ones that were disbanded by the Coalition Provisional Authority were supposed to take the place of American soldiers in securing Iraq. His time in Mosul was contrasted with its collapse into instability months after “King David” had left and prompted comparisons of the relative peace and functionality that Petraeus achieved with the chaos that followed his departure (Bowden, 2010).²⁸ It also reflected the growing profile and influence that Petraeus and his faction were beginning to exert in the debate over the Iraq war and its strategy. The growing Petraeus profile prompted anger from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and General Casey was ordered to tell Petraeus to stay out of the media (Cloud and Jaffe, 2009: 172). As Petraeus’s profile and his identification with counterinsurgency grew, his influence within the military establishment also grew. By 2005, General Casey, the Multi National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) commander who would contest the COIN narrative during the lead up to the Surge, established a Counterinsurgency Academy that U.S. forces rotated through upon arrival in Iraq, again reflecting the growing influence of the counterinsurgency doctrine as espoused by Petraeus (Ricks, 2006B: A10). This was paired with the continued telling and retelling of the Petraeus biography, giving rise to the warrior-scholar meme that would become attached to the COIN advocates that Petraeus surrounded himself with as he ascended to command in Iraq. As one of the few whose work in

²⁸ Bowden article in *Vanity Fair* mirrored Maass’s article on Nagl. Titled “The Professor of War,” it continued to reinforce the notion that the COIN advocates were the smarter, better war people. While Professor Nagl went to war, Petraeus was the Professor of War.

Iraq was deemed successful, Petraeus was insulated from the wider sense of failure that encompassed the Iraq War, and the sense that the war was grinding into stalemate at best. This furthered the “savior general” subject positioning, with Petraeus as one of the saviors able to grasp what was needed to win the war, while his counterparts continued to fail.

By the time Petraeus returned from Iraq and MNSTC-I, he was assigned to a relatively remote post in Kansas to head the Combined Arms Center (CAC), as part of the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command. The Army’s “school house,” TRADOC was responsible for running the training programs from basic training to the Army War College, and developing the doctrine under which U.S Army forces would use to train during peace time and execute during times of war. This position, while important in the Army hierarchy, seemed to have moved Petraeus out of the Iraq war debate, as TRADOC and CAC are not traditionally part of the war council deliberations involving the operational strategy for current conflicts.²⁹

Petraeus used the posting as an opportunity to continue his push for counterinsurgency, leading a rewrite of the counterinsurgency doctrinal manual and furthering the use of the CAC administered *Military Review* journal as a forum for circulating population-centric counterinsurgency throughout the Army (Kaplan, 2013: 186-187). The rewrite of the doctrine, garnered significant press coverage, as it represented the first update to Army counterinsurgency doctrine since the Vietnam War.³⁰ As the counterinsurgency narrative grew in the Army and the National Security bureaucracy, the production of the manual reinforced the notion of Petraeus as

²⁹ TRADOC and CAC are generally tasked with developing the concepts for the Army of the future and for generating the doctrine, schooling, and training for the Army not determining what current operational strategies should be in place.

³⁰ An interim Field Manual for Counterinsurgency was published in October 2004. Nagl argues that the in the Fall of 2003, that an officer with no previous experience in counterinsurgency and without a combat tour in Iraq was assigned to write the manual under an accelerated time frame and that while the effort was commendable, it “needed to be rewritten from scratch”.

COIN guru and the man for the times. While revelations about prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay were breaking, Petraeus was writing a field manual (FM) that included a chapter on ethics, counseled against the mistreatment of prisoners and wrote a column on the COIN practices, including such notions as “Do not try to do too much with your own hands,” “Cultural awareness is a force multiplier,” “Money is ammunition,” “Act quickly because every Army of Liberation has a half-life,” and “Build institutions, not units” (Petraeus, 2006: 3). The Carr Center on Human Rights, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), as well as journalists, academics, and other military members were invited to Leavenworth to review the manual, resulting in the widely circulated pieces that continued to position Petraeus as the warrior-scholar that grasped the challenge of the war in Iraq, and that could drag a staid bureaucracy within the military off its historical resistance to counterinsurgency to save the war effort.

Petraeus’s position within counterinsurgency discourse began with the invasion and continued through to his commands of MNF-I and CENTCOM. There was a consistency to his casting as the warrior-scholar and counterinsurgency expert who not only understood the theory, but had successfully applied it in Iraq in 2003, and the savior general who could change the way the Army fought.³¹ Petraeus’s position within the war debate and the counterinsurgency discourse gave him both the platform and the authority to speak. Further it insulated him from the perceived failures in Iraq. Despite an unremarkable tour as the head of MNSTC-I that began with his heralding by *Newsweek* as the man who could save Iraq, the failings of the Iraqi Security Forces did not discredit, nor reduce his influence. Instead, as the war continued to spiral downward and the COIN narrative became more prominent, Petraeus’s status continued to rise

³¹ As discussed later, Petraeus was even given the seal of approval from the widely perceived COIN experts: the British Army.

and, with it, the positions of the other COIN advocates, the “COINdnistas”, most notably, Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl.

Nagl’s positioning with the counterinsurgency narrative occupied a similar place as Petraeus but on a smaller scale. The warrior-scholar and counterinsurgency expert positioning was applied to Nagl as well, as the story of his PhD from Oxford, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, taken from the famed and highly mythologized T.E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia, received wide spread press coverage (Nagl, 2002).³² Further, Nagl was a known opponent of going to war in Iraq, making his story, as a West Point graduate, Oxford Doctorate, counterinsurgency expert and advocate, appealing to the press covering the war. *The New York Times Magazine* featured a large article entitled “Professor Nagl’s War” in 2004, as the post-conflict occupation began to turn from chaotic and unsettled, to a more defined and violent insurgency (Maas, 2004). Nagl’s COIN advocacy was then put on full display, as he not only was interviewed about the war and counterinsurgency’s place in the conflict, but was covered in the midst of executing the war itself. Nagl also was linked with the Petraeus orbit as a COIN advocate who wrote papers at the desk of then Major Petraeus in the NATO headquarters in Brussels (Nagl, 2014: 42).

Upon rotation to Washington, D.C. after his tour in Iraq, Nagl became a sought after speaker at conferences, discussing the war and how his counterinsurgency research applied to the ongoing efforts in Iraq (Kaplan, 2013: 93).³³ As a pundit and expert in the media, Nagl’s profile and reach grew. His dissertation, published by the University of Chicago, had initially been a

³² Indeed, Ricks even submitted an article that was published by the Washington Post that John Nagl, a Lieutenant Colonel, was retiring. This is highly unusual, as Nagl was not in a command position and was not in the upper echelons of the military command structure.

³³ Again, reflecting the outsized influence of Nagl, a Lieutenant Colonel was providing interviews on Counterinsurgency to major media outlets at a time in which the official DoD position was that there was no insurgency in Iraq.

technical and barely read dissertation, but began to sell on a much wider basis. Nagl, then working in the Pentagon, took the book to the Chief of Staff of the Army, who added it to his annual reading list for officers, ensuring further dissemination of the counterinsurgency discourse and Nagl's placement within that discourse (Nagl, 2014: 119).

With Nagl as a founding member, the COINdnistas, the band of counterinsurgency advocates within the military, worked to change the terms upon which the debate over the war strategy would take place. Nagl partnered with David Kilcullen and Janine Davidson at the Pentagon. Kilcullen was an Australian Army officer whose PhD research was turned into the book *The Accidental Guerrilla* and a devoted counterinsurgency advocate (Kilcullen, 2009). Another outspoken opponent of the war in Iraq, Kilcullen, requested by the Defense Department to support the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), was now placed as the expert who could speak truth to power, against the war but attempting to find a way to make it winnable, or at least not a total disaster for all involved. This fed into the COIN storyline of the "better war" that could be had, if only the U.S. military could grasp the kind of war it was in: no more battles of Waterloo, and lots more Malayan Emergencies.

Davidson was the third member of the COINdnistas. Working for the Assistant Secretary of the Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, Davidson was another of the COIN advocates with a PhD, whose research became a book with the ironic title, *Lifting the Fog of Peace* (Davidson, 2011). Again, as an internal COIN advocate, Davidson enjoyed similar subject positioning as Nagl and Kilcullen.

The youthful, confident, and credentialed COINdnistas, all with PhDs and books on the shelves, were experts in the new wars of the 21st century, despite advocating a doctrine whose roots and precepts were modeled after the wars that followed the colonial breakdown of the post-

World War II era.³⁴ They reached back into the Algerian and Malayan conflicts to identify the timeless precepts for these better wars and were cast as the internal “insurgents” battling a stodgy Army and Department of Defense that refused to even call the conflict in Iraq an insurgency. The PhD laden advocates, flush with the symbolic power their degrees and positioning provided, were reflective of the historical connotation of COIN war as a special, more difficult, and better war, and together with other internal advocates who began writing articles in *Military Review* or monographs for the Army War College, such as Conrad Crane, Steve Terrill, Kavlev Sepp, and T.X. Hammes, the COINdnistas were produced in the counterinsurgency storyline as offering an opportunity for a “better war” that could be won if only the hierarchical and slow to adapt military could meet the challenges of the 21st century.

The positioning of Petraeus and the band of COINdnistas were juxtaposed with the advocates of the other story line competing to dominate the discourse in the Iraq war strategy debate. Despite their degrees, background and heritage, the positioning of the anti-population centric COIN advocates were much less privileged in the strategy debate. Some, such as the leading COIN detractor, Colonel Gian Gentile, despite a PhD in Military History from Stanford, who had also published books and articles, were barely a part of the discussion about COIN and the post 2006 Iraq war strategy. Instead of a warrior-scholar, he was recast as a modern day Harry Summers, whose book on Vietnam had gained both fame and infamy, as it was widely regarded as providing the basis for the Army casting aside counterinsurgency in the post-Vietnam era. Summers argued that the U.S. had lost Vietnam not as a result of not doing counterinsurgency, but because it was doing too much counterinsurgency, ignoring the regular NVA army units and spending time tending to hamlets in the countryside (Summers, 1982).

³⁴ Indeed, COIN can trace its roots to the colonial policing strategies of the British and French empires.

Similarly, when Gentile was involved in the public debate over the war, his role was that of COIN detractor or critics, as opposed to warrior-scholar or advocate of withdraw. Arguing that COIN was “a strategy of tactics”, simply a collection of tactical actions that provided no way of knitting together a strategic victory, and openly concerned about the ability of the Army to execute conventional war tasks after six years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq that required limited combined arms fire and maneuver, Gentile was positioned as the advocate for conventional war, a strategy that ultimately became out of step with the debate (Gentile, 2009). Gentile and others like him, who argued against the categorization of COIN as “the graduate level of war”, the “thinking man’s war” and as limited in its ability to produce victory, were positioned as the traditional military thinkers, wedded to the big unit wars of previous times, and, ultimately, as not offering a viable solution for the war in Iraq as the counterinsurgency storyline became hegemonic (FM 3-24, 2006: 1).³⁵

Similarly, Generals George Casey and General John Abizaid, the commanders of MNF-I and U.S. Central Command at the time of the debate, were also not given the same privileged positions in the discourse and their positions were rarely reported in the public debate over the war. Ironically, they were advocating the view held by the most senior people in the Department of Defense and the military services during 2006. This position argued that U.S. forces were “the sand in the gears” of reconciliation in Iraq (Ricks, 2009: 26). Iraqis had to come to some agreement on a social compact and reconciliation, and that such an agreement could not be imposed by an occupying U.S. military. Instead, both Abizaid and Casey wanted to continue to transition security responsibilities to Iraqi Security Forces as way to draw American forces out of

³⁵ Again, the notion that COIN was the “thinking man’s war” or a “graduate level of warfare” was reflective of the specialness argument that COIN has historically possessed. As Porch (2013) has argued, from the French colonial adventures in Africa to C.E. Callwell’s treatise on small wars, COIN has a portrayal as being different, special and more involved than conventional war.

Iraq and force Iraqis to take responsibility for the violence besetting heavily populated areas in the country.

While perhaps providing a potential course of action, the positioning of Abizaid and Casey in the various recountings of the debate, is one of “conventional generals” not in touch with the raging sectarian conflict in Iraq. Their position was similar to that of Westmoreland in Vietnam, as preferring to fight the big unit wars that Western militaries focus on preparing for and not in tune with the changing nature of warfare that had come about in these first wars of the 21st century. Their absence from the public discussion leaked to newspapers and magazines is the primary indicator of their subject positioning in the Iraq War debate.³⁶ As the discourse of counterinsurgency became more legitimized, their position of transition and withdrawal was deemed odd, strange, and out of touch with the times. Their minimization in the debate reflects the way in which COIN discourse had captured the imagination, privileging the COIN advocates and removing the “right to speak” of its detractors.

This positioning is particularly interesting element in the discussion about Iraq and counterinsurgency that is often not fully grasped, particularly given the emphasis on culture and cultural knowledge that was significant part of the COIN narrative. Abizaid was of Middle Eastern descent, had lived in Jordan as part of an Army developmental assignment, and was the first to deem the Iraqi insurgents as pursuing “a classical guerilla-type campaign”, when he was nominated to become the commander of U.S. Central Command (Cloud and Jaffe, 2009: 127).

Meanwhile, Casey had opened the COIN Academy at Camp Taji, Iraq in November 2005 and felt that his campaign plan emphasized several of the key points of accepted COIN doctrine.

³⁶ Ironically, it was Abizaid that first identified the war as an insurgency and Casey who started the COIN Academy in Iraq. This played into the COIN narrative, as they were officers who knew that an insurgency existed but could not execute a COIN campaign to defeat it.

Most importantly, Casey saw letting the host nation take responsibility, despite U.S. forces ability to do it better, as central to solving the problems in Iraq and moving American forces out, a tenet Petraeus (2006) observed in his “Observations from Soldiering in Iraq” article. However, as with Westmoreland and the Tet Offensive, the Al Askari mosque bombing and the subsequent outburst of sectarianized violence had seen his tenure as commander come to an end.

This analogy would define much of the subject positioning of Casey; as the commander who spoke about counterinsurgency, but could not successfully execute such a strategy. Instead, like Westmoreland, Casey was the man presiding over failure, while proclaiming to see a light at the end of the tunnel. This marginalization in the strategy discourse discounted his and Abizaid’s views and reduced their position to one that was not seen as tenable in the Iraq debate. As counterinsurgency grew more dominant in the strategy debate, Casey and Abizaid became less and less allowed to talk about, provide meaning to, or interpret facts surrounding the situation in Iraq and the keys to fixing the problem.

The above demonstrates the positioning and symbolic power of those advocating particular strategies for the war in Iraq in 2006-2007 and their relationship to counterinsurgency discourse and the strategy debate. This subject positioning and capital is crucial to understanding how particular storylines play out and become dominant, while others are ruled old-fashioned, archaic, anachronistic, strange and non-viable. The warrior-scholar, savior general and expert on the nuances and vagaries of modern war in which Petraeus and the other COIN advocates occupied, were central to the authority they were given within the Iraq war debate, the way they were able to produce knowledge about the situation in Iraq in 2006, and the means to reverse that situation and create the “better war”. As such, the COINdnistas were able to produce the storyline of counterinsurgency as “common-sense”, and position COIN as the

inevitable choice for creating a successful outcome with the smarter war. These phenomena feed on each other, as the COIN storyline becomes more dominant in the strategy debate, the more the positioning and power of the COIN advocates, and their authority to speak about Iraq and war strategy is enhanced, improved, and made normal. At the same time, the anti-COIN advocates were made to appear more out of date and out of touch with what needed to be done in Iraq. As such, their positions and strategies became increasingly marginalized and excluded from the debate over the war. That this is so can be seen in the increasing press coverage and books published about Petraeus and the COINdniestas, as well as the tone of those accounts, when compared to the coverage of Casey and Abizaid. While press coverage alone is a relatively crude instrument, it does have the effect of defining agents for the mass audience and was widely circulated through the Pentagon through the now defunct “Early Bird” that drew in news articles from across the media for senior leaders to review.³⁷ As such, this coverage certainly had impacts on how the broader public saw the debate, as well as the foreign policy community in the various think tanks. That the COIN advocates expressly sought to generate this coverage is undeniable and that a certain amount of discursive entrepreneurship was involved in the advocacy of COIN is beyond doubt. However, the COIN storyline and the positioning of subjects in the broader discourse of the Iraq war increasingly took on a life of its own, as counterinsurgency became more dominant in the debate over the Iraq War.

Having established the subject positions, the symbolic power of COIN advocates, and having detailed the ways in which this influenced the war strategy debate, I turn in the following sections to detail the building of particular analogies and commonplaces that further supported the capture of the argumentative space by counterinsurgency discourse.

³⁷ The Early Bird was not only for Senior Leaders in the building, as it was distributed widely via email and on the DoD website for DoD service members and civilians to use.

Commonplaces and the Redefining of Vietnam

In the context of the Iraq War, analogies played a role in the creation of the storylines that facilitated counterinsurgency's capture of the discursive space. I argue that as opposed to the analogies such as Munich, which are widely accepted, the Vietnam analogy functioned as a rhetorical commonplace in which the lessons of the Vietnam War were defined and redefined in particular ways to legitimize counterinsurgency and its applicability to the war in Iraq. As per Jackson's work on the rebuilding and rearming of post-World War II Germany, a rhetorical commonplace serves as discursive material whose meaning is weakly shared (2006: 45). A commonplace, in this conceptualization, is a site of argumentation that serves to fix the meaning of the Vietnam analogy in order to help define the boundaries of action that are available to decision makers.

The Vietnam War commonplace was re-imagined and deployed in two ways: first, as the inability of the Army to adapt to the counterinsurgency quickly enough to win, and secondly, as the "better war" as conducted by General Creighton Abrams in the post Tet Offensive period that reflects the opportunity to turn around a flailing war effort. The remainder of this section illustrates the redefinitions and deployments of the Vietnam War commonplace and highlights the different interpretations by counterinsurgency advocates as the counterinsurgency storyline captured the strategy debate discursive space.

The much contested and often revised history of Vietnam served as a critical analogy, or commonplace, that was called upon in the discussion of what to do about the war in Iraq and was presented from two different positions. The first traced the failures of the U.S. Army to adapt to counterinsurgency warfare. In this telling, the Army was addicted to the big unit maneuver, heavy firepower, and attrition based strategy premised on the "search and destroy" tactic most

often associated with U.S. military in Vietnam (Krepinevich, 1988). This notion was the thesis of Andrew Krepinevich, a retired Army officer with a doctoral degree in military history that heads the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA).³⁸ In Krepinevich's telling, the Army was so wedded to the Army Concept of the 1960s, that focused heavily on fire and maneuver and large formations, that it was incapable of adjusting to fight nimble guerrillas that had already left the search and destroy zones by the time the bulk of U.S. fighting forces had arrived (1988). The army didn't do counterinsurgency in Vietnam, but instead focused on the war it wanted to fight, leading to the collapse of the war effort and the ultimate loss of South Vietnam to the North.

In 2005, Krepinevich (2005: 88-89) authored a *Foreign Affairs* article arguing for the adoption of a counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq:

Rather than focusing on killing insurgents, they should concentrate on providing security and opportunity to the Iraqi people, thereby denying insurgents the popular support they need. Since the U.S. and Iraqi armies cannot guarantee security to all of Iraq simultaneously, they should start by focusing on certain key areas and then, over time, broadening the effort -- hence the image of an expanding oil spot.

Drawing on classical counterinsurgency methods, Krepinevich contrasted the large set piece battles in Fallujah in 2004, as incapable of breaking the back of the insurgency and instead called for concentrating on "providing security and opportunity to the Iraqi people" in a campaign that would gradually grow to encompass the whole country, in line with the British effort in Malaya (Krepinevich, 2005: 88-89, 94). Further, Krepinevich argued that in gleaning historical lessons, "there is no shortage of counterinsurgency strategies to draw on" (2005: 93). Citing Vietnam as

³⁸ CSBA is an influential think tank in the Washington, D.C. area that routinely has access to high level Department of Defense and Department of State officials.

evidence, he claimed that search and destroy tactics failed to work in Vietnam but continued to exert a strong pull on the Army, as large offensive operations continued to dominate the military strategy in Iraq (Krepinevich, 2005: 93). In Krepinevich's view, "Having left the business of waging counterinsurgency warfare over 30 years ago, the U.S. military is running the risk of failing to do what is needed most (win Iraqis' hearts and minds) in favor of what it has traditionally done best (seek out the enemy and destroy him)" (2005: 93).

This represented one of the initial ways in which the commonplace of Vietnam and the historical lessons associated with it, were deployed as the counterinsurgency debate began in earnest. Failing to understand the war in Vietnam, the Army had adopted the wrong strategy to fight it, resulting in the ultimate loss of the war. The Iraq War, the newest arena in which the Army faced a large scale insurgency, the siren call of search and destroy was again leading to a catastrophic loss, with a similar problematic feature: namely that senior military officers did not grasp the importance of the population in putting down insurgent movements, and instead focused on executing conventional tactics that presumed that the enemy military formations were the center of gravity in the campaign.³⁹

Importantly, Krepinevich's article began to gain traction in the strategy debate, with his invite to speak to senior military officers shortly before its publication and the use of his "clear, hold, and build" line in then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Rice, 2005).

Nagl's dissertation, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam and Malaya*, was the another salient moment in the presentation of the argument that the

³⁹ Krepinevich quotes Abizaid as saying that after the attack on Fallujah, the insurgents would have nowhere left to hide. Again, this positions Abizaid as not understanding that COIN's center of gravity is not the enemy troops, but the population that supports them, or at least tolerates them. Krepinevich likens it to the Vietnam era.

failure to adopt counterinsurgency lead to warfighting failure in Vietnam deployment (2002). In Nagl's telling, the U.S. Army was "not a learning organization" as its rigid and hierarchical structure prevented it from grasping the kind of war in which it was engaged and the necessity to change from its favored way of fighting. Instead, the Army continued to fight a war of attrition against the NLF and the NVA, and was incapable of the necessary adaptation. This was a failure that Nagl argued the British military did not succumb to, as their more flexible organization and doctrine development process facilitated the shift to counterinsurgency strategy in Malaya (Nagl, 2002). Importantly, it was this failure to adapt that caused the U.S. Army to lose in Vietnam, and conversely, the ability to adapt to COIN by the British that resulted in their victory in Malaya. Nagl argued that the U.S. military did adapt, but only after it was too late. This laid the seeds of the redefining of the Vietnam War into its two constituent parts: the rigid, inflexible Army of the mid 1960s that fought the big unit, firepower war, and the beginnings of the "better war" thesis that sought to redefine Vietnam as providing the blueprint for how an Army can adapt with the right doctrine and leadership, if it doesn't wait too long.⁴⁰

Nagl's book became instrumental in the deployment of the Vietnam commonplace for both elements and to wide variety of audiences. Nagl requested that the Chief of Staff of the Army, Pete Schoomaker, write the forward for the book and it was added to the CSA's reading list for the year, ensuring its distribution throughout the officer corps of the Army (Nagl, 2014: 119). In addition, with the increasing comparisons of Iraq and Vietnam among opponents of the Iraq war, Nagl's research and his positioning within the strategy discourse, garnered wider

⁴⁰ The Better War thesis is a play on the book by the historian Lewis Sorley, who transcribed hours of audio tapes of Creighton Abrams when he was in command in Vietnam and wrote the book, published in 1999, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*.

distribution among policy planners and think tank staff than had the war come to rapid close in 2003-2004.

With the book on the CSA's reading list, Nagl became a frequent speaker at various military forums in the Army education system, such as the Army War College. In these venues, Nagl would review his research into the counterinsurgency lessons from Vietnam and Malaya, stressing the required adaptation to counterinsurgency in Iraq and relaying the twin lessons of the mistakes of staying wedded to the big unit war, and the promise of the better war to be had could the Army admit that it needed to change strategy (Kaplan, 2013: 93).

In this way, the commonplace of Vietnam and the "lessons from history" to be drawn from it were both substantiated and redefined. Vietnam was, therefore, a lesson in what not to do, the big unit, firepower focused wars of the mid 1960s and the possibility of what could be, if the Army changed more quickly to implement COIN as Templer had done in Malaya and Abrams had done in Vietnam, only this time before the public's patience had run out. These twin deployments established the parameters of, and became commonplace in, the debate, filtering from the internal military discussions in journals such as *Military Review*, to State Department testimony, and stirring within the think tank and academic communities that were advising the military and the White House. The deployment of the Vietnam War as analogous to another failing, small war in Iraq served two purposes. First, it seized the argument from the anti-war critics that Iraq was another Vietnam.⁴¹ In this telling, Iraq was another Vietnam, where the U.S. military was failing again, but failing due to a failure to adapt to the kind of war it was in, the title of an opinion piece that Nagl wrote (Nagl, 2009). But as opposed to being a cause to

⁴¹ Krepinevich (2005: 88) articulates this in *Foreign Affairs*, stating the Administration's critics alternative strategy was accelerated withdrawal. "They see Iraq as another Vietnam and advocate a similar solution: pulling out U.S. troops and hoping for the best." The most straightforward statement of the two competing strategic poles.

disengage and withdrawal from Iraq, Vietnam provided a second, better option: the adoption of COIN and the promise for a better war with a better ending that could be obtained if the strategy shifted quickly enough.⁴² This argument dovetailed with the Petraeus argument that the U.S. needed to “get the inputs right” (Gentile, 2013: 1). If the military and the National Command Authority could but agree to shift to a population-centric counterinsurgency strategy, the war could be salvageable.

As the images and reports emanating from inside Iraq continued to spiral downward over the course of 2006, the strategy debate began to coalesce around these two competing poles: one that drew upon the Vietnam commonplace to recommend withdrawal and the other, that drew upon Vietnam to argue for continuing the war, but doing it in the smarter way of the Abrams era in Vietnam, where the “inputs” were right and the better war could be had. With Nagl and Krepinevich’s work moving in various streams of the military and civilian branches of government, the Bush Administration began a series of internal strategy reviews, reviews that would ultimately lead to the most dominant period for counterinsurgency in the American military history. This dominance was abetted, not only by Vietnam analogy, but also by the romanticized and mythologized notions of COIN operations past that also provided support to the COIN narrative and captured the imagination of the broader populace. The next section addresses several of the mythologized notions of COIN campaigns past and the ways in which this buttressed the standing of COIN discourse in the strategy debate.

Myths and Legends

As the counterinsurgency narrative began to blossom in the early years of the Iraq occupation, the counterinsurgency myths of campaigns past came to the fore. Specifically, the

⁴² David Ignatius (2005: A23), writing in the *Washington Post*, notes that Sorley’s book includes the phrase “clear and hold,” that was mirrored in Rice’s testimony..

eneration of the British performance during the Malayan Emergency captured imaginations and served to further ingrain the COIN narrative in the dialogue of the Iraq War.

The Malayan Emergency was held up by the COIN advocates as the model for counterinsurgency campaigns, and its lessons served as a hegemonic analogy in the debate. The 1948-1960 conflict between the British and the Communist movement in Malaya, dominated by the ethnic Chinese minority, gave rise to the “hearts and minds” phraseology ubiquitous in COIN discourse (Stubbs, 1989: 1).⁴³ The post-World War II period had seen the aura of invincibility thrown off of the European powers, as the Japanese had seized territories in Asia and the Germans had conquered France (Stubbs, 1989: 10). As the European powers began to reassert their authority over the lost territories, the agitation for independence grew across Vietnam, Algeria, and Malaya. As the “Emergency” took hold with assassinations of European rubber plantation owners, the reoccupying British Army began large scale search and destroy missions designed to eliminate “CTs,” communist terrorists, that were wreaking havoc across swaths of the country (Barber, 1971). These actions were deemed insufficient to quell the unrest, and the sense of emergency came to a head with killing of the chief civilian representative, Sir Henry Gurney, in 1951 (Barber, 1971: 131).

In response, White Hall deployed General Sir Gerard Templer, who both coined the “hearts and minds” term and undertook a new strategic orientation (Stubbs, 1989: 1). The ethnic Chinese in the country side were forcibly resettled into so-called “New Villages,” and separated, physically from the communist insurgency (Stubbs, 1989: 6). The New Villages were to be provided with services, health care, food provision, and security; the hearts and minds portion of

⁴³ Douglas Porch (2013: 57) argues that the terms “hearts and minds” and “peaceful penetration” were in use in the North West frontier of India at least by 1891, while Stubbs argues that the phrase first became associated with counter-guerrilla war during the Malayan Emergency.

the forcible resettlement. Police were to be retrained and operations were to become “intelligence” driven, so as to avoid the problem of continuing the large search and destroy missions that were producing little actual contact with the enemy. Perhaps most importantly, the British agreed to grant independence to Malaya once the emergency ended and to gradually remove the curfews and emergency powers as each province was pacified, reflecting the “oil spot” strategy that Krepinevich (2005) wrote about in his *Foreign Affairs* article.⁴⁴

The Malayan insurgency ultimately ground to halt and the remaining insurgent hold outs, starving in the Malayan jungles slipped across the border into Thailand (Barber, 1971). This produced the mythology that Malaya was the kinder, gentler war of counterinsurgency doctrine. Civic action supposedly won the hearts of the Chinese minority that were the base of the insurgent movement, while intelligence driven police and military operations eliminated the irreconcilables, putting an end to the Emergency.

The Malayan Emergency served two purposes in the Iraq War strategy debate. First, it served to produce the model for counterinsurgency advocates (Mumford, 2011). As in the retelling noted above, Malaya supposedly demonstrated the efficacy of the “hearts and minds” approach. The resettling of the Chinese minority in the new villages, physically separated the insurgents from the population and the provision of services supposedly weaned those disposed to support the Malayan Communist Party from the inclination to provide that necessary food and safe haven support in the Malayan country side. Second, it produced the British as the experts in counterinsurgency. The nimble adaptation of the British to the counterinsurgency strategy that

⁴⁴ Arguably this was the most important action taken by the British in Malaya. Galula argues that combatting the cause of the insurgents is a critical step. By granting independence, the British had effectively gutted the cause of the Malayan Communist Party in a significant way.

gradually reclaimed control of the territory was produced as a successful case study of how to defeat insurgent movements, one that was universal and one that “got the inputs” right.

COIN advocates were then able to draw on the Malayan analogy, as Nagl had repeatedly done in reviewing his research in military forums and with the media, to demonstrate how a change in strategy could take a losing war effort and transform it into the better war that could still be won. They could also draw on the experiences of the British Army, first as the heroes of the Malayan Emergency, that unlike the French in Vietnam and Algeria, or the Americans in Vietnam, were able to defeat an insurgency through the hearts and minds approach. The Americans and the French were too focused on firepower and brutal repression to understand the nuances of fighting a counterinsurgent war and were unable to grasp the need to win “hearts and minds,” a trope that continues to permeate all discussions of countering insurgencies and serves as short hand for that form of warfare (Mumford, 2011: 19).

Further, the British experience in Malaya, Palestine, Northern Ireland, and earlier periods of their colonial history, were drawn on to produce the British as uniquely able to understand counterinsurgency and put in to effect the required tactics to win (Mumford, 2001: 1). British patrols that went without body armor and bullet resistant helmets were said to reflect the “British way of war,” as opposed to the high tech, high firepower “American way of war” that produced collateral damage and produced more enemies than it removed from the battlefield. The British were then the enlightened force that understood the vagaries of modern warfare, while the US was still captured in a conventional approach centered on destroying the enemy.

The deployment of the Malayan Emergency and the perceived expertise of the British Army in counterinsurgency that came with it, culminated with the publication of a critique of the U.S. Army’s performance during OIF in *Military Review* by Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster, a

UK general who had served as part of the coalition command in Iraq (Aylwin-Foster, 2005).

General Petraeus reprinted Aylwin-Foster's article from the "Seaford House Papers" in *Military Review* specifically to play on the perceived British expertise, adaptability, and heart and minds notions favored by the COIN advocates and to:

"provide Military Review readers the thought provoking assessments of a senior officer with significant experience in counterterrorism operations;" And it is offered in that vein – to stimulate discussion" (Military Review, 2005: 2).

Quoting from Nagl's *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, Aylwin-Foster discussed the requirements of Western theories of counterinsurgency and the adaptability requirement to adjust from conventional to irregular warfare. Citing that "above all a COIN force must have two skills that are not required in conventional war fighting: first, it must be able to see issues and actions from the perspective of the domestic population; second, it must understand how easily excessive force, even when apparently, justified, can undermine popular support" (Aylwin-Foster, 2005: 4). Again, COIN is produced as a special, more difficult form of warfare that not all soldiers can grasp.

Aylwin-Foster argued that the U.S. Army had a strong organizational culture that was focused on conventional warfighting skills. This culture was inhibiting the ability of the Army to adjust to the demands of a counterinsurgency campaigns. While the Army did innovate, the innovations that were developed were more geared to Cold War style campaigns than the conflict they were actually fighting (2005: 9-10). Aylwin-Foster acknowledged that this was not true across the board. He cited Petraeus and Major General Pete Chiarelli as examples of those who understood the requirements necessary for COIN warfare. He further argued that they had

managed to blend the dual requirements of hunting insurgents with providing services and governance to the population (2005: 5).

This served the COIN as solution narrative. First, it was a critique by the British who's "numerous counterinsurgency campaigns in the post-World War II era have resulted in the generally accepted academic assessment that this volume of experience equates to competence in the realm of irregular warfare" (Mumford, 2011: vii). As Mumford argues the British way of executing counterinsurgency largely stems from the templated solution of the Malayan emergency (2005: 15). Playing on these two notions, the printing of the Aylwin-Foster critique of the U.S. Army campaign in Iraq drew on this accepted notion of British excellence in COIN generally, and the Malayan emergency as the model for COIN campaigns specifically. The critique gained wide spread circulation through *Military Review*, the *Washington Post*, and the scathing critique was noted by David Ucko in his book, *The New Counterinsurgency Era* (2009). The article had the desired effect as it generated significant discussion within military circles, and furthered the narrative of COIN as the solution in the war strategy debate.

Second, this 'British voice of experience' identified both Petraeus and Nagl as the enlightened members of the military who grasped the concept of COIN. Petraeus in particular, Aylwin-Foster noted, had "maintained relative peace and normal functionality in Mosul, a city with an ethnic mix easily liable to ignite into civil conflict" (2005: 5). This again positioned both Petraeus and Nagl as leaders who grasped the essence of the COIN problem and who were able to balance the two requirements that a COIN force must employ that conventional war fighters did not. Arguing that the U.S. Army's Soldier's Creed, released in 2003, served to reinforce the conventional war fighting focus of the Army, Aylwin-Foster argued that the Army as an institution was still failing to grasp and adapt to the 21st century wars they were fighting

(2005: 14). Petraeus, however, had, and the image of the savior general was reinforced by the coalition partner widely regarded as the expert.

Finally, Aylwin-Foster reinforced the notion that COIN was a special and different kind of war. As was the case in the formation of the *bureaux arabes* during French colonial days, Aylwin-Foster argued that COIN required a different expertise and skill set than “continental” or conventional war fighting (Porch, 2013: 30). Only those who could grasp its paradoxes and challenges could be successful. And as Kilcullen argued, of those who understand COIN, fewer can actually execute it as required. This also served to further the notion that COIN was the “graduate level of warfare,” as opposed to the formulaic, centralized conventional operations preferred by the Army as an institution.

Ironically, at the time of Aylwin-Foster’s critique, the British Army in Basra was struggling to stabilize and normalize the functionality of the city. Basra was teeming with militias who were imposing strict Islamic based laws on the population, shuttering liquor stores and forcing females to dress modestly. During the “Surge”, Operation Charge of the Knights, an Iraqi led operation directed at Basra with U.S. support, was required to wrench control of the city from the Mahdi Army militias that operated freely (Gordon and Trainor, 2012). Yet, the notion that the British Army understood COIN and were able to execute it better than others, still granted Aylwin-Foster a privileged spot from which to criticize the U.S. Army, identify the Malayan Emergency as the template for COIN wars, and add to the regime of truth building behind the COIN narrative as the strategy debate began in earnest in 2006. Further, his discussion of the COIN requirements played directly into the mystical and exotic aura of counterinsurgency discourse.

The Mystification of COIN

As noted above, counterinsurgency as a discourse has always been romanticized in its deployment. From Lawrence of Arabia, a much hyped insurgent, to John Arquilla's *Masters of Irregular Warfare* (2011), Galula's interviews with Mao Tse Tung, Giap as master strategist, and the more recent convention that COIN was the graduate level of warfare or the thinking man's war, has reinforced this mystical quality in COIN discourse. COIN discourse talks of paradoxes, winning hearts and minds, and includes romanticized stories of foreign soldiers winning the title of Sheik or King. Memoirs such as *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Lawrence, 2008) and *The Twenty Seven Articles* (Lawrence, 2011) of T.E. Lawrence reinforce the narrative that COIN is a special type of warfare to which the Clausewitzian based U.S. military has struggled to come to terms. COIN advocates furthered the notion of COIN as "special" and the media were quick to report in depth stories of the individuals that grasped an "alien culture" and were celebrated for having done so, making the prospect of COIN both more romanticized and a more "common sense" approach to the war effort.

The 2006 COIN narrative continued in this vein, with Nagl, Conrad Crane, Eliot Cohen and Jan Horvath's article on the paradoxes of COIN (Cohen, et al., 2006). Among these paradoxes were the notions: some of the best weapons do not fire bullets, the more you protect the force the less secure you are, sometimes doing nothing is the best reaction, tactical success guarantees nothing, and that letting them do it poorly is sometimes better than us doing it well (Cohen, et al., 2006: 52). The notion of COIN paradoxes made the war an ever shifting mosaic that required continual attention to strategic effects at tactical levels, giving rise to the trope of the "strategic corporal" who needs to understand that sometimes the best reaction to being shot at was to do nothing. Ironically, Casey's strategy was based on the notion that letting the Iraqi Army secure the country imperfectly was better than U.S. force doing it well, while COIN

advocates were requesting a surge of brigade combat teams and enabling forces that would be taking the lead in securing the population from a weak Iraqi Army that was doing it poorly.

Playing on Lawrence of Arabia's *Twenty Seven Articles*, Kilcullen produced the article "Twenty-eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-level Insurgency," which laid out the "commandments" of counterinsurgency, such as "know your turf," "diagnose the problem", and build networks of alliances on the ground (Kilcullen, 2006: 29-31). As Kaplan notes, Kilcullen's article went viral: appearing in *Military Review*, *the Marine Corps Gazette*, the online *Small Wars Journal*, and the restricted access *Company Command.com*, set up for junior officers to exchange ideas (2013: 1777). At the same time, Rand (Hosmer and Crane, 1962) was republishing its 1962 COIN symposium and the *New Yorker* (Packer, 2006) was carrying an article on the HR McMaster's Tal Afar campaign at the same time the above mentioned article by Nagl, Crane, Cohen and Horvath was published (Kaplan, 2013: 77). This reflected the continuing saturation of COIN in *Military Review* and its growing dominance of the media discussion of Iraq, the war and how it was to be fought. Further, COIN was increasingly being tied to the historical COIN campaigns of the past and used much the same "specialness" argument that European colonial soldiers used to discuss their role versus the role of the army fighting continental warfare (Porch, 2013: 50). The much hyped notions of T.E. Lawrence was reborn and further circulated the precepts of the COIN advocates, further mythologizing the conduct of COIN, and conjuring images of the blue eyed Lawrence in his white dishdasha riding on a camel in the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire in World War I.

All of which served to make COIN both a more exotic type of warfare, and to normalize the notion that the new COIN strategy would move the Army away from the heavy handed tactics that had produced the abuse at Abu Ghraib and would force the Department of Defense to

grasp the need to adjust to COIN wars that would transform societies into functioning democracies. The *28 Principles*, the COIN paradoxes, and the emphasis on adaptability produced the idea that COIN was the new form of warfare, the thinking man's warfare, that was better suited to 21st century conflicts and that would remove the stain of Abu Ghraib and black site prisons that had emerged in the Global War on Terrorism. COIN in this sense was this mystical strategy that even when understood, could not necessarily be implemented (Killcullen, 2006: 31). It required a special kind of warrior, one that could grasp the paradoxes, apply them and constantly adapt seemingly from minute to minute or day to day to a changing context. Unlike conventional war, Killcullen argued that rank was not the right metric for determining who was in charge, but instead the focus should be on the innate ability to grasp and execute COIN (2006: 31).

This notion was further amplified by the construction of Human Terrain Teams, teams of anthropologists, who would map the culture at the village level to inform military operations and strategies. Culture itself was a weapon of war, as the race to understand tribal leadership, histories, local languages, and grievances were seen as a critical element to righting the war effort and producing the better war (Porter, 2013). The recruitment of academics, notably Montgomery McFate from John Hopkins University, began apace as the COIN narrative gathered strength among the military, strategists, and think tanks. This served to further mystify COIN as a special war that could only be conducted by the best and the brightest, much as the previous counterinsurgency era under Kennedy relied on the "Action Intellectuals" and the insertion of academics into the study of hamlets in South Vietnam.

This mystification continued with the *FM 3-24* conference in 2006, held by Petraeus and the Combined Arms Center, which invited the Carr Center on Human Rights, other academics,

pundits, NGOs, and military members to review and revise the manual before its publication. The manual was the so-called “whole of government” approach to stabilizing insurgent plagued areas as it advocated unity of command with the State Department, the incorporation of NGOs into the battle space, and a team of soldier-scholars to draft and implement the new strategy.

In short, these were Petraeus’s “inputs” as argued by COIN advocates. The “who” in determining the change in strategy was a product of the subject positions and symbolic power that the PhD laden COIN advocates occupied and possessed in pushing their message, the how was in the incorporation of *Military Review* as a fount for COIN articles within the Army, and the numerous media and military forums which COIN began to monopolize throughout 2005-2006, and the why was to produce the better war that COIN could provide. It would serve to rescue a flailing war, do it in a more humane way, and be led by the best and the brightest, the warrior-scholars advocating COIN. Having laid the groundwork for COIN discourse hegemony, the notion that COIN could turn the war around, then began to find its way into the myriad of strategy reviews with a singular narrative of how to “fix Iraq”.

The next section briefly reviews the COIN narrative and highlights the debate arenas in which the COIN discourse and narrative began to appear and take hold.

The COIN Narrative

The Iraq war COIN narrative derived from the COIN advocates and the various forums from which they pronounced its efficacy was the mantra for a better war. In short, the narrative argued that the U.S. military as an institution was slow to grasp the changing nature of warfare in the post Desert Storm period, and that its continued reliance on conventional operations would not and could not work in the types of wars it found itself fighting. The population was the prize in these types of wars and they must be won over to the counterinsurgent side in order to win the

war (Kilcullen, 2009: 73). In Iraq, the pull back from the cities and the “commute” to war from Super FOBs left the population exposed, and instead, the military should move back in with greater numbers to protect the population and separate the people from the insurgents (Petraeus, 2008). Security and the provision of services such as medical, sanitation, water, electricity and a functioning job market would lead the population to reconcile with the government and recognize its legitimacy. This could only be accomplished through the adoption of COIN, its precepts, and its paradoxes. Soldiers would have to know the languages, customs, and societal structures at a granular level to execute the war, and not everyone could grasp and execute a COIN campaign. Supporters of the Government of Iraq and the uncommitted middle could be won over, if the violence could be tamped down, and political reforms and reconciliation processes were put into place (Kagan, 2006: 1-2). This would require a commitment of U.S. forces, despite domestic political resistance, and enlightened leadership that would be able to weave these “lines of effort” together for a sustained period, while the Iraq Security Forces were retrained, purged of sectarian influences, and redeployed to relieve U.S. forces. The commitment of these forces would provide the U.S. leverage over the Iraqi Government, speed the reform, and allow for the purging of sectarian influences from the government ministries (Kagan, 2006: 1). To not adopt COIN, was a rush to failure, would result in a collapse of the Iraqi government and provide a safe haven for terrorists in “the heart of the Middle East”.

This new strategy would be modeled after the COIN campaigns of the past drawing on the Malayan model, the “better war” of the Abrams era in Vietnam, and the guidance of Galula and the French campaign in Algeria. Learning the lessons of counterinsurgency from these historical examples, COIN advocates argued, would allow the U.S. to get the “inputs” to the Iraq war strategy correct and secure a better outcome for the U.S. Petraeus argued that turning the

Iraq war around was “hard but not hopeless,” and the shift to a counterinsurgency strategy was the only option to securing U.S. objectives (Petraeus in Partlow, 2007).

This would serve as a reordering of geostrategic reasoning in the U.S. military and the U.S. government. The imaginary fast, high tech wars of the past would be replaced by the long, slow commitment of COIN. More than five years after the September 11th attacks, the strategy for the war on terrorism would now largely be confined to COIN, as the terrorist groups served as “global insurgents”.

COIN and the Strategy Debate

Over the course of 2006, the various agencies responsible for the war in Iraq began undertaking separate reviews of the strategy under a cloud of deep pessimism. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, the National Security Council, and a prominent Washington, D.C. based think tank all began strategy reviews of the Iraq war effort to determine what could be done to address the growing violence and sense that the war would be lost. As the violence in Iraq increased and became more organized, the long, slow build of counterinsurgency from a specialized discourse among a select few military officers, academics, and enthusiasts to its dominant position within U.S. national security took effect. This build deployed the key advocates, the particular COIN narrative with all of its specialized and mystical properties, and the rhetorical commonplaces and hegemonic analogies of historical COIN campaigns to capture the discursive space and redefine the “American way of war” for a distinct period.

The long march of counterinsurgency from military backwater to capture of the geostrategic debate space began in the immediate aftermath of the march to Baghdad in April of 2003. The confusing, chaotic aftermath of the U.S. invasion produced visual evidence of the U.S. military and broader U.S. government’s lack of planning, preparation and execution of

stability operations, Phase IV in military planning discourse. The notion that American forces would be “greeted as liberators” and that Iraq would pay for its own reconstruction through oil revenues, were demonstrably shown to be false assumptions as the looting and power outages plagued the U.S. occupation from the start (Cheney, 2003). In this chaotic environment, the subject positioning of Petraeus began and the discourse of COIN began to emerge in the Iraq context. While Odierno’s 4th Infantry Division was drawing scrutiny for heavy-handed tactics and mass detentions of Iraqis in Tikrit, Ricks and Thompson were talking about the actions of David Petraeus in Mosul. With Galula’s book in hand, Petraeus hung up posters around the 101st Airborne Division area of operations asking: “What have you done to win Iraqi hearts and minds today?” and “We Are in a Race to Win Over the People. What Have You and Your Element Done Today to Contribute to Victory” (Kaplan, 2013: 73). As Kaplan noted, Petraeus gathered his subordinates and told them “We are going to do nation-building,” a notion still very much in disfavor within the Department of Defense in 2003 (Kaplan, 2013: 72). Petraeus’s time in Mosul and the relative normality that was left behind, had two consequences for COIN discourse: it introduced the counterinsurgency narrative and its “hearts and minds” mantra into the U.S. media coverage of the wars; and it also began the build of the Petraeus legend that would carry him from the “King” of Mosul to the Savior of Iraq in 2005 and again, in 2007.

With counterinsurgency, the notions of “hearts and minds” and “nation-building” anchored in the narrative of the war in Iraq, the reach of the COIN discourse expanded, with the *New York Times Magazine* article of “Professor Nagl’s War” (Maass, 2004). The article continued the injection of the COIN discourse into the Iraq scenario and began to flesh out the story of how COIN produced the better war of the COIN narrative. It covered Nagl’s work on the Malayan Emergency and the British expertise noted above (Maass, 2004: para 4). Through

Maass's article, Nagl introduced the notion of Malaya and Vietnam into strategy discussion, as the article reviewed the successful counterinsurgency conducted by the British "by generally steering clear of the excessive force and instituting a "hearts and minds" campaign to strip the insurgents of public sympathy" (2004: para 4). Conversely, the "Americans resorted to indiscriminate firepower and showed little concern for its effect on the civilian population" in Vietnam (Maass, 2004: para 4). Indeed, Nagl goes on to argue that "Vietnam stands as an encyclopedia of what shouldn't be done," because "as long as you only go after the guy with weapons, you're missing the most important part" (Maass, 2004: para 24). The article continues the trope of the "hearts and minds" strategy and the need for an "exquisite calibration of levels of force" that must be determined to avoid alienating the population (Maass, 2004: para 49). The initial introduction of Nagl and Petraeus established the baseline of the narrative that would define what could be done to save the war in Iraq: hearts and minds COIN, reproduced the myth of British expertise, presented the "Malaya as model" concept into the broader debate and began the deployment of Vietnam as the test case in what not to do. Demonstrating the potency of the COIN discourse, it began to dominate discussion of the Iraq war generally, and specifically among the uniformed military, while still being officially off limits within the Department of Defense.

In the initial stages of the Iraq war, before many had begun to discuss the notion of an insurgency or what to do to stop it, COIN discourse had begun to build. This was critical to its emergence as it defined the problem inside of Iraq. For COIN advocates, like Petraeus, the problem was the potential for the population to be "won over" by Sunni insurgents, and the race to win them over was underway in certain parts of Iraq. For the COIN supporters, this race could

only be won by managing the war time violence, and providing government services, jobs, and other civic action. In other words, counterinsurgency was what was required to win the war.

The way in which a situation is defined is critical to determining what could or should occur. As Hajer argues in the discussion of acid rain, dead trees by themselves are not a policy problem, as trees die for various reasons and of natural processes (Hajer, 1997: 22-23).

However, when the reason for their demise is acid rain produced by heavy industry emissions, there is a policy response to address what is now a political, social, and economic problem (Hajer, 1997: 22). Much the same process ensued for the war in Iraq, and indeed, much time was spent attempting to define the problem. Secretary Rumsfeld's and the official position of the Department of Defense was that there was no insurgency, and the term was banned from use in Department communications. Rumsfeld argued that "I guess the reason that I don't use the phrase 'guerrilla war' is because there isn't one, and it would be a misunderstanding and a miscommunication to you and to the people of the country and the world" (Boyer, 2006: para 41). Much like the acid rain example, if there is no guerrilla war, than there is no counter-guerrilla or counterinsurgency program to conduct. Instead, the battle was against "dead enders," "foreign fighters," and "anti-Iraqi forces." The determination of the type of war being fought, leads to a different strategies being adopted. In this case, instead of a COIN based campaign, the objective is to sweep away those "dead enders", who by definition will continue to resist and are not reconcilable. Therefore, they must be taken off the battlefield in some fashion. It also has implications for the training of Iraqi Security Forces, as they are being trained as a force capable of defending Iraq's territory against encroachment by its neighbors, not as a constabulary force maintaining peace inside of Iraqi cities, towns, and villages. In short, the

definition of the type of war is a critical element to determining what the military response should be, an issue that was identified early by COIN advocates.

As the violence within Iraq became more organized, defining the war in Iraq became more contentious as a political and strategic matter. The Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, Jack Keane, who would become a go-between for the COIN advocates and the Administration in 2006, was pushing the notion that an insurgency was taking place inside of Iraq within military circles. But the turning point came when the incoming CENTCOM commander, John Abizaid, stated that the insurgents “are conducting a classic guerrilla-type campaign” (Cloud and Jaffe, 2009: 127). Despite the continued resistance from the Pentagon leadership, the notion that an insurgency was underway was being acknowledged and forcing the debate over the war strategy to the forefront within the military.

General Casey’s assumption of command in Iraq ramped up the notion of counterinsurgency with the U.S. military. Casey immediately called for a strategy review and established the COIN Academy in 2005 (Ricks, 2006B: para 2). Calling on many of the contributors to *Military Review* who would become influential in mainstreaming the idea of COIN inside the military, Casey brought in Kalev Sepp to review the strategy and help establish the center. All units coming into Iraq rotated through the COIN Academy for training on the principles of counterinsurgency prior to conducting their unit’s rotation in the country. Based on that experience, Sepp (2005) produced the article “Best Practices in Counterinsurgency”, that was published in *Military Review* in the summer of 2005. Sepp identified Vietnam as a place where “military staffs rather than civil governments guided operations, which were typified by large-unit sweeps that cleared but then abandoned communities and terrain. Emphasis was on

killing and capturing enemy combatants rather than on engaging the population”. Further, Sepp (2005: 12) argued:

Over time, the Americans improved their counterinsurgency practices in Vietnam, which resulted in viable combined and interagency efforts such as the Vietnamese-led Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support; the Vietnamese Civilian Irregular Defense Groups and Provisional Reconnaissance Units; the U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons; and U.S. military adviser training and employment. These practices, and other Vietnamese-directed programs, came too late to overcome the early ‘Americanization’ of the counterinsurgency and its initially military-dominant strategy focused on enemy forces rather than the Vietnamese people and their government.

Having established the presence of an insurgency, and hence the need for some type of counterinsurgency program to combat it, Sepp’s article then laid out the foundation of the COIN narrative for Iraq. He identified the successful Malayan Emergency and contrasted it with the early failures of the U.S. military in Vietnam and called out the central tenets of COIN practice: population control and attention to their needs and security (Sepp, 2005). Further, he identified the evolution of the U.S. military force in Vietnam, and the “better war” that Abrams had conducted during the closing stages.

With the war now defined as insurgency, a COIN training program running in the theater and the establishment of the better war element of the narrative, the seeds of the COIN story line had become implanted inside the military at the operational and tactical levels. With the narrative established, the COIN advocates could begin the insertion of COIN into the strategic level of the war debate, eventually capturing the strategic discussion and providing one distinct approach to winning the war in Iraq: population centric counterinsurgency.

With the discussion of insurgency and counterinsurgency full engaged within the military structures, the movement of that discussion from the military bureaucracy, the tactical and operational levels of wars, to the strategic level of the National Command Authority was essential for establishing COIN as a hegemonic discourse in U.S. strategic policy and transforming the war from the “American forces stand down as Iraqi security forces stand up” mantra that served as the guidepost for U.S strategy from 2004-2006. Making the current strategy anachronistic, ill-adapted or unsuitable to the task, was required to make the notion of COIN normal and the consensus approach to the transforming the war strategy.

This shift began with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s selection of Phillip Zelikow as an advisor at the State Department and his prompt dispatch on fact finding trips to Iraq (Kaplan, 2013: 193). Zelikow met with then Major General Pete Chiarelli, who’s Division was charged with securing Sadr City. Chiarelli had mapped the incidences of violence against the provision of government services and found that violence and lack of service almost completely overlapped on the map (Chiarelli and Michaelis, 2005: 9). Having read much of the counterinsurgency literature and having discussed the issue with Petraeus multiple times, Chiarelli had oriented the 1st Cavalry Division toward ensuring that water, electricity, and sanitation service was provided (Chiarelli and Michaelis, 2005: 10). Encouraged by Chiarelli’s approach, Zelikow followed up the discussion with Kalev Sepp and H.R. McMaster, both of whom provided Zelikow with the COIN narrative and reinforced Krepinevich’s advocacy of the “oil spot” strategy and clear, hold and build (Kaplan, 2013: 193).

The fact finding trips resulted in parts of the COIN storyline finding its way into Secretary Rice’s testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in October 2005. In her opening statement, Rice stated: “In short, *with the Iraqi government*, our strategy – the key –

is to *clear, hold, and build*: clear areas from insurgent control, hold them securely, and build durable, national Iraqi institutions” (Rice, 2005). Rice referenced McMaster’s offensive in Tal Afar, the clearing and enlargement of secured areas, and the provision of economic development and services as the central elements to the Administration’s strategy (Rice, 2005). Crucially, LTG Odierno was serving as the Joint Staff’s Liaison to the State Department and working with Rice’s team during the 2005-2006 periods (Youssef, 2008). He would move from that assignment to become the Multi National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) commander in charge of implementing Petraeus’s Surge in 2007.

The COIN storyline was now operating at multiple levels with the National Security bureaucracy. Within the Army, COIN permeated the education, training, and doctrine structures, the in-house journal *Military Review*, the COIN friendly *Small Wars Journal* blog site, and at *Company Command.com*. In addition, various military education forums and conferences were filled with COIN based materials produced by Kilcullen, Crane, Nagl, Petraeus, Sepp and others. Secondly, these ideas were now moving into the State Department advisory teams through the news media’s focus on insurgency and counterinsurgency, the co-mingling of advisors in Iraq and Washington, and the arrival of the Washington based think tank advocacy of COIN. Finally, COIN discourse began to creep into the strategic reviews of Iraq strategy and the political debates in Administration.

As noted, after the Al Askari mosque bombing and the unleashing of sectarian violence on a grand scale, all of the major agencies involved in Iraq began reviews of the strategy, including the State Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the National Security Council. For the purposes of this research, the interesting part is that all came to similar conclusions and a

unified response to the war in Iraq.⁴⁵ The second element is the role of the think tanks in pressing for COIN, particularly AEI and their *Choosing Victory in Iraq* study that Jack Kean took to the White House. The slow build of counterinsurgency from U.S. military backwater to the organizing concept of the organization was under way.

In the spring of 2006, the NSC strategy review was kicked off by Stephen Hadley and Meghan O’Sullivan. O’Sullivan sent a memo to Hadley questioning the U.S. strategy of drawing down forces and stating that, given the increased violence across Iraq, that U.S. assumptions were no longer valid (Woodward, 2008: 69). Reflecting the growing COIN consensus, the memo argued that security was paramount and without it, there could be no reconciliation, no disarming of militias, and no transition to Iraq Security Forces (Woodward, 2008: 69). This kick off of the review reflected the basic COIN narrative and the imperative on securing the population. It also directly contradicted the current strategy being pursued by Abizaid and Casey, again reflecting the ways in which COIN discourse was reshaping the contours of the Iraq debate. The NSC would continue its review through the summer and fall of 2006, and be influenced by the COIN discourse coming from the military, the think tank community, and the press. As COIN continued its slow build, the NSC was pushed forward into its adoption.

In the summer of 2006, prodded by Jack Kean, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Peter Pace had convened a select Council of Colonels to conduct a review of Iraq strategy. The group included H.R. McMaster of Tal Afar fame, Pete Mansoor, who would head the Counterinsurgency Center of Excellence at Fort Leavenworth and later serve as Petraeus’s

⁴⁵ I devote little time within this research to the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group. Ultimately this panel had little influence on the overall decision to adopt COIN in 2007, with only minor parts that were mostly forced into the text by Panel Member Charles Robb by most accounts that held out the possibility of more troops. This was used as a fig leaf for the actual decision making process that ran in parallel and was ultimately unconvinced of the possibility of success based on the ISG strategy.

executive officer, as well as representatives from the Marines, Air Force and Navy (Mansoor, 2014: 41). The group concluded that the war was being lost and provided multiple options, the most notable being: Go Big, Go Long, or Go Home (Mansoor, 2014: 45). McMaster backed the Go Big strategy which was the Surge – generate as much force as possible, secure Baghdad, tamp down the sectarian violence, and build out from there. The overall result was to clarify for the Joint Chiefs that the U.S. was losing and that the war needed to be properly defined as a complex insurgency (Gordon and Trainor 2013: 285-286). The other contribution was the outline of the Surge in the Go Big option. While the JCS had made no decisions in the Council of Colonels, the notion of the Surge was planted.

In a parallel effort, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and Jack Kean prepared the *Choosing Victory in Iraq* paper and presentation. Kean's connections inside the Pentagon and ties with both Odierno and Petraeus had provided back channels to determine the number of forces the U.S. could produce to support the war and the plan was developed with this number of troops in mind. The detailed plan included a three phase approach: clear, hold, and build (Kagan, 2006: 1). The plan argued that securing the population was necessary for reconciliation, for building the ISF, for reconstruction and economic growth (Kagan, 2006: 1). In short, it was the COIN discourse turned into an operational strategy that would turn out to be very similar to the actual Surge plan. Beyond that, Kean had access to the Bush Administration through the Vice President's office, and received an audience to not only present the plan, but also to help the Administration choose the next commanders. As such, COIN was now ensconced within the military structures, the National Security Council, had been articulated by Secretary Rice in front of Congress, if not yet enacted, and was now being briefed to the President and Vice President by think tanks in the area.

Finally, *Field Manual 3-24* was released in November 2006, just after the mid-term elections. The conference in February had received significant press coverage, and included the COIN narrative of how to “save Iraq”. Building on the COIN discourse circulating in the media, the military, and within the Beltway, Petraeus, Nagl, Crane, Kilcullen, and the other COINdnistas continued the push for the clear, hold, and build strategy. The conference and the manual’s release were touted by the Army, published by the press and the manual was downloaded more than a million times (Biddle, 2008: 347). COIN had now become the major topic of discussion and was the only strategy that had the star power of Petraeus, the exotic and mystical notions of taming the violence and passions in the Middle East, and the reach into the decision making circles in the military and the Administration to be adopted and executed.

November of 2006 saw the Republicans lose control of the House and Senate, Rumsfeld’s resignation, and the release of *FM 3-24*. By December, Bush had nominated Robert Gates to be the new Secretary of Defense, Petraeus to lead MNF-I, and COIN to be the strategy for securing U.S. ends in Iraq. In January 2007, Bush formally announced the Surge, and included all of the elements of the COIN narrative for fixing the strategy towards Iraq. The military was ramping up COIN training throughout its military education and training systems, simulated Iraq villages where proliferating across military installations, and COIN was the dominant paradigm for military operations. In short, COIN discourse and the COIN narrative had captured the discursive space and the “The New Counterinsurgency Era” had been firmly established (Ucko, 2009).

COIN’s Dominant Moment

The most obvious indicator of the status of counterinsurgency was the Bush announcement of the Surge in January of 2007. Bush’s speech announcing the new strategy

invoked all of the elements of the counterinsurgency narrative, focusing on protecting the population and only mentioning that the future would see Iraq forces hunting down the “killers” plaguing Iraq (Bush, 2007). He argued that American forces would clear neighborhoods of insurgents as they had in the past, but this time would stay to protect the population (Bush, 2007). Provision of services and reconstruction would occur through doubling of Provincial Reconstruction Teams, which closely mirrored the CORDS teams from Vietnam, services would be provided, and the Iraqi government would undertake reforms to bring about reconciliation (Bush, 2007). The announcement provided a mirror image of the COIN narrative and reflected the near total capture of the strategic debate by the COIN advocates and counterinsurgency discourse. COIN as a discourse had garnered symbolic capital and power. It could now shape the terrain upon which future debates would take place and it had established the cognitive schema through which COIN was to be viewed. This form of symbolic power and capital, as Bourdieu (1991) argued, allowed for COIN to feel natural and inevitable, and a strategy apart from the raucous political debate over the wars at that time.

The second indication was the curtailing of General Casey’s tour as MNF-I commander and the appointment of Petraeus as the new commander. Petraeus’s appointment reflected the idea that not only the strategy needed to shift to counterinsurgency, but that only a select few who understood counterinsurgency had the ability to actually execute the task. Petraeus’s headquarters was stacked with hand-picked officers that grasped the COIN concept. Pete Mansoor, with a PhD from Ohio State, was named Petraeus’s Chief of Staff, H.R. McMaster lead Petraeus’s Joint Strategic Assessment Team and Kilcullen served as a COIN advisor to MNF-I. Conversely, General Abizaid retired from Central Command, General Casey and COL Gian

Gentile were reassigned to positions in the institutional army and were both out of the operational force.

A significant indication of COIN dominance was the publication of *FM 3-24* by the University of Chicago Press (Biddle, 2008: 347). Military field manuals rarely, if ever, are published outside of the Government Printing Office and can be downloaded for free. That a university publication arm chose to acquire the rights to publish the COIN manual demonstrates the status that COIN achieved during the 2006-2007 period. Further, David Galula's (2006) work *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* was reprinted by Praeger as part of the PSI Classics of the Counterinsurgency Era. A book that was little known or read when it was first produced in the in the early 1960s, experienced a renaissance in August of 2006 (Marlowe, 2010: 1-2). Nagl wrote the forward to the book and Petraeus added it to the curriculum at the Combined Arms Center (Galula, 2006). Retired Army Vice Chief of Staff Jack Keane recommended that Secretary Rumsfeld read it (Kaplan, 2013: 230). While few had heard of Galula when he was writing the book at Harvard, the reinvigoration of COIN and its emergence as a dominant discourse, had brought the book and its prescriptions out of the shadows and into the mainstream of U.S. military strategy and thought.

The elevation of stability operations within the U.S. military to the same status as combat operations was another indicator of the creeping dominance of the COIN discourse. Department of Defense Directive 3000.05 was signed in November 2005 and was produced nearly in tandem with the Quadrennial Defense Review, that contained a significant section on the need to develop to develop counterinsurgency and security, stability, transition, and reconstruction operations (SSTRO) as part of the strategy to defeat global terrorism (Department of Defense, 2005). These two documents represented a radical change to the military's way of doing business and to the

status of irregular warfare of all types, but particularly for COIN and stability operations. Again, this was representative of the creeping dominance of COIN within the military and the larger national security bureaucracy. That these documents were undertaken under Secretary Rumsfeld, who had banned insurgency from official DoD discourse, is more evidence of COIN's capture of the imagination and strategic discourse within the U.S. The reordering of resources, training bases, equipping strategies, and structures in the midst of two wars is a radical change compared to the generally slow evolution of most changes within the military.

Finally, as Kaplan argues, the promotion to general officer of many of the COIN advocate Colonels, such as Sean McFarland and H.R. McMaster, reflected the acceptance by the Army as an institution of the shift to COIN (Kaplan, 2013: 279-283). Then Colonel H.R. McMaster particularly provided a clear case for the hegemony of COIN, as his brigade's actions in Tal Afar were seen as the model of COIN operations (Tyson, 2006). Further, he was not expected to be promoted to the general officer ranks due to his publication of his dissertation, *Dereliction of Duty*, which was highly critical of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Vietnam era and was widely seen as a barrier to his promotion. Petraeus was even brought back from Iraq to serve as the chair of the promotion board, which was heavily populated by COIN advocates, and resulted in the promotion of several counterinsurgency proponents to senior leadership positions within the U.S. Army (Kaplan, 2013: 282).

Conclusion

As in previous high water marks for counterinsurgency, the Iraq war debate that gave rise to the Surge was determined by COIN's capture of the discursive space. It advocates occupied privileged positions and wielded symbolic power within the discourse; and they used those positions to advocate a particular type of warfare that would produce the "better war" needed to

save the U.S. in Iraq. Petraeus and the COINdnistas were the warrior-scholars, who as Kilcullen argued, not only understood COIN, but were also capable of executing it. COIN was able to move from its confinement within the small community of Special Operations forces, to the focus of the U.S. military and much of the U.S. government. During the Iraq war debate, COIN captured the space and the imagination of the military, parts of academia, the U.S. government, the media, and military experts like no other time in U.S. history. It did so through the positioning of its advocates, by drawing on, redefining and deploying the historical commonplace of Vietnam and the hegemonic analogy of Malaya, romanticizing and mystifying the concept of COIN warfare, and producing a regime of truth around the COIN narrative for a better war. Skillful use of the media, internal military forums and institutions, and external public forums, facilitated this capture, making the notion of COIN normal and the only acceptable option. The rise of counterinsurgency in 2006 captured the discursive space so completely that it remained dominant through the Afghanistan war debate in 2009, a subject that I turn to in the next section.

CHAPTER 6

AFGHANISTAN: COIN CHALLENGED AND CONTINUED

The U.S. Army and other parts of America's defense establishment have become transfixed by the promise of counterinsurgency. Since the surge in Iraq began in February 2007, the panacea of successful counterinsurgencies has become like an all-powerful Svengali, holding hypnotic sway over the minds of many of the nation's military strategists.

Gian P. Gentile, The International Herald Tribune, 5 December 2008

Background

The 2008 presidential campaign included vigorous debate over the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Democratic Party and their standard bearer, Barack Obama focused on drawing a distinction between the “war of choice” in Iraq and the “war of necessity” in Afghanistan. In drawing this distinction, Obama argued that Bush and the Republicans had under resourced the “good war” in Afghanistan in order to support the “bad war” in Iraq.

In addition, 2008 had seen a steep downturn in the U.S. housing market, destabilizing banks burdened with credit defaults swaps and non-performing loans. The collapse of Lehman Brothers and the subsequent financial panic that followed in its wake produced a deep recession and a global financial crisis. As unemployment rose and markets and home prices fell, the GWOT, foreign affairs, and military operations became secondary concerns to much of the U.S. population, as economic concerns displaced war and terrorism as top issues and the memory of the 9/11 attacks lost some of their potency in political debates.

Further, by 2009, the Surge in Iraq had ended, a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) had been signed, and U.S. forces had begun a gradual withdrawal from Iraq. In contrast, the benchmarks measuring progress in Afghanistan were judged to be moving in the wrong direction

from a U.S. and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) perspective. As such, President Obama ordered a review of Afghanistan strategy to be led by Bruce Riedel, a retired Central Intelligence Agency officer and Senior Fellow at the Washington-based think tank, the Brookings Institution. The strategy review generated a series of recommendations for Afghanistan and Pakistan. The first of which was “Executing and resourcing an integrated civilian-military counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan” (Riedel, 2009: 2). With Afghan elections set for the fall of 2009 and upon concurrence from the principals on his national security team, President Obama ordered the deployment of 21,000 additional U.S. forces to provide security, bringing the total number of U.S. forces up to approximately 68,000 (Gates, 2014: 342).

In addition, the U.S. commander of ISAF, General David McKiernan, was relieved from command shortly after the release of the report and replaced by General Stanley McChrystal, a career Special Forces officer who led the Joint Special Operations Command in Iraq. The replacement of McKiernan was the first time that a commanding general had been relieved during wartime since the Korean War era replacement of Douglas MacArthur by President Truman. In announcing the replacement, Secretary Gates said it was not that he had done something wrong but that a fresh set of eyes and ideas were required to generate new U.S. momentum in the war (Gates, 2014: 346). It was widely reported that the relief was undertaken specifically to bring in McChrystal, an officer that it was argued understood counterinsurgency and could execute the new strategy (Chandrasekaran, 2009A: para 31).

As with Iraq in 2006, the emergence of COIN in the Afghan context had claimed the command of a senior Army commander who was deemed too conventional, a COIN advocate was brought in to replace him, and a massive increase in the number of U.S. forces, nearly

double the number that were part of the Iraq surge, were ultimately deployed to Afghanistan in order to protect the population, train Afghan security forces, clear, hold, and build areas in the country and spread like inkblots to bring security, stability, and the space for political reconciliation in Afghanistan (McChrystal, 2009: 421). That this occurred under President Obama, who campaigned for president on the need for “nation building at home,” the war weariness of the American people, and the need to move off of a permanent war footing is another reflection of the thorough hegemonic status of the COIN discourse during the time period of 2006-2011. Even when considered within a broader political context, in which the U.S. Democratic Party is historically seen as weaker on national security and under political pressure to demonstrate their “toughness,” there is limited evidence that Obama felt this pressure or that it applied in the Afghan context.⁴⁶ Indeed, much political commentary focused on the “war weariness” of the American public and Obama stated directly to Secretary Gates and Admiral Mullen that, “On Afghanistan, my poll numbers will be stronger if I take issue with the military over Afghanistan policy” (Gates, 2014: 378). As such, the notion of political pressure forcing the President to deploy troops seems non-applicable in this case. Indeed, Rahm Emmanuel and Gates both acknowledged the difficult political maneuvering it would require to get a more Democratic Party dominated Congress to accept the moves and get public acceptance of the decision (Gates, 2014: 380 and 383)

This chapter will empirically map the ways in which COIN discourse continued its reign during the Afghan war debate of 2009 and its continued ability to make COIN again appear as the common sense approach and all other options to seem non-operable, strange, and out of place within the debate. Again, I follow the geostrategic reasoning framework of the previous

⁴⁶ See Alan Wolfe, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Threat*, Boston, South End Press: 1984 for one example.

chapters, tracing the ways in which the key actors are produced in the debate discourse, identifying the ways in which key analogies and commonplaces are deployed to legitimize particular strategies and delimit choices, the mysticism that surrounds COIN and the ways in which it enters the strategy debate, and finally, highlighting the COIN narrative and the ways in which disparate groups that influence the strategy debate call on that narrative to (re)produce COIN's hegemonic status.

Subject Positioning and Symbolic Power in the Afghan War Debate

As noted before, the more dominant a discourse becomes, the more power and influence advocates of that discourse have in the debates of the day, and as always, discourse is contingent, situated, and operates within a particular context. The subjects produced in the Afghan war debate were in large part products of the Iraq War debate, the Surge, and the narrative of the Surge that operated in the years after its completion. As the Surge was widely covered as having drawn Iraqis back from the precipice and for having dramatically reduced the sectarian violence, those who advocated it were lauded, while those opposed were further marginalized.⁴⁷ In addition, the Surge served as validation of counterinsurgency theory; a “proof of concept” as John Nagl termed it (Nagl, 2014: 164). As such, the voice, authority, and symbolic power of Petraeus and the COINdinitas were amplified and the military establishment had moved from the grudging acceptance of COIN in 2006, to the full throated advocates of 2009.

Petraeus, the embodiment of the COIN discourse, obviously profited from the Surge and the reduction of violence in Iraq throughout his period as MNF-I commander. As highlighted earlier, during the Iraq war debates, Petraeus was feted as the “savior general” and the “man who

⁴⁷ There are a number of places to see this conclusion. Among them a Bloomberg article by Kim Chipman and Juliana Goldman title “Obama says Iraq Surge success beyond ‘Wildest Dreams’” from September 4, 2008, *The Surge* by Dr. Pete Mansoor, Fred Kaplan’s *The Insurgents* and other media. Obviously, the debate has reopened with the rise of IS and the collapse of the Iraqi Army in Mosul in July 2014.

could save Iraq”. The Surge solidified that positioning, as Petraeus was now, not only the man who could save Iraq, but was the man who did save Iraq, as well as the man who saved the U.S. from a humiliating withdrawal from Iraq and the consequences of an unstable Iraq spilling violence over its borders into neighboring countries. Bob Woodward argued that Petraeus “had almost redefined the notion of warfare, authoring the new *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* and implementing it in Iraq” and that a “new kind of soldier in the Petraeus mold had to be a social worker, urban planner, anthropologist and psychologist” (Woodward, 2010: 15). With the popular narrative that the Surge had saved Iraq established, Petraeus’s position as the most preeminent military leader of the age and miracle worker effectively reinforced his authority to speak about the war and create the common sense about how the war in Afghanistan could, likewise, be pulled from the brink of defeat and put on the path towards a successful conclusion.

Another of the COINdinistas, John Nagl, saw his positioning and symbolic capital further buttressed by the seeming success of the Surge in Iraq. As a prominent COIN advocate and key member of the warrior-scholars that followed in Petraeus’s wake, his profile had grown throughout the Surge as well. As noted, his retirement from the Army had been referenced in the *Washington Post* and he had moved into a position with a prominent Washington, D.C. based think tank, the Center for New American Security or CNAS (Ricks, 2008: para 7). CNAS was founded and run by Michelle Flournoy, an attendee at the COIN Field Manual conference at Fort Leavenworth in 2006. Flournoy hired Nagl, who was then promoted to President of CNAS after Flournoy was appointed to the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy after Obama won the 2008 presidential elections, one of the most important political appointments in the Department of Defense. CNAS had become known as President Obama’s favorite think tank and was a fount for COIN under Flournoy and then Nagl. As the president, Nagl was now a frequent writer of

influential opinion pieces and served as an expert witness at Congressional hearings on the subject of the wars.

With this new position and the success of the Surge, Nagl's reach and influence increased as he was no longer constrained by his membership in the Armed Forces and his status as counterinsurgency expert was solidified by the Surge. Further, his position was further buttressed by the production of think tank "fellows" as policy experts, a notion that was, and is, widely shared among the media and the general public. In addition, his relationship to Flournoy and the CNAS reputation as Obama's favorite think tank gave Nagl reach into the decision making entities that surrounded the President and that were guiding policy and strategy towards the newly restyled Afghanistan-Pakistan (AFPAK) region.

Indeed, Nagl had tremendous access to decision-makers within the Administration and in the Department of Defense. He was asked to be a member of McChrystal's assessment team, but declined due to the administrative requirements of serving as the CNAS president. However, he was able to hand pick a replacement, Andrew Exum, a U.S. Army veteran finishing his doctoral degree and fellow COINdiniasta (Nagl, 2014: 192).⁴⁸ In addition, Nagl was "invited to the White House" to convince the Administration's lead COIN skeptic, Vice President Biden, "by explaining that counterterrorism by itself would do nothing," and that "it was necessary to resource improvements in governance, economic development, and the provision of services to the population to persuade Afghans not to support a Taliban insurgency that promised it would do all those things if it regained power" (Nagl, 2014: 194). In a demonstration of the hold COIN discourse had taken over geostrategic policy making in the U.S., Kaplan described Nagl in

⁴⁸ Exum was a former Army Ranger and served with Special Forces units in Afghanistan and other parts of the Middle East. He received his PhD from King's College and ran a blog site focused on insurgencies. As of May 2015, Dr. Exum was the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Middle East Policy.

2004 as arriving at the Pentagon and roaming the hallways in search of people who would listen to his argument for COIN and its requirements (Kaplan, 2013: 91). Now, approximately four years later, Nagl was invited to the White House to debate the Vice President for 90 minutes on the merits of COIN versus the down sides of CT. This provided a prime indication of the degree to which COIN had become embedded in the foreign policy establishment of Washington D.C.'s discourse, and the ways in which those associated with it were given privileged positions to speak in the Afghan war debate.

In short, Petraeus and Nagl, two of the central figures in bringing COIN to prominence in the 2006 debate over the Iraq war, were now centrally positioned to influence the Afghan war debate. Petraeus, as the CENTCOM commander, would be in the internal debates and discussions. Nagl, the COIN expert and think tank leader would be carrying the message to Capitol Hill, select White House and DoD engagements, the press, academia, and in debates with COIN skeptics, such as Gian Gentile.

The other prominent COIN advocate in the context of the Afghan War debate was General Stanley McChrystal. McChrystal was a central figure in the Afghan war debate and prominent COIN advocate. Introduced as the Special Forces leader who had revolutionized the hunt for high value targets in Iraq, McChrystal was produced in the Petraeus mode. In his introduction, the *New York Times* identified him as being “known for operating on a few hours sleep and for running to and from work while listening to audio books on an iPod,” and that “he usually eats just one meal a day, in the evening, to avoid sluggishness” (Blumiller and Mazzeti, 2009: para 1-2). Further, coming from the Joint Special Operations Command and having spent the majority of his career in Special Forces assignments, McChrystal’s “ascetic” habits and classified background, easily captured the imagination of the press (Thomas, 2009: para 9).

Perhaps more importantly, in his initial introduction, McChrystal was categorized by former colleagues at the Council on Foreign Relations as “a warrior-scholar, comfortable with diplomats, politicians,” military forces, intelligence agencies and the FBI, granting him position and power in the debate (Bumiller and Mazzetti, 2009: para 3). His fusion of those entities into the JSOC operation in Iraq won wide acclaim, with Bob Woodward arguing that McChrystal’s special operations units and the CIA, DIA and FBI fusion centers were central to Surge’s success (Woodward, 2008: para 9). So from the beginning, McChrystal was linked in multiple ways to the COIN advocates and the Surge in Iraq. He was another of the “warrior scholars” who understood the new ways of war and could share the credit for the decreasing violence that Petraeus and the Surge were widely credited with achieving in Iraq. Indeed, when discussing why General David McKiernan was relieved in favor of McChrystal, a Pentagon official argued that you could blame Petraeus, as he “redefined in his tour in Iraq what it means to be a commanding general” and that the next ISAF commander must be “adroit at international politics,” “a skilled diplomat,” and “savvy with the press” (Chandrasekaran, 2009A: para 13).⁴⁹ In short order, McChrystal was placed in this same subject position, with CFR members arguing he met those new commander requirements: a scholar with tours at Harvard and as a CFR fellow and comfortable with diplomats and politicians. With Petraeus the model and new standard for what a commander should be and be capable of doing, McChrystal’s introduction to the wider foreign policy, military, and domestic audience indicated that he too should occupy a similar position and his views be accorded a similar weighting when discussing the Afghan war strategy.

⁴⁹ Ironically, according to Rajiv Chandrasekaran of the *Washington Post*, McKiernan was focused on the maintenance of the alliance, and met “almost daily” with European delegations to attempt to relax some of the restrictions placed on European forces in Afghanistan – seemingly a recognition of the need to be “adroit at international politics”.

While McChrystal was produced in that Petraeus inspired warrior scholar and COIN advocate role, the serving ISAF commander occupied a different subject position. General David McKiernan led ISAF from the summer of 2008 until his relief and replacement by McChrystal in June of 2009, again, becoming the first U.S. war time commander to be relieved since Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War. However, unlike MacArthur, Secretary of Defense Bob Gates stated that McKiernan had done nothing wrong, instead that with a new strategy, “fresh eyes” were needed to implement the new strategy and determine its requirements (Tyson, 2009: para 2). Indeed, McKiernan was deemed too slow to act and too much of a traditional military officer. Gates and Admiral Mike Mullen, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, had been unimpressed with McKiernan’s plan to integrate civilian and military personnel into the action plan and, with President Obama’s announcement in March 2009 of the way forward in Afghanistan, the expansion of military operations to “a more comprehensive counterinsurgency effort,” required a new commander (Chandrasekaran, 2009A: para 27). This new commander, as Kilcullen had argued during the Surge debate, needed not only to understand COIN, but to also have the skill to execute it (Kilcullen, 2006: 31).

As with Casey and Westmoreland, McKiernan was cast as the traditional military general that might be able to grasp counterinsurgency, but could not implement and lead it.⁵⁰ This position was juxtaposed with Petraeus and McChrystal, who were cast as “skilled practitioners of counterinsurgency strategy,” and along with Lieutenant General David Rodriguez, who would take on a role in Afghanistan similar to Odierno’s role in Iraq, as having “played influential roles in internal discussions about Obama’s new Afghanistan strategy”

⁵⁰ Ironically, Casey had established the COIN Academy in Iraq due to a feeling that the Army was not training COIN fast enough to support his requirements, Westmoreland established the CORDS program in 1967 that Abrams would unify under the One War concept, and McKiernan was praised by Petraeus for adopting COIN strategies.

(Chandrasekaran, 2009A: para 31). As such, COIN discourse continued to produce those individuals who could influence war strategy decision making and sideline those who were not COIN advocates. While McKiernan had acted to boost the number of troops and get NATO forces more involved in COIN operations, his casting as a tradition bound armor officer produced the notion that he was incapable of leading COIN operations. Conversely, the warrior-scholar McChrystal was a “skilled” COIN practitioner despite not having ever lead COIN operations. He had indeed been part of the development of the intelligence fusion model that had dramatically increased the tempo of Special Forces raids in Iraq, but had not lead the “hearts and minds” and population security operations of the Surge. Ironically, his job, as Woodward (2008) noted, was to remove the irreconcilables from the Iraq battlefield, a notion somewhat removed from the notions of the kinder, gentler war of counterinsurgency and more in line with the counterterrorism strategy that would contest COIN hegemony in the Afghan war debate.

As with Iraq and Vietnam, how subjects were produced and their symbolic capital was a critical element in determining what strategy would eventually be adopted in Afghanistan. Petraeus’s legend had grown with the Surge in Iraq and his authority to speak on what was needed to “fix” another flailing war effort would be heavily weighted. Further, as analytical pieces by national security reporters in the *New York Times* (Bumiller and Mazzetti, 2009) and *Washington Post* (Chandrasekaran, 2009A) noted, he had produced the new model for generalship in the 21st century: the warrior scholar who was politically and media savvy, and who had the necessary skills to execute the Pentagon’s new way of war, COIN. This “new model of generalship” is assuredly a debatable point. However, with regard to the positioning of actors within the debate over COIN, two of the largest newspapers in the world, introduced McChrystal to the broader public in this way. These were not opinion columns, with highly

partisan writers, but by the reporting staff that covered these issues. Regardless of one's view of the degree of partisanship or ideological commitments of journalists, for the broad cross section of the country, these pieces began the discursive work of detailing how McChrystal fit within the debate space of the Afghan War to a mass audience.⁵¹

McChrystal fit the Petraeus model as an adroit COIN operator and warrior scholar, who had spent time at Harvard and as a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, producing the academic and foreign policy credentials considered necessary for success. In addition, he was cast as understanding the political requirements of the new way of war, and deemed to have the ability to interact successfully with diplomats and politicians, a requirement in the resource and long duration COIN conflicts of (post) modern warfare. His special operations background provided the romanticized and mystifying elements to his resume and, perhaps most importantly, McChrystal was linked to the Surge through his leadership of the JSOC task force that killed Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi and was credited with capturing or killing numerous leaders and bomb making cells in Iraq during the Surge.

As such, the dominance of COIN discourse within the military and the national security bureaucracy had generated the production of leaders of the new strategy, positioned them to influence what that strategy might become and had prompted the removal of a General in charge of a theater of war, not for wrong doing, but for not being an adept COIN practitioner. This subject positioning and symbolic power was reflective of the continued dominance of COIN across the Department of Defense and served to move dissenters further to the sidelines within the military. This positioning was critical to understanding the ways in which COIN dominated

⁵¹ The intent here is not to illustrate that McChrystal was or was not reflective of a "new generalship but instead demonstrate how his biography was introduced to a mass audience.

the months-long debate over the strategy in Afghanistan and the uniformity of recommendations that were brought forward as strategic options for turning around the war.

The Afghan War Debate Analogies and Commonplaces

While the Iraq war strategy debate drew heavily on the Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam War, legitimizing the strategic shift in Afghanistan called on Vietnam and the OIF Surge. With the military heavily invested in moving toward institutionalizing COIN along the lines of *FM 3-24* and the Surge campaign, the narrative of the Surge's success served as a discursive space that the advocates would attempt to (re) define and put to work in legitimizing particular courses of action for Afghanistan. In addition, Vietnam would again arise and provoke a discursive struggle to define the "better war" possibilities for Afghanistan against the "lessons in disaster" that the Vietnam War, operating as a commonplace, continues to occupy in most discussions of the use of military force by the U.S.

The discursive struggle to define these spaces was not only critical to legitimizing the COIN strategy for Afghanistan, but also for determining the forms in which it would take. This is reflective of the contingent nature of discourse(s) and the resistance to even hegemonic or dominant discourses that are in operation at a particular point in time. Stabilizing meaning and the discursive space during a debate determines what courses of action will be followed and requires undertaking discursive work to capture and maintain that space for periods of time. COIN's capture of the geostrategic debate space during the Surge continued into the Afghan war strategy debate, but it faced resistance and challenge in maintaining its hegemony. COIN's ability to withstand and overcome the challenge to its dominance was reflective of its strength, but also illustrated the ways in which these discursive challenges (re)configure and condition actions. These conditions will become apparent in the sections that follow.

Rhetorical Commonplaces: A Better War or a Lesson in Disaster

As with the majority of war strategy decisions, the drawing of analogies continued apace in the debate over the Afghan war, and the struggle to define those commonplaces to legitimize particular strategies was central to the long running Presidential review conducted over the course of 2009. While Riedel's initial strategic review had established COIN as the framework from which the Obama Administration would operate, senior advisors admitted that they didn't understand what that meant when the strategy was announced (Chandrasekaran, 2009B: para 6). The military by contrast argued that "when they said COIN, we thought they meant COIN" (Chandrasekaran, 2009B: para 46). As such, when the troop request of 40,000 came in with McChrystal's assessment in August of 2009, the Administration blanched at the figure and began a series of strategic reviews that would last for approximately three months. A pillar of those discussions centered on what lessons could be learned from the Vietnam War, and the very different notions associated with that question. As opposed to the Vietnam War producing a transcendent set of "lessons", those "lessons" are instead arenas of debate that are constantly challenged and redefined. The Afghan War debate saw Vietnam continue its siren song during the war debate, with McGeorge Bundy's *Lessons in Disaster* (Goldstein, 2009) and Lewis Sorley's *A Better War* (2007) competing for centrality in influencing the direction of the war.

The parallels of the Vietnam War began early in the Obama Administration as John Barry of *Newsweek* published the article "Could Afghanistan be Obama's Vietnam?" (Barry, 2009). The parallels of a Democratic president struggling with the decision to send forces to war in Asia were irresistible to media outlets and were reflective of the Vietnam War commonplace's significant currency in U.S. strategic debates. As with Vietnam, Afghanistan had a weak central government, was divided between North and South, had insurgent safe havens across nation-state

borders that were difficult for U.S. forces to eliminate or mitigate the impact of, tremendously difficult terrain that limited the effectiveness of some major U.S. weapons systems, an insurgent force hardened by decades of war, and a government widely perceived as corrupt and ineffective (see Johnson and Mason, *Military Review*, November-December 2009 for more of the parallels). Barry's work sketched out the nature of these challenges and the question of strategy a young, newly elected President would follow, drawing the specter of Obama being drawn more deeply into a war that he could not extricate himself from if the war effort continued to deteriorate. Barry (2009: para 24) argued that by the 2010 mid-terms, if the war had not demonstrated success, Obama would face Congressional members attempting to distance themselves from "Obama's war".

Similar to the Iraq debate, the COIN advocates could use the notion of the Vietnam War to reflect both elements of the Vietnam War lessons narrative. First, the war was a disaster because it was fought as a conventional, firepower focused war that never got the "inputs" right. Second, there was better war to be had, if the decision was made to employ a COIN strategy. As such, once again, the Vietnam War lessons commonplace/analogy could support both elements of the COIN narrative. The difference for Afghanistan was the degree to which Kaplan's (2013) "small band" of COINdinistas advocacy had captured all of DoD like the "all powerful Svengali" Gentile described (Gentile, 2008: para 1).

Within the military bureaucracy, the Vietnam analogy was consistently defined in the terms of the "better war" fought under Abrams after the 1968 Tet Offensive. This linkage was clearly drawn during the drafting of *FM 3-07 Stability Operations*. This manual was a companion doctrinal manual to *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency*, and as with the COIN manual, it too was vetted by other government agencies, academics, and NGOs involved in providing relief

in war torn areas. Lieutenant General Caldwell, now the CAC commander, in a summer of 2008 *Military Review* article stated, this will “mark the first doctrine of any type to undergo a comprehensive joint, service, interagency, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental review” and reflected the “conflict transformation,” where “battles and engagements fought by armies devoid of population” had been replaced by wars in which the “allegiance, trust, and confidence of the population will be the final arbiters of success” (Caldwell, 2008: 2). This continued the institutionalization of COIN precepts and theoretical commitments, and linked them to the “lessons” of the “better war” of the late Vietnam era.

Indeed, Caldwell argued that with Vietnam, the U.S. had failed to capture those lessons and had paid the price for that failure in Iraq and Afghanistan, stating “that in a cruel twist of fate, the answers we so desperately sought in recent years were collecting dust on the bookshelves half a world away; the distant lessons of a remarkably successful Vietnam-era civil-military program sat largely forgotten, save by those few who had lived those experiences” (2008: 56). Caldwell was referencing the CORDS program, a program that featured in a prominent vignette in *FM 3-24* and that was the basis for the PRT/civilian surge that was part of both Surge I in Iraq and Surge II in Afghanistan.

Caldwell continued to define the better Vietnam War commonplace, arguing that despite his recognition of the value of CORDS program in 1967, “Westmoreland chose to pursue a strategy of attrition rather than leverage the constructive capabilities of his forces to launch a pacification campaign like the one that would prove so successful under General Creighton Abrams” (Caldwell, 2008: 59).⁵² Therefore, the Vietnam War, as with Iraq, was used to bolster the case for counterinsurgency in Afghanistan by arguing that critics of the war were correct, an

⁵² This notion of war by attrition would serve to support the COIN narrative specifically for Afghanistan, as the alternative of a Counterterrorism strategy was essentially an attrition based strategy using drones and SOF raids.

attrition based counterterrorism strategy that neglected the security of the population would not produce results, as with General Westmoreland. At the same time it held out the promise of employing the “remarkably successful lessons” of the better war that could be had (Caldwell, 2008: 57). Again, serving to wrong foot critics that argued that Afghanistan was another Vietnam, the COIN supporters could again employ the Vietnam commonplace constructed during the Iraq debate to demonstrate how both sides were correct. The current strategy was indeed a “lesson in disaster” but a shift to the right inputs, a focus on securing the population and employing the clear, hold and build of COIN would get you the better war of the Abrams era in Vietnam.

Caldwell in discussing Westmoreland’s failure to apply the appropriate strategy also served to bolster the notion of the savior general and the particular ability of some to execute COIN. While Abrams and the savior of a later “better war,” Petraeus, could do so, Westmoreland, Casey, and McKiernan could not. This notion reflects the ways in the better war of Vietnam and Iraq, as commonplaces, served to condition actions. Not only did the strategy shift to a large COIN effort, but the General in charge was relieved of command.

The better war lessons of Vietnam continued with Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who had quickly gained a reputation as one of the better Defense Secretaries of recent times taking up this line of argument. Speaking to Kansas State University’s Landon Lecture series, Gates argued that the history of the Vietnam conflict was “constructive, if uncomfortable” (2007). “After first pursuing a strategy based on conventional military firepower, the United States shifted course and began a comprehensive, integrated program of pacification, civic action, and economic development,” Creighton Abrams had successfully implemented that

strategy and by “the time U.S. troops were pulled out, the CORDS program had helped pacify most of the hamlets in the South Vietnam” (Gates, 2007).

The Vietnam War and its lessons, defined in this way reinforced the COIN strategy for Afghanistan: more troops, more civilian experts, and better generals who understood this type of warfare could and would produce victory if given the opportunity. Indeed, in many ways, it was reflective of the other “better war” Nagl (2002) described in his review of the Malayan Emergency, a war going off track that is righted by a “savior general” that then applies the appropriate lessons: one of population-centric counterinsurgency; a demonstration of the consistency of COIN discourse in (post) modern conflicts and strategy debates.⁵³

This understanding of Vietnam moved from military circles into the mainstream press, as the attempt to (re) produce the lessons of Vietnam continued apace. In a *Newsweek* article, McChrystal was identified as reading Sorley’s *A Better War* (2007) and the article further noted that Sorley’s book was getting a lot of attention during the Afghanistan war debate, quoting a Senior Defense Official as saying that in following Sorley’s thesis, the reporter was “on to something” (*Newsweek*, 2009: para 2-3). Further, the article reproduces the better war narrative, stating that initially, the Americans pursued a “misbegotten” strategy of search and destroy and that not until “Creighton Abrams replaced General William Westmoreland as U.S. Commander in 1968 did the Americans smarten up and begin to fight a true counterinsurgency, focusing on protecting the population by a strategy of “clear and hold” (*Newsweek*, 2009: para 7). Abrams further built up local forces until with American air support they could withstand the 1972 NVA Easter Offensive. This notion reproduced key points of the counterinsurgency narrative and redrew the Vietnam War lessons to legitimize that reading of history. With Vietnam parallels

⁵³ In the sense, the Malayan Emergency as a hegemonic analogy of what a COIN war should be continued to operate despite being displaced by the recent Iraq Surge.

proliferating in the press and punditry, COIN advocates were able to again demonstrate the folly and the hope of the Vietnam War. Folly was to attempt to win by enemy attrition, the better path was to employ the “smarter generals” and the right population centric counterinsurgency strategy to achieve success. Indeed, *Newsweek* asserted that the “real lesson” of Vietnam was that counterinsurgency wars “can produce victories if presidents resist the temptation to fight wars halfway or on the cheap” (*Newsweek*, 2009: para 6).

As the attempted legitimization of COIN in Afghanistan continued apace, the better Vietnam War lessons continued to move in appearances of COIN advocates. In this way, it served as shorthand through which advocates could call on the Vietnam commonplace to evoke the larger narrative of the better war and the requirements to meet that war. John Nagl’s submitted testimony to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations was entitled “A ‘Better War’ in Afghanistan” (2009A). Once again, reflecting the notion of the better war and the lesson that the war could be won if it were comprehensive in scope and resourced appropriately, he argued for a surge of troops to establish security in the now familiar, clear, hold and build strategy. This would be augmented by an increased focus on the training of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), which would eventually take over security for U.S. forces, in a process similar to the Vietnamization of the Abrams era of the Vietnam War (Nagl, 2009).

Nagl’s testimony was derived from an article he had written for *Joint Forces Quarterly* (November 2010), which circulated these notions throughout the military, think tank, and parts of academia.

To be certain COIN advocates had the advantage of working from within the dominant discourse of counterinsurgency in the context of its post Iraq Surge fame, however, in the Afghan war debate, a second reading of Vietnam mounted a challenge to the “better war” lesson

of Vietnam. In what the *Wall Street Journal* titled “a battle of two books,” many Obama advisors were harvesting the lessons of Vietnam from *Lessons in Disaster*, a book about the lessons that McGeorge Bundy had learned from his Vietnam experience with Kennedy and Johnson (Speigel and Weisman, 2009).⁵⁴ Bundy argued that the lessons of Vietnam are that one should not deploy troops in pursuit of indeterminate ends and, famously, that “Conviction without Rigor” is a strategy for disaster (Goldstein, 2009: 144). In this reading, Vietnam was a “disaster” in that the end state that the troops were to achieve was never accurately articulated and was instead determined by a perceived need to look tough in pushing back against communist expansion in Southeast Asia. This reading, dovetailing with McMaster’s (1998) *Dereliction of Duty* thesis, was that the failure was one of process, approving troop deployments without first determining the strategy and its potential for success. As Jonathan Alter (2009: para 2) argued, *Lessons in Disaster* became required reading in the Obama White House and served as the basis for the extended debate over the McChrystal troop request.

As such, in looking at the lessons of Vietnam as operationalized for the Afghan War debate, the “better war” lessons that were significant parts of the COIN discourse during the Iraq Surge, continued to structure the debate over Afghanistan. The new element of the storyline was the incorporation of Bundy’s “lessons” that permitted the Vietnam War to be drawn on in the context of a “hardnosed” look at America’s strategic and vital interests, before determining the troops required to meet that vital interest. The (re) defining of the Vietnam War for this strategy debate therefore was influential in two respects. It continued to provide the discursive resources for COIN, by establishing that the “search and destroy” tactics of the early years of Afghanistan,

⁵⁴ The Peter Speigel and Jonathan Weisman of the *Wall Street Journal* further argued that the Washington, D.C book shelves had been emptied of Goldstein’s “recently released paperback edition” and that the Georgetown Barnes and Noble said all its remaining copies were on hold for buyers.

like Iraq and Vietnam, were not enough to win the war. Since the U.S. “could not kill its way out of the war,” it needed to turn to the better war of COIN, like Abrams did in Vietnam and Petraeus did in Iraq. This argument would provide the basis for responding to the notion of a counterterrorism strategy, which would essentially be a Special Operations and drone campaign against Al Qaeda and other high value targets, or an attempt to dismantle Al Qaeda through attrition. Secondly, for the war sceptics, the “Lessons in Disaster” rules of rigorous examination of the strategic end states prior to determining troop numbers extended the debate over the course of 2009.

The result was that while COIN established the parameters of the debate, the lessons in disaster rules conditioned its path to conclusion. One was an argument for war strategy and one was an argument for strategy review process. Both were legitimized in the context of the Afghan War debate, and while COIN became the only operational strategy deemed possible to deny Al Qaeda safe haven in Afghanistan, it could only continue its dominance after a long examination by the White House, the Defense Department, the State Department, and the National Security Council and with stipulations that would ultimately lead to its loss of hegemony in the period after 2009.

Indeed, as discussed above, COIN ultimately was forced to co-opt additional elements into its strategic discourse in the context of the debate. In effect, three alternatives were debated: the CT strategy championed by the Vice President, the McChrystal COIN strategy, and the Gates focused COIN strategy that removed a brigade from the deployment list and focused on developing key ministries in the central government versus the development of a strong central government (Gates, 2014: 374-375). In this option, COIN would operate in the south and the east along the Afghan-Pakistan border, while the training mission would focus on the ANSF and

the security based ministries of the Afghan central government (Gates, 2014: 374-375). In reality, these options were largely the same and required similar troop numbers, as the focused COIN strategy sought to bring additional ISAF forces to make up for the fewer American forces. As noted above, the move to include the timeline reflect the first destabilization of COIN hegemony, but as will be argued below was co-opted into the COIN narrative to maintain its stability as the “common sense” approach to dealing with the Afghan war.

The Surge

The “better war narrative” and COIN were greatly aided by the Iraq Surge. Much as Petraeus, Nagl, and the COINdinistas were elevated by the perceived success of the Surge in Iraq, so to was the notion of counterinsurgency as palliative for an ailing war in Afghanistan. Senator John McCain, the Republican presidential nominee in 2008 and member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, argued that “while Vietnam may appear to have some parallels to Afghanistan, the better comparison is Iraq, where many of the same commanders now managing the Afghan war learned the value of surging more troops into the battle zone” (Spiegel and Weisman, 2009: para 5).

Petraeus (2009A) in a speech as part of the Landon Lecture Series at Kansas State University highlighted the statistics of the Surge’s success, citing the decrease in the number of daily attacks, successful elections, and the decimation of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). He went on to argue that “while the popular understanding is that it was the surge commonly seen as the U.S. sending 30,000 or so more combat troops into Iraq,” in fact the surge “should be understood more broadly as not just a commitment of more troops but as the accompanying surge and employment of counterinsurgency principles as well” (Petraeus, 2009A). As such, the war in Iraq had turned on the employment of COIN as the operational strategy, not in the tactical

insertion of more troops. The “focus first and foremost on securing and serving the population” had “led to and reinforced the implementation of another counter-insurgency concept, the fostering of reconciliation” (Petraeus, 2009A).

The Surge analogy was then defining the path forward for how the war in Afghanistan could and would be saved. The notion that the war had been under resourced, i.e. did not have enough troops due to the war in Iraq had been a major element of the 2008 presidential campaign, helping set the stage for the injection of additional forces into the war. Further the Surge in Iraq, and its positioning as “proof of concept,” established that it was not just surging the forces into Iraq, but employing them in line with counterinsurgency principles (Nagl, 2014). In addition, as McCain argued, it was not just the number of forces that would be increased, and it was not just that those Surge forces would be employed in line with COIN principles, but the war effort would also be overseen by the savior of the Iraq War, General Petraeus at CENTCOM, and executed by another “counterinsurgency expert” in General McChrystal who was handpicked to lead ISAF and the war effort. From Abrams, to Petraeus, and now McChrystal, the failing war in Afghanistan was now in line to receive its savior general.

As with Iraq, the ways in which a problem is defined delimits the options available to serve as solutions. The “better war” narrative, operating through the Vietnam War and Iraq Surge, served to define the problem with the war in Afghanistan. It was an under resourced, forgotten war in the wake of the Iraq effort. More importantly, it was being fought incorrectly and not in accordance with COIN principles and the “transformation of war” that Caldwell argued had occurred in his article introducing *FM 3-07* (Caldwell, 2009). Finally, it was being led by a staid, traditional Army general, who while he may have understood COIN, could not execute it. Therefore, analogous to Iraq in 2006, Afghanistan needed three things: new

leadership, a COIN strategy, and more forces. The Surge and the Vietnam War served to reinforce these notions and drive the legitimization of COIN as the preferred strategy in dealing with another flailing war effort.

The next sections will briefly review the ways in which COIN retained its mystical status, the Afghan COIN narrative, the strategic review and the ways in which these elements reflected the commonplaces drawn on to solidify COIN's status as a hegemonic discourse and the only viable option for the Afghan war in 2009.

Myths and Legends Again

As with Iraq, and congruous with the hegemony that all things COIN maintained during the 2009 debate, the mysticism of COIN generally, and figures such as T.E. Lawrence specifically, continued to influence the ways in which COIN as a strategy was debated. This continued in four primary ways: first, in the notion of the kinder, gentler war for the minds of Afghans; second, the continued romanticism of COIN wars of the past and mythologized figures such as T.E. Lawrence; third, in "special" requirements for COIN forces; and, finally, in the linkage of the "best and brightest" to COIN.

As noted above, in redefining the commonplace of Vietnam and the "better war" narrative that was put to work to legitimize the surge in Iraq and Afghanistan, much of the discourse revolved around the notion of the "surge of ideas" (Petraeus in Mansoor, 2013: x). It was not just the manpower that was deployed in the form of forces in Iraq, but the ways in which they were employed. In Vietnam, Abrams did not receive additional forces and instead oversaw a gradual reduction through the Vietnamization program. It was the way in which these forces were put to use, securing the population and providing the "breathing space" for reconciliation

and the development of the host nation security forces that drove the supposed “transformations” of the war, and the potential for U.S. success.

Admiral Mullen, in testimony to the Senate, used the exact phraseology of the Iraq Surge, in arguing that the increased forces would provide the security necessary to produce the “breathing space” that the Afghan government needed to ensure that it would no longer serve as a safe haven for Al Qaeda militants (Dreazen and Spiegel, 2009: para 6). Indeed, McChrystal’s report further defined the COIN principles of protecting the population, arguing that the population of Afghanistan, contrary to popular thought, in fact had a sense of national identity, and wanted their government to provide basic services (McChrystal, 2009: 2-4). The population represented “many things in this conflict – an audience, an actor, and a source of leverage – but above all they are the objective” (McChrystal, 2009: 2-4). The reasons they chose to support the government or the insurgents, needed to be better understood, as the war was a fight over the insurgency and “the crisis of popular confidence” (McChrystal, 2009: 2-5). COIN in Afghanistan, as in previous versions, was an overt battle for the “minds” of Afghans. The surge would better secure them and new more restrictive rules of engagement would be applied to prevent “tactical victories from becoming strategic losses” (McChrystal, 2009: E-2).

The COIN discourse for Afghanistan thus continued to produce the populace in nuanced ways with a multiplicity of motivations. The “hearts and minds” notion of COIN was again employed in pushing for an understanding of the population at very granular levels, at a village by village or group by group level, that necessitated particular forms of action. Indeed, McChrystal argued in his Tactical Directive of 1 July 2009, that the commanders must be prepared to break off contact with enemy forces if there was too great a potential for civilian casualties and served to reduce the amount of air power and artillery that forces would be

permitted to use (McChrystal, 2009: E-2). These stringent requirements were so tightened that George Friedman of STRATFOR, a geopolitical analysis group, argued that McChrystal's directive had reduced the Afghan war to an "infantry" war, in which the U.S. comparative advantage would be dramatically reduced (Friedman and Bhalla, 2009: para 37-38).⁵⁵ Linking back to the "lessons" of Vietnam, the directive aligned with John Paul Vann's directive that argued that the best way to kill an insurgent was with a knife, the second best with a rifle, the next best with artillery, and the last option was the use of airpower (Nagl, 2014: 201).⁵⁶

The Afghan war debate served then to further this mystification of a "kinder, gentler" war and further emphasized the COIN paradoxes that by 2009 were well circulated in the geostrategic literature: increased force protection, could make you less secure and the notion that best reaction was often to do nothing, as noted in the Cohen, et al (2006), piece that accompanied the Iraq surge that were further refined and elevated for the Afghan conflict. All of this evolved from the prism that the minds of the population were an objective, a mental battlefield that required persuasion through security, both from insurgents and collateral damage, to foment success in the conflict.

A second element was the continued romanticism of COIN wars past, and in the case of Iraq, COIN wars present. As noted above, the Iraq surge commonplace served as analogy for what could be accomplished in Afghanistan if the "inputs" were correct. The Malayan Emergency still served to provide a template for COIN, though it had been superseded in the debate by the "better war" of Abrams in Vietnam and Petraeus in Iraq. The production of these

⁵⁵ Friedman argued that McChrystal's tactical directive put U.S. troops at a disadvantage, fighting larger numbers of forces with better intelligence, familiarity with the terrain, and without the air and artillery support that would normally be used to eliminate a larger force.

⁵⁶ Vann, an advisor and later CORDS member during the Vietnam War, was made famous by the book *A Bright Shining Lie* by Neil Sheehan.

commonplaces between 2006 and 2009 produced particular notions of the “transformations” in warfare from the depopulated battle spaces of the past that focused on the destruction of enemy formations and materiel, to the current and future ones. These were Kaldor’s (2012) “new wars” and Smith’s (2007) “wars amongst the people,” and they required deep understandings of culture, economics, and the development of political solutions. These wars would not have signing ceremonies on the decks of aircraft carriers or unconditional surrenders, but would end with capable host nation forces, reconciliation, and economic development. These wars produced the romanticized characters who adapted to local customs, drinking large amounts of tea, and working closely with local populations, reminiscent of the much mythologized Lawrence of Arabia.

The mythology of T.E. Lawrence also continued to exercise a role, as much of the *Military Review* literature and websites dedicated to military officers were consumed not just by Iraq bound forces but by those deploying to Afghanistan. Kilcullen, in producing his *28 Articles*, noted that his article “was subsequently translated into Arabic and Spanish, and used in Afghanistan and Iraq by both Coalition and local forces,” and he “received several emails from Afghan and Iraqi officers offering their commentaries and thanks” (Kilcullen, 2010: 26). Hence the notion of the paradoxes and the wisdom of Lawrence, Malaysia, and the proliferation of sheiks noted in the Iraq war debate, influenced both the Iraq and Afghanistan theaters and strategy discussions. Indeed, these mythologized views were in fact reinforced by the Iraq surge narrative and the “common sense” produced about Iraq by 2009.

Further, as COIN gained hegemony over the geostrategic discourse of the day, Petraeus and Caldwell included Lawrence’s works into the curriculum for Army captains, majors, and lieutenant colonels. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1935) was inculcated into the Army’s professional

military education program, with an officer noting that Lawrence “gets you to think about one’s own thinking, about other countries, and other armies that are foreign to us, how they see themselves, how they see us” (Soussi, 2010: para 9). Further, an officer who served as an operations officer for the U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center from 2007-2009, argued “I think there are many more examples of effective advisers in military history, but none as influential,” and that “none have quite the dramatic scope of Lawrence’s experience in Arabia” (Soussi, 2010, para 15).⁵⁷

With Kilcullen’s *28 Articles* “going viral” throughout the U.S. military and the continued profiles of Lawrence in the press, the larger than life Lawrence of Arabia continued to exert influence over the military, the U.S. foreign policy establishment, and the public at large (Kaplan, 2013: 177). The works of Lawrence, Galula, and other COIN advocates of the past provided symbolic support to the COIN narrative in the Afghan War debate and were reinforced by the narrative of the Iraq Surge’s success and the military’s embrace of COIN.

While the influence of Lawrence and others continued, another element that supported the broader COIN narrative continued to play a role in sustaining the COIN discourse: that of the special requirements of a COIN force. While Woodward (2010: 15) had argued that Petraeus had single handedly reconfigured what it meant to be a general, requiring adeptness at diplomacy, politics, economics, and social work, Aylwin-Foster (2005: 4) had argued during the Iraq War debate that the requirements of the COIN soldier were beyond those of a traditional military operation. According to Aylwin-Foster, the force had to see itself as the domestic population perceived it, and that it had to recognize that force, even when justified, can undermine popular support (2005: 4). McChrystal’s assessment continued this logic arguing that

⁵⁷ The officer specifically mentions John Paul Vann as being a better advisor for foreign forces. It is also ironic that Lawrence was advising the insurgents, not the counterinsurgents during World War I.

“As formidable as the threat might be, we make the problem harder,” as the force was a “conventional force that is poorly configured for COIN” (McChrystal, 2009: 1-2). Language skills, cultural knowledge, and a preoccupation with force protection had “physically and psychologically” separated the force from the Afghan population (McChrystal, 2009: 1-2). The Surge force, predominately American, and now well-schooled in the principles of COIN from Iraq would change the operational culture and provide the means to reconnect with populace and win the hearts and minds.

The above serves to demonstrate the ways in which the overarching COIN narrative continued to operate and mystify COIN as form of war. The heroes of the COIN narrative reconstructed what it meant to be a successful soldier and military leader. The requirements of COIN required changes to the operational cultures and skills of the force, from the lowest to the highest levels. Again, the “strategic corporals” would need to understand that the battle was for the perceptions of Afghans and that force would need “exquisite calibration” to strictly limit its impact on the population (Maass, 2004: para 49). These special requirements for COIN, as with Iraq three years earlier, continued to mystify COIN as a form of warfare, the type of people who could execute it, and the ways in which it would produce victory.

Finally, the inclusion of academia and think tanks into the analysis of the war and its strategy continued the connection of COIN to the “best and the brightest”.⁵⁸ COIN was not simply a method of warfare that any trained soldier or leader could implement, but instead required augmentation and understanding of whole societies at very granular levels. This could only be accomplished through the establishment of Human Terrain Teams that would/could map

⁵⁸ The best and brightest notion itself harkened back to the Vietnam War, as it was the title of a book by David Halberstam that argued that the policies that lead to disaster in Vietnam were a product of the intellectuals brought into the Kennedy Administration.

the underlying structures and cultures of the various ethnic groups and tribes in Afghanistan. In addition, think tank experts played large roles in the Afghan war debate. McChrystal's assessment team included many of these experts including Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Andrew Exum, the COIN advocate Nagl chose to replace him on the team from CNAS, Stephen Biddle who had provided similar service to Petraeus in Iraq, and Frederick Kagan from AEI, who had developed the *Choosing Victory in Iraq* paper that mirrored the Surge (Nagl, 2014: 192). Bruce Riedel of the Brookings Institution led the review of Afghan policy that identified U.S. goals and established the baseline of "fully resourced COIN strategy" as a requirement. Additionally, Kagan also produced the *Weekly Standard* (2009) article reviewing the brutality of Soviet tactics in Afghanistan in comparison to McChrystal's supposed strategy that served "to remind" Secretary of Defense Robert Gates why a surge in U.S. forces was not the same "foreign occupation" that Afghans had rebelled against in the 1980s (Gates, 2014: 360). All of which demonstrated the ways in which COIN was a step apart from a conventional military campaign. Think tanks and academics do not routinely influence the internal operational strategies of U.S. Combatant Commands, only, COIN, the form of warfare that requires a special understanding to execute, requires such expertise to determine the ways in which forces will be deployed and used.

In short, the mystical, romanticized COIN discourse of 2006, with its paradoxes, special soldier requirements, and mythologized heroes, was still operable in the Afghan war debate of 2009. The context was broadly similar and with the Iraq surge touted as a success, the elevation of these romanticized notions of better, kinder wars fought over the "hearts and minds" of the population, executed by savior generals, and supported by the best and brightest of academia and

policy experts at think tanks continued their influence. In fact, the war in Iraq had deepened these mystical qualities associated with COIN warfare.

The COIN Narrative Redux

The COIN narrative for Afghanistan, not surprisingly given COIN's dominance of the discursive space, was largely consistent with the Iraq Surge and better war storyline. As with Iraq prior to the Surge, Afghanistan did not have the forces necessary to stop the deterioration of the war effort. Indeed, General McKiernan, the former commander of ISAF had commented that if "you're in Iraq and you need something, you ask for it," and that if "you're in Afghanistan and you need it, you figure out how to do without it" (Chandrasekaran, 2009A: para 18). John Nagl gave voice to this notion as he argued in his congressional testimony that the better war in Afghanistan began with resourcing ISAF with the required troops to implement a new strategy and focus for the war (Nagl, 2009).

That new strategy could not "be focused on seizing terrain or destroying insurgent forces; our objective must be the population" (McChrystal, 2009: 1-1). Much as in Iraq, the battle space in Afghanistan was repopulated in the new strategy. Terrain and high value target hunting were part of the strategies of the past that would not produce success by "simply trying harder or doubling down" on those actions (McChrystal, 2009: 1-1). Instead, the people were the critical element and influencing their perceptions of ISAF, the war, and the Afghan government was central to the ability to "disrupt, dismantle and eventually defeat Al Qaeda" and ensuring that Afghanistan would not become "a base for terrorism" again (McChrystal, 2009: 1-1).⁵⁹

Again, the operational culture of the force needed to undergo a change, from the conventional, force protection based force of previous years, to one that understood the people,

⁵⁹ The focus on Al Qaeda was a step back from the "Freedom Agenda" of the Bush Administration and was an attempt to somewhat limit that nation-building requirements – though it still produced a COIN based strategy.

interacted more closely with them, and understood that their perception of ISAF was critical to defeating the insurgency. As in Iraq, understanding languages and cultures at a granular level would be necessary to interact with, understand, and influence the war's new center of gravity.

In addition, as then Secretary of State Clinton wrote, the surge of forces in Afghanistan was designed to protect the populace and created the required security in order to provide space for political reconciliation (Clinton, 2014: 137). Additional American forces would provide maximum leverage for getting the Karzai government to clean up corruption, undergo talks with reconcilable insurgents, and provide services to the population.

This strategy would be undertaken in an "inkblot" approach, much like the oil spot strategy of Iraq, in which certain population centers would be secured and gradually grow to connect more and more of the population to the government (McChrystal, 2014: 421). While the oil spot had become the ink blot, the intent of the metaphor remained the same, and "clear, hold, and build" was still the operative discursive formation.

In addition to the surge of U.S. forces, as with Iraq, a civilian surge would accompany the troops to war, to support the "build" element of the plan and promote "good governance," reconciliation, and the development of services in the newly held areas. The additional security created by the additional troops would provide the PRTs more territory and space to work with their Afghan counterparts to provide economic development and services that would enhance the reputation of the Afghan government and ISAF forces, winning the population to their side, and in a virtuous circle, produce more intelligence that would allow the ISAF and ANSF to more precisely target the irreconcilables, further enhancing stability.

In line with the Iraq and Vietnam commonplaces, there would also be an increased focus on training of Afghan police and the national army, with more and better forces. These forces

would be partnered with U.S. forces in order to eventually transition control of cleared areas to the Afghans and serve as the exit strategy for U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

The Afghan counterinsurgency narrative was deeply reflective of the form of COIN discourse that continued to dominate the strategic space. As during the Vietnam era, while COIN would continue to dominate the strategic space, the Afghan war debate would begin to sow the seeds of its eventual destabilization. However, from the 2006 to 2011 period, COIN remained the strategy of choice for U.S. wars. The following sections detail the strategy debate and highlight the particular forums in which COIN was produced as the only viable option to pursue in Afghanistan.

The Afghan War Strategy Debate

In tracing the Afghan war debate, I sketch out the debate in five areas: first, the Riedel report at the beginning of 2009, the Assessment Report, the strategy reviews and the inclusion of the better war narrative, the resistance and its co-option, and finally, the decision to Surge in Afghanistan. The remaining sections will highlight these areas and indicate how COIN retained its hegemony, co-opted elements that challenged it, and conditioned the Afghan War strategy going into 2010.

As previously noted, upon entering office, President Obama ordered a review of the Afghanistan war strategy and put Bruce Riedel in charge of leading the review. This initial review concluded, in concert with the Obama campaign's position, that Afghanistan had been under resourced for years, as U.S. military, diplomatic and intelligence personnel were diverted to the war in Iraq. The result was deterioration in stability, a loss of prestige for the ISAF force leading the war effort and a resurgent Taliban insurgency. The report defined U.S. objectives in Afghanistan as: "the removal of Al-Qaeda's sanctuary, effective democratic government control

in Pakistan, and a self-reliant Afghanistan that will enable a withdrawal of combat forces while sustaining our commitment to political and economic development” (Riedel, 2009: 2-3). To accomplish these objectives, the report produced a series of recommendations, the first of which was “Executing and resourcing an integrated civilian-military counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan” (Riedel, 2009: 2).

As such, the Obama Administration had determined that the path forward in Afghanistan required a full scale counterinsurgency operation and adopted the COIN storyline, arguing that the “counter insurgency strategy must integrate population security with building effective local governance and economic development” (Riedel, 2009: 3). This would serve to “establish the security needed to provide space and time for stabilization and reconstruction activities” (Riedel, 2009: 3). In a reflection of the dominance of COIN, the new national security principals, with the exception of Vice President Joe Biden, concurred with the report (Gates, 2014: 342).

The initial report served to define both the problem and the solution to the flagging war effort in Afghanistan. By arguing that a stable and effective Afghan government was critical to removing the Al Qaeda sanctuary in Afghanistan, and going further, by recommending a fully resourced COIN strategy to achieve that end, the basis for the strategic debate was established at the outset. With COIN as the preferred option, the ability of alternative options to seize the geostrategic space was immediately disadvantaged. However, unlike in Iraq, a concerted effort was made to destabilize COIN’s hegemony, provoking additional months of extended debate over the war’s direction.

The adoption of the Riedel report brought with it the decision to deploy an additional 17,000 “combat forces” and 4,000 additional trainers for the ANSF (Gates, 2014: 342).⁶⁰ While the primary goal was to “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al Qaeda,” the means to do so was to defeat a Taliban insurgency in the South and East of Afghanistan (Riedel, 2009: 1). With COIN the established military strategy, General Stanley McChrystal was dispatched to Afghanistan with the task of completing an assessment of what was required to fulfill the “fully resourced counterinsurgency strategy” (Riedel, 2009: 2). This assessment, with its troop request, coming on the heels of the decision to deploy 21,000 additional forces in March 2009, would serve as the spark for reinvigorating the challenge to COIN’s dominance.

While McChrystal deployed to Afghanistan, the COIN advocates began the legitimization process in earnest. Petraeus had worked with Riedel to establish the military strategy of COIN in the strategy review report. With his status as COIN guru and savior general, Petraeus had pushed for the COIN strategy that received near universal agreement among the National Security Principals (Kaplan, 2013: 297). In this regard, we can identify how Petraeus’s position within the geostrategic discourse facilitated his ability to determine the regime of truth over what would be required to stabilize Afghanistan and prevent it from becoming an Al Qaeda safe haven from which to resume training and planning in relative safety.

Petraeus then set the stage for the follow on debate in a series of public lectures on the Surge in Iraq and the reasons for its success. In April 2009, Petraeus conducted an address at the Landon Lecture Series hosted by Kansas State University and the key note address at the Center for New American Security in Washington, D.C. at the invitation of John Nagl in June of 2009.

⁶⁰ The U.S. has recently developed an odd classificatory system for deploying forces into war zones in which some are deemed “combat forces” and others are “trainers” or some other thing. This has continued with the deployment back to Iraq in 2014 of U.S. forces to train Iraqi Security Forces without having “boots on the ground” to fight ISIL.

In both forums, Petraeus argued that it was the employment of COIN principles that reduced the violence in Iraq and provided the space for the political process to resume functioning. With violence significantly down in Iraq, despite the drawdown of large numbers of U.S. forces, the Iraq Surge was used to validate COIN as a strategy, and Petraeus argued that these counterinsurgency principles “remain valid” for the war in Afghanistan (Petraeus, 2009A). Echoing the Riedel report, he further argued that “our objectives in Afghanistan requires a robust sustained and comprehensive counter insurgency campaign which is of course what President Obama described last month when he laid out the new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan” (Petraeus, 2009A).

At the same time, McChrystal was developing the assessment in Afghanistan and reports began to leak that there was a large troop request coming over the course of the summer. The report was delivered in August and provided a request for 40,000 additional forces to support the war effort. The delivery of the report set off the debate over the strategy as many in the Administration pushed back against the large troop request. The result was a contest over two competing strategies: first, the COIN strategy requested by the military detailed in the McChrystal report and the second, the counterterrorism plus strategy pushed by Vice President Biden.

The COIN strategy flowed from the COIN narrative identified above. The Vice President argued for a CT plus strategy that would focus on using drones and Special Operations Force to attack Al Qaeda members and the deployment of increased trainers to further develop the ANSF. Biden argued that the deployment of large numbers of forces was politically unsustainable at home and that the lower cost CT option was the only viable path (Gates, 2013: 342).⁶¹ These

⁶¹ Gates argues that he felt that the plan adopted actually did not differ much from the Biden’s CT plus strategy in that the COIN was geographically limited to the major population areas and was blended with CT operations in both

served as the two elements of discussion for a series of strategy reviews that would take place over the course September, October, and November of 2009.

In pushing back against the CT model, Nagl and the COINdinitas argued that the to adopt such a stance was to set up a “recipe for endless war” as the U.S. would offer nothing to the Afghans in return, jeopardizing the very basing rights needed to conduct such operations (Nagl, 2014: 194). Nagl’s testimony before the Senate Foreign relations committee laid out this exact argument, and his prepared remarks were titled “A Better War” (2009). Emphasizing the need to shift to COIN, Nagl brought the Better War narrative of Sorley and the Surge to a Congress that had grown more skeptical with the election of more Democrats in 2008 and it was reproduced on the CNAS website and as an opinion piece in *Joint Forces Quarterly* (2010) magazine. Lamenting the shift of resources to Iraq in 2003, Nagl argued that the opportunity to reverse course and save Afghanistan from “becoming a terrorist haven” was still viable, but the “better war” strategy had to be followed (Nagl, 2009). COIN was necessary, but it could only work if it was paired with a commander that could make it work as Petraeus had done in Iraq. Further, in his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Nagl argued that the clear, hold and build counterinsurgency model “was relearned over several painful years in Iraq and that “these lessons are well understood” (Nagl, 2009). Nagl argued that the “question now is not how to achieve our goals in Afghanistan and Pakistan – we know the answer to that question” (Nagl, 2009). That answer was the employment of additional forces that would execute a COIN based strategy based on the “oil spot” and clear, hold, and build strategy.

Senators McCain and Joseph Lieberman repeated these arguments, drawing on the Surge to buttress the argument for COIN. The Senators argued that a “narrow, short-term focus on

Afghanistan and Pakistan (Gates, 2013: 384). That is a difficult distinction to make as COIN from Malaya to Iraq has never been posited as securing the whole country at once.

counterterrorism, by contrast, would repeat the same mistakes made for years in Iraq before the troop surge with the same catastrophic consequences,” and that success in Iraq only came after “we changed course and applied a new approach – a counterinsurgency strategy focused on providing basic security for the people and improving their lives – that the cycle of violence was at last broken” (Lieberman and McCain, 2009: para 5).

The above demonstrates the ways in which both Vietnam and Iraq Surge were put to work to both discredit the CT approach and legitimize the notion of COIN as the only acceptable path for righting the flailing war effort. They provided the discursive resource from which advocates could draw to make the CT effort seem unworkable and a reflection of failed strategies of winning through attrition that had failed in Vietnam, Iraq, and to that point, Afghanistan and were reflective of the power and dominance that COIN held in the geostrategic discourse of the time.

This power was further demonstrated in the ways in which it serves to delimit options for the Afghan strategy. Woodward (2010: 236-237) argues that over the course of the Afghan debate that the President was unable to get the Pentagon to produce a CT strategy for consideration. He argues that the Vice Chairman General James Cartwright had attempted to build a CT option for consideration but was stopped by Admiral Mullen and that the COIN based strategy was the only fully developed option that was debated (Woodward, 2010: 236, 245). Indeed, this was reflective of the power of the COIN narrative, as Mullen was not generally seen as a COIN advocate, but had fallen in with the McChrystal plan for Afghanistan and advocated for it within the war council as directly as Petraeus.⁶² With the military and the COIN advocates

⁶² Again this serves to reinforce the strength to which COIN had grasped the military structure at that point. Mullen was not a COINdinator, as a naval officer, not a significant player in COIN operations, thought, and theory. Yet as the Chairman, he served as a COIN advocate on behalf of McChrystal and Petraeus.

arguing that Vietnam and Iraq had demonstrated the better war that could be had, the military education system filling up with COIN related materials, and the savior generals leading the strategy debate, the only feasible course presented was to execute COIN.

The Administration wanted to adhere to the “lessons” of McGeorge Bundy, in that there would significant consideration given to the strategy and the end states that were achievable in an Afghan COIN scenario. Secretary Gates noted that Obama responded to the COIN option that “while North Vietnam had never attacked the United States, there were still points during the war when the basic approach should have been questioned” and that he “did not want McChrystal to come in determined to stay on the same path if it’s not working” (Gates, 2013: 357). As such, the competing commonplaces for Vietnam were working with the Administration and the military: one that recalled the better war lessons of Vietnam and one that addressed the process of a thorough examination of options and continual reassessment. These would be exhaustively debated in an attempt to prevent the new Administration from falling into what it saw as the Lyndon Johnson trap: getting so deeply entrenched in a war that it could not reverse course and withdrawal.

The fraud marred election of Karzai to another five year term added fuel to the COIN skeptics’ dismissal of the counterinsurgency. Drawing on the tenets of COIN doctrine, they argued that COIN required a legitimate host-nation government and that propping up Karzai would not produce stability. This dovetailed with the leak of Ambassador Eikenberry’s cables in which he argued that the “proposed counterinsurgency strategy assumes an Afghan political leadership that is both able to take responsibility and to exert sovereignty in the furtherance of our goal – a secure, peaceful, minimally self-sufficient Afghanistan hardened against transnational terrorist groups,” something he asserted did not exist (Schmitt, 2009: para 9). He

further argued that Afghanistan did not have, nor would Karzai facilitate the development of, a national identity that would allow COIN to succeed (Schmitt, 2009: para 11).

COIN advocates responded by drawing on the Iraq Surge. Nagl and Richard Fontaine, both of CNAS, claimed that this “argument is badly flawed” and that Nuri al-Maliki, the Prime Minister of Iraq in 2007, was “widely viewed as weak and sectarian” and that his election was boycotted by the Sunnis, who formed the bulk of the insurgency and rejected the legitimacy of the al-Maliki government (Fontaine and Nagl, 2009: para 4). The Surge had provided the security necessary to facilitate reconciliation and demonstrate “to the Sunni that they had a reasonable alternative to Al-Qaida and its sectarian warfare” (Fontaine and Nagl, 2009: para 5).

Contrary to Eikenberry’s view, McChrystal, Petraeus and the COINdinistas argued that the clear, hold, and build strategy would facilitate the development of this connection to the Afghan government as it did in the Surge. Specifically, the additional forces would clear villages, secure the population, and, in conjunction with the “civilian surge” build the governance, services, and economic opportunities that would win over the Afghan population. In this way, as with Abrams in Vietnam and Petraeus in Iraq, the “better war” narrative of COIN could be put into operation to rescue another failing war. Failing to do so would make any alternative strategy unworkable, as the ability to develop the intelligence and have the areas from which drones and Special Forces would operate would not be viable, and other development activities would have no security.

September and October saw repeated gatherings of the National Security and in depth discussions of the Afghan War strategy. By the October 9th strategy sessions, with Karzai re-elected after his chief rival Abdullah Abdullah dropped out of the run off, President Obama stated that “defining counterinsurgency in terms of population security as opposed to the Taliban

body count was sound; and that the basic “inkblot” strategy was sound – we couldn’t resource COIN throughout the country, so we had to deny the Taliban a foothold in key areas” (Gates, 2013: 372). This was followed by another October session in which Secretaries Gates and Clinton and the President’s White House advisors conducted a follow on meeting. The President asked specifically for their recommendations and Secretary Gates argued for the deployment of 30,000 additional troops and to pressure allies to make up the additional request (Gates, 2014: 376). Reflecting the power of the Surge commonplace, Secretary Clinton agreed, but stated that the President should be prepared to deploy the fourth Brigade Combat Team that McChrystal requested if the allies did not produce the necessary forces, as “The Surge worked” (Gates, 2014: 376).⁶³

By November 2009, the Afghan war debate had reached its zenith. Obama had gathered his principal advisors and after getting their agreement, ordered a surge of 30,000 additional U.S. forces, to be augmented by NATO forces that were largely in line with the request of McChrystal’s report. In the announcement at West Point, Obama announced the surge and the intention to withdraw the surge forces within 18 months (Obama, 2009). In accordance with the McChrystal assessment that saw the next 12 months as decisive, the Surge of forces would be present for that time period and facilitate the push to turn to around the deterioration of the war effort in Afghanistan (McChrystal, 2009: 1-2, 1-4).

The introduction of the timeline into the Afghan surge is largely reflective of the debate and can be seen as the beginning of the ebb in the “surge” of COIN’s dominance. The end state of OEF had not changed from the COIN focused strategy approved in March of 2009, but the open ended commitment of COIN had been successfully challenged to some degree in the 18

⁶³ The fourth Brigade Combat Team and the associated enabler forces would take the troop surge count from 30,000 to the 40,000 that General McChrystal requested.

month timeline. The inclusion of the timeline was the reconciliation of the competing commonplaces for the war debate, as the acceptable boundaries of action were shifted slightly to incorporate the new CT and focused COIN campaign challenge. Obama told Gates and Mullen that at multiple times during the Vietnam War, that it was obvious that strategy was not working and that he didn't want McChrystal coming back with a "stay the course" message if it was clear it wasn't working in Afghanistan (Gates, 2014: 357) Gates argued for an annual review of the strategy and its potential for success and Mullen argued that he would advise the President to "stop" (Gates, 2014: 357).

Indeed, the inclusion of the timeline element is reflective of the ways in which the argumentative debate space shapes policy and shifts the boundaries of acceptable action. Gates argues that he had opposed timelines for the Iraq Surge but came to believe that they were necessary for Afghanistan, "because I felt some kind of dramatic action was required to get Karzai and the Afghan government to accept ownership of their country's security" (Gates, 2014: 379). Further, Gates argues that he accepted the military timeline of two years to have the areas and ANSF prepared to transition security. As such, the timeline would be acceptable, and in alignment with the COIN principle of pushing the Host Nation to the fore, but adhering to the requirement to have periodic strategy reviews and timelines for "conditions based" phased withdrawals in alignment with the lessons of disaster. This reflects the ways in which COIN co-opted the "lessons in disaster lessons" while maintaining its status as the only acceptable option. It further illustrates how practical geostrategic reasoning and the "persuasion" within the war councils shape practice. COIN, established as the operational framework from the March 2009 report, maintained its dominance. As noted, the CT option was never fully developed and the other challenge to COIN, the focused COIN, trimmed the number of troops by one brigade, with

an attempt to make up the difference with other ISAF forces. However, the inclusion of the timeline reflected the slight destabilization of COIN hegemony, and its adoption into the COIN narrative as a requirement to get the attention of the Afghan government and its requirement to support the war and end corruption, became an element of the COIN narrative going forward.⁶⁴

Further, that COIN was the strategy is without doubt. The battle of Marjah followed on the heels of the Afghan Surge decision and was decidedly a COIN focused operation, approved by the U.S. government, ISAF, and the Afghan government. Its highly restrictive rules of engagement limited the amount of fire support from aircraft or artillery the U.S. could use to clear Marjah. Indeed, apologies were issued due to a faulty HIMARS rocket and additional restrictions were placed on firepower in the midst of the operation. Also, the now infamous “government in a box” was to follow closely on the heels of the clearing operation to begin the process of “hold and build”. While COIN had been successfully challenged as a hegemonic discourse in one sense, the timeline, the co-option of the timeline as necessary to “focus” the Afghan government had been accepted and COIN was reimagined with the base inkblot and clear, hold, and build approach, while adopting the phased withdrawal served as a method for capturing the host nation focus.

COIN Dominance and Its Indicators Revisited

The indications of COIN’s continued hold over the geostrategic debate space are mostly reflected in three primary ways: first, the deployment of the Afghan Surge, both military and civilian, second, the approval of this campaign plan in the midst of a global financial crisis that

⁶⁴ To be certain, not all COIN purists or COINdinitas accepted this notion, but unanimity is not the same as hegemony. COIN shifted ever so slightly to incorporate an aspirational timeline for withdrawal that has not been effectively met and is likely to drag out at some level into the 2020s.

saw the primary concern of the population turn to domestic economic issues versus foreign wars and terrorism, and finally, the replacement of General McKiernan with General McChrystal.

The most obvious indication was President Obama's announcement of the deployment of 30,000 additional forces, and the surge of 7,000 additional multi-national forces in support of the Afghan surge.⁶⁵ In approving the deployment, less than one year after approving the deployment of an additional 21,000 U.S. forces was an obvious reflection of the power of the COIN narrative to shape the discourse over war strategy and a reflection of its continued dominance. The announcement included the pairing of a civilian surge, much as with Iraq, that would support service delivery and governance, increased numbers and accelerated training of Afghan security forces, and an aid package to Pakistan. All of these were elements of the COIN narrative for how to achieve a better war in Afghanistan. Even the withdraw date, was reflective of the COMISAF assessment, if not entirely consistent with COIN doctrine.

Secondly, this announcement was made in the context of the most significant financial crisis since the Great Depression, with large banks receiving bail out funding and unemployment rising in the U.S. In what was often described as a "war weary" public during the Iraq War debate, was now "a war weary" public undergoing economic difficulty and much more focused on economic issues than the threat of terrorism or war. That COIN discourse, with its high demand for resources, was selected as the strategy was a continued reflection of its hegemony and ability to shape the strategic discursive space.

Finally, the removal of General McKiernan and his replacement with General McChrystal, served as another indicator of COIN's continuing status as dominant. McKiernan

⁶⁵ Indeed, the first operation in Afghanistan was the clearance of Marjah and the infamous "Government in a Box" that was to take over once Marjah was cleared and secured. In McChrystal's strict interpretation of the COIN principles, the operation was announced well in advance and air and artillery fire was limited.

was praised by Petraeus for moving to COIN shortly before his removal as the COMISAF, and his removal was admittedly due to no wrongdoing. Instead, the positioning of McKiernan as an armor officer who could understand, but not execute COIN demonstrated the ability of the discourse to produce individuals that met the necessary criteria for COIN campaigns and sideline that those that it did not. As a JSOC commander, McChrystal had little to do with the Iraq population, their concerns, or security per se. His task force in Iraq before and during the Surge was responsible for raiding insurgent hideouts, capturing or killing bomb makers, and high value target hunting. He had not been a part of a large scale COIN campaign, but was more versed in the counterterrorism campaign urged by Vice President Biden. His production as an expert in COIN, and the strictness with which he amended the rules of engagement demonstrated the power of the COIN discourse to produce a particular COIN expertise in some, deny it to others, and produce actions aligned with its premises by those positioned as experts. Indeed, this is reflective of how subjects are produced and situated within debates, as McChrystal assumed the position of COIN champion. At the same time, it also reflects the power of the COIN discourse, drawing in additional adherents particularly in the wake of its touted role in tamping down the violence in Iraq. In this sense, the “common sense” produced by the Iraq Surge, conditioned what could be derived as strategy for the Afghan war. Mullen’s full support for the McChrystal plan also reflects the same notion, as he was not a COINdiniista, yet worked to limit the options available to McChrystal’s COIN plan, or its very close derivative of applying COIN in RC South and East.

At the same time, many of the same indicators of COIN’s hegemony that operated during the Iraq War debate continued. Galula and other COIN theorists were still in high demand on bookshelves and Caldwell’s production of *FM 3-07* continued to institutionalize the

precepts of COIN across the Army and the Department of Defense. This hegemony remained for the 2009 debate, though it would be begin to be destabilized over the coming years.

Conclusion

The Afghan war debate in 2009 can be marked as the zenith of the second counterinsurgency era within the U.S. military. The capture of the strategic discursive space in the context of a war weary public now in the throes of a global financial crisis was a remarkable indication of the durability of COIN discourse to drive strategy in the midst of “small wars,” particularly when those wars appear to be going poorly. It also demonstrated the ways in which particular analogies and commonplaces, and the lessons of those events are defined and put to work to shape policy options. In the case of Afghanistan, Vietnam and the “better war narrative” continued to be used, as it was in Iraq, to legitimize the notion that flailing war efforts can be righted given the right doctrine, the right resources, and the right commanders. The anti-COIN advocates similarly used it to enforce a rigorous process that would prevent the “slippery slope” of continued escalation should the war continue to deteriorate.

The inclusion of the aspirational withdrawal timeline in President Obama’s speech demonstrated the first destabilization of COIN’s hegemony, as it began to reduce the open ended notions of *FM 3-24* and the COINdinistas. The global financial crisis and concerns over debt and deficits have since served to reduce the size of the U.S. military to levels not likely capable of executing a “surge” as was accomplished in Iraq and the new military strategy calls for “time-limited, scope-limited, counterinsurgency,” a notion that is incompatible with the current COIN doctrine and that may perhaps lead to its redefinition over the coming years.

Still, COIN discourse in the Afghan war debate demonstrated the continued strength of notions of the “better wars,” “hearts and minds based COIN,” and its employment by the “best

and brightest”. The notions of the savior generals leading forces to secure populations and transforming societies into some form of democracy, with all of its mysticism and romantic historical figures still remains. That President Obama, a figure many believed was elected to end the wars, take the U.S. off of a permanent war footing, and deal with a growing financial crisis, would surge more forces into Afghanistan than President Bush did into Iraq on the basis of a counterinsurgency campaign plan demonstrates this strength.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Counterinsurgency remains one of the most controversial doctrines within the library of U.S. military strategies. Its recurrence as the preferred method for dealing with wars that are in crisis or, at least, perceived as failing, represents an undertheorized element within the voluminous academic literature on counterinsurgency. Given the institutional and political obstacles to its emergence as the strategy of choice, particularly in the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan, the change to a COIN-based strategy is truly a remarkable shift in the U.S approach to the wars.

This study empirically traced how the notion of COIN, a backwater in U.S. military doctrine, rose to the position of prominence in the early 1960s, and from 2006-2010. In doing so, it broke with traditional IR approaches to war time strategy and doctrine development. As Jackson (2006: 245) argues, the traditional “decisionist” paradigm of International Relations “looks for interests - whether material or ideational – of individuals in some specific historical context and examines how those interests lead to specific decisions”. In essence this reduces strategy to the accumulation of individual decisions. Whether in the realist vein, in which the head of state personifies the interests of the nation-state, or one in which the individual decisions of the department and agency leads are amalgamated into a universally agreed option, the decisions are largely exogenous to the raging internal administration debates that exist around their adoption. This requires the analyst to highlight the presence of unambiguous interests or norms that exist outside of the decision-making process to justify the adoption of COIN as the preferred strategy (Jackson, 2006: 248).

This approach often serves to obscure or omit the mechanism that causes consensus to form around a particular course of action. The intent here was to problematize this mechanism, specifically in engaging how a largely ignored military doctrine came to dominate despite the organizational and political hurdles arrayed against it. As Kaplan (2013) notes, counterinsurgency was itself an insurgent strategy within the military and he titled its champions as “The Insurgents”. As such, detailing its rise to prominence is of particular interest.

In doing so, I have shown how particular narratives were constructed throughout the debates that produced COIN as the solution. As Fitzgerald (2013) argues the sense of crisis opened the possibility of change and as Posen (1984) noted, failure generates a similar opportunity within military departments and organizations. While the crisis atmosphere provides the opportunity, it does not specify why one particular strategy or doctrine was advanced to address the identified failure. This analysis demonstrated how that change came to be COIN and not some other option. As opposed to an examination of the interests of the various elements of the bureaucracy or the interests of the nation-state, I explored how particular discursive resources were deployed into the debate, often in novel ways, and traced the ways in which these resources were configured into a narrative of COIN that legitimated it as the solution to turning around the failing wars. The study examined how that COIN narrative shaped the policy/strategy boundaries of action such that COIN was the only solution that could be applied in that context and for that period. This is not to say that COIN was unchallenged or that it would remain dominant forever. All dominant discourses are challenged and destabilized at various points in time. It requires work to stabilize and work to destabilize and replace, a struggle that continues throughout the lifecycle of a dominant discourse.

Discourse and discourse analysis, in this sense, is not the reading of text or speeches, but instead explores the particular ways of producing knowledge about the wars and the ways to fight those wars. The outcomes of those debates produce policy, strategy, and institutional responses. For example, the training plans, training resources, changes to the military education systems, and other resources were shifted to accommodate a focus on COIN warfare that largely eschewed what was seen as the “American Way of War” with its high tech sensors, stand-off weaponry, and heavily armored vehicles. Across the training base mock Vietnamese, Iraqi and Afghan villages were put together and actors were brought in to serve as Vietnamese, Iraqi, and Afghan villagers as part of the change to training paradigms that largely focused on conventional warfare. As such, the production of COIN as strategy has serious impacts on the U.S. military and its day to day business and routines, in addition to deploying tens of thousands more forces into Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

The remainder of this chapter will highlight three critical elements of the argument made in this study including understanding strategy as a narrative, ways of conceptualizing analogical reasoning and legitimation, and the impact of symbolic power on military doctrine development. After that, I turn to the implications for policy and the potential for future research questions that could augment this approach.

Strategy as Narrative

Indeed, as Krepinevich and Watts (2009: viii) argue strategy in and of itself is a best guess as to what effects future actions will produce. The violent collision of two animate organizations and the subsequent action-reaction that follows are largely beyond prediction and forecasting. As Eisenhower (1957) remarked:

“I tell this story to illustrate the truth of the statement I heard long ago in the Army: Plans are worthless, but planning is everything. There is a very great distinction because when you are planning for an emergency you must start with this one thing: the very definition of "emergency" is that it is unexpected, therefore it is not going to happen the way you are planning.

As such, the strategy of a war is largely a theory of victory. It is a story of how particular actions taken will produce the desired outcomes. This has implications for how the analysis of such decision-making is conducted, as the bias towards a quantitative or rational actor model fails to account for the inability to predict why a particular course of action sounds as if it will produce results while others do not. Indeed, this conceptualization of what strategy is and how strategy is done serves to decenter the traditional theoretical approaches to understanding military strategy development. As opposed to the assumption of a decision-tree based rational scoring system, it opens up the national security bureaucracy to identify the ways in which particular theories of victory are advanced and consensus achieved on what can and should be done and what strategies are deemed to be unworkable or incapable of achieving the desired end states.

As argued in this research, strategy is a narrative that knits not only the tactical actions and operational approach to the achievement of a desired strategic goal, but conveys the available discursive resources that legitimate that narrative. As Hajer (1995) argues this narrative serves to overcome the political and organizational fragmentation that is part and parcel of the strategy debate. As noted in each case, resistance to counterinsurgency existed at varying levels, whether it was the State Department and USAID in Vietnam, U.S. Central Command and MNF-I leadership in Iraq, or the Vice President and other presidential advisors in Afghanistan, alternative narratives were produced to challenge the adoption of COIN as the favored approach.

This conceptualization of narrative as strategy then adjusts the frame of how we think about strategy development and decision-making on geostrategic issues. Whether it is the Revolution in Military Affairs, counter-terrorism, or counterinsurgency, the strategic narrative must knit and interweave the tactical and operational to the strategic and do so in way that legitimates that particular way of thinking. The Iraq war debate, for example, progressed from a place where the notion of an insurgency's existence and the need for counterinsurgency were essentially banned topics from 2004-2005, to operating as the dominant strategic paradigm for the Department in 2008-2009. Again, this analysis has traced how the narrative or storyline serves as the vehicle for constructing and shaping the acceptable parameters of strategy and thought about the wars. This shaping occurs not within the cognitive processes of the individual mind, but instead does so discursively.

Analogical Reasoning and Legitimation

That leads to the question of how a specific strategic narrative and military option manages to capture the discursive space. The answer partly rests in the notion of constructing legitimacy. In this analysis, I traced the ways in which analogical reasoning was employed to normalize the idea that COIN provided the solution to small wars going badly. These analogies were conceptualized as hegemonic, whose meanings were relatively fixed, or as commonplaces, whose meanings and lessons were subject to debate and definition. They provided the discursive resources to serve as short hand for the larger narrative, as well as the resources to define the “right” lessons to draw from historical examples. Conceptualized in this way, we see how hegemonic analogies and commonplaces serve as legitimation claims and how they both discursively shape and are shaped by the debate over the wars. We can further understand how analogies and the lessons from history are not reified bits of knowledge, but instead serve as

interpretable discursive material to shape legitimation claims. For example, in this research I traced the multiple deployments of the Vietnam War and the various lessons attributed to it. It could serve as a lesson in disaster, as a warning of not fully debating the strategic outcomes sought, or as lesson in how a better war with better commanders could turn around failing war efforts.

This has implications for how we understand the process through which strategy is discursively produced within debates and how boundaries of action are determined. Lessons from history are malleable, context specific, and available for deployment to support various legitimation claims. They are those discursive resources that shape the boundaries of action within the strategy narratives. The tracing of the deployment of hegemonic analogies and the more malleable commonplaces through the debates furthers our understanding of how they shape both geostrategic reasoning and policy.

Symbolic Power and Military Doctrine

Finally, this research examined the symbolic capital and power of the COIN advocates across the twin eras of its dominance. COIN discourse wrapped its practitioners in the veneer of the elite class of soldier that was smarter and more adaptable. It brought along academia and the symbolic capital that the “expert” moniker lends to those arguing a particular case. This enabled the best and the brightest and the warrior scholars to set the parameters under which the debate would be held. Their presumed status as the elite produced COIN as “special” and that narrative penetrated into popular culture, think tanks, and various elements of the news media. The expert driven wars of COIN, as detailed in this study, helped bring the notion of the better war to the public at large, as the debate and discussion was covered in depth by various news media.

While the notion of experts in particular forms of warfare is not confined to COIN, as the RMA and its high tech concepts were often categorized as specialists. However, the symbolic capital of the RMA advocates did not have the broad reach or as much scope as the COINdnistas and the Action Intellectuals and did not have the same degree of influence as the COIN advocates possessed in the COIN debates. Indeed, during the Iraq war debate, a Lieutenant Colonel was able to speak with more authority than Generals due to his categorization as an “expert” who understood the challenges of modern war. As detailed in this study, this status and positioning assuredly amplified the voice of the COIN advocates and enabled the shaping of the boundaries of action for developing an “acceptable” strategy in the midst of failing war. This symbolic capital held despite its often ahistorical view of insurgency and counterinsurgency. Indeed, in many cases, the context in which insurgencies were defeated was stripped away, as noted in the critique of comparing Malaya to Vietnam above. As Birtle (2006: 229) argues, U.S. doctrine writers in the 1960s did not look to U.S experiences with Plains Indian tribes or the Revolution, but instead focused on the British experience in Malaya and the Huk Rebellion. The effect is to examine a small number of insurgent conflicts that may or may not reflect the conditions in which the wars are being fought. Indeed, as Shafer (1988) argues, each insurgency must be evaluated singularly as to how it is to be combatted and situated within the appropriate framework.

Having recounted these critical elements of the argument, I now turn to the implications for policy, practice and theory. I argue that this research provides the resources for understanding how we conceptualize and understand geostrategic change, how policy makers can shape the outcomes of strategy debates, and how analysts can better identify, analyze, and critique particular strategic options within debates.

Narrating Geostrategic Change

When grounding strategy development in a narrative analysis, we facilitate an understanding of strategic change and the power of discourse to challenge and displace ideas, as well as unify actors across the national security bureaucracy behind a strategic shift despite the presence of various political and organizational impediments.

The analysis of the COIN debate during OIF perhaps best illustrates approach to understanding geostrategic change, as the notion of counterinsurgency was largely banned across the Department of Defense from 2003-2006, before becoming the only strategic option to receive a full hearing in the Afghanistan debate. So thorough was the shift to COIN, that Admiral Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was a full throated advocate of the strategy during the Afghan war debate in 2009 despite not being a COINdnista. Further, as a Navy Admiral, his service would not have been a lead player in COIN within the Department of Defense, seemingly sidelining notions of parochial Service interests. This was a marked contrast to the COIN debate during OIF where the Joint Chiefs were largely opposed to the notion of adopting COIN due to its impacts on the force and the hollowing out of a strategic reserve should additional contingencies arise. COIN had undergone a transformation in this short time period, from a small SOF specialty that had not had an updated doctrinal manual for twenty years to the driving force behind the training strategies and force development plans. Indeed, the context of the Afghan War debate had shifted enormously from the debate over Iraq, as the Surge and COIN had come to dominate the discourse inside the Department and around the foreign policy community in Washington, D.C. In the post Iraq Surge military of 2009, the talk was not of the “never again” mantra of the post-Vietnam era, but of a “global counterinsurgency campaign” against terrorists groups and the requirement to ensure that the “hard won lessons of COIN” were

not lost again. The insurgent discourse of COIN had captured the argumentative space and for that period was now dominant.

The results of this approach then have implications for how we consider and analyze strategy and policy making. The remainder of this chapter discusses those implications.

Policy Implications:

As Brian L. Steed (2015: 3), a military history professor at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, argues the character of war has changed from being a competition of violence to being a competition of narrative. While the two are not mutually exclusive, the emphasis has shifted from violence to narrative. As the character of war has changed, so has the means through which we understand and reason about the complexities of strategy and strategy making. The narratives of war distill the very complex issues associated with conflict, particularly with the insurgent wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, which had multiple armed groups with varying objectives, into elements that can be grasped and understood. From the perspective of the policy maker, the high degrees of uncertainty associated with military strategy development demands what Roe (1994: 3) calls the underwriting and stabilizing of the assumptions and storylines for a particular strategy. It is those storylines that will serve as the heart of the argument for the policy maker's preferred option and the one which they deploy into the debate. Though we inherently recognize that in order to win a debate, we require a storyline of how particular actions taken produce results, narratives are often dismissed as "just telling stories" (Roe, 1994: 9). As noted in these cases studies, the power of the narrative is the way to render the complex task of strategy making both understandable and legitimate in the eyes of the decision makers and the broader public audience. Without the ability to outline the narrative, identify and deploy legitimation claims, the policy maker won't see the stabilization of a

preferred outcome amidst the competing storylines within strategy debates. Again, though we often inherently recognize this requirement, it is often subordinated to reified notions of interests.

Conceptualizing strategy making in this fashion, policy analysts can then identify the key themes and the ways in which particular commonplaces are deployed into the debates. Indeed, subject positioning and the degree to which particular mystified and mystical notions are present in particular storylines, whether it is the all seeing eye of the drone or the warrior scholar drinking tea with the locals, can be identified. Understanding the ways in which particular storylines are deployed opens the opportunity to create counter narratives, challenge the construction of particular commonplaces, and enable an understanding of the discursive work required to stabilize or destabilize dominant discourses inside of the debate. As this research demonstrated, the ability of the COINdnistas to build the better war narrative generated massive changes to the way the U.S. military organized, trained, equipped, and employed forces in wars. Understanding how narratives and central elements of these storylines provide opportunities to overcome the political and strategic fragmentation provides opportunities for both policy makers and policy analysts seeking change or continuity.

Conclusion

This research sought to expand the framework available for understanding strategy making and demonstrated how narratives and their constituent elements condition the decision making process and the resultant military actions that are a product of these debates. In that sense, it hopes to add to the knowledge base that we have for understanding small wars and how the U.S. and, perhaps, other Western militaries seek to fight them. In so doing, I make no claim on the correctness of the decisions to employ the Strategic Hamlet Program, the Surge, or the Afghan Surge. Instead, I sought to trace, empirically, how those decisions were arrived at.

Whether it was COIN or counter-terrorism, the focus was on identifying how the argumentative process churned out a particular strategy and detailed how that strategy became dominant for a period of time. The decisions on right or wrong are a normative question that will be debated well into the future and themselves have no objectively correct answer that is outside of the claims to truth that surround them. To be certain there are facts associated with the Surge in terms of lives lost and money spent, but to determine strategic outcomes requires an interpretation and expression of what those outcomes are and against what criteria they are judged.

As such, this research sought to pry a bit further into the U.S. national security bureaucracy and identify the ways in which its constituent parts attempt to influence, guide, and capture the debate. To be certain, the organizational structure produces interests for actors in the debate, but these interests are not reified and immovable. Instead, debate produces meaning, which produces strategy, which produces decision. That complex process of meaning making and legitimizing knowledge claims occurs throughout the structure and more routinely than many would imagine.⁶⁶ The intent here was to break from those traditional notions of how structure and “rationality” produce decisions, to examine how strategy is constructed within the process. In so doing, the politically charged notion of the COIN debates served as the vehicle to trace the ways that COIN was produced and applied.

As the next debates over war and strategy play out in the future, others will have the opportunity to mine, refine, and improve the framework highlighted here. As new conflicts arise, we will see new narratives and commonplaces, and our ability to recognize how they produce particular results will open additional opportunities to refine approaches, engage the

⁶⁶ Indeed, a whole series of mundane actions with the DoD that are associated with the production of doctrine and strategy, are subject to a myriad of debates in which particular narratives and analogies are employed to produce consensus on the way forward.

creativity of other scholars, and problematize additional elements of the strategy making process in order to further thicken the analysis of military strategy making.

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