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Victory Has a Thousand Fathers

Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency

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Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

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Cover photo: A U.S. marine stands in a doorway after searching one of the houses of Saddam Hussein's family in Owja, Iraq, April 15, 2003. The village, which is just outside Tikrit, was the former leader's birthplace. AP Photo/Kevin Frayer.

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Summary

Insurgency has been the most prevalent form of armed conflict since at least 1949.¹ Despite that fact, following the Vietnam War and through the balance of the Cold War, the U.S. military establishment turned its back on insurgency, refusing to consider operations against insurgents as anything other than a “lesser-included case” for forces structured for and prepared to fight two major theater wars. In the post-9/11 world, however, insurgency has rocketed back into prominence. As counterterrorism expert William Rosenau notes, “insurgency and counterinsurgency . . . have enjoyed a level of military, academic, and journalistic notice unseen since the mid-1960s.”² Countering insurgents, or supporting the efforts of allies and partners as they do so, is the primary focus of ongoing operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

When a country becomes host to an insurgency, what counterinsurgency (COIN) approaches give a government the best chance of prevailing? Contemporary discourse on the subject is voluminous and often contentious. A variety of different approaches and areas of emphasis are advocated, but such advocacy is based on relatively limited evidence. Advice for the counterinsurgent tends to be based on common sense, a general sense of history, or but one or two detailed historical cases. A broad base of evidentiary support for advocated approaches is lacking. This monograph and its companion, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Detailed Counterinsurgency Case Studies*, seek to alleviate that

¹ Thomas X. Hammes, “Why Study Small Wars?” *Small Wars Journal*, Vol. 1, April 2005.

² William Rosenau, “Subversion and Terrorism: Understanding and Countering the Threat,” in *The MIPT Terrorism Annual 2006*, Oklahoma City, Okla.: National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, 2006, p. 53.

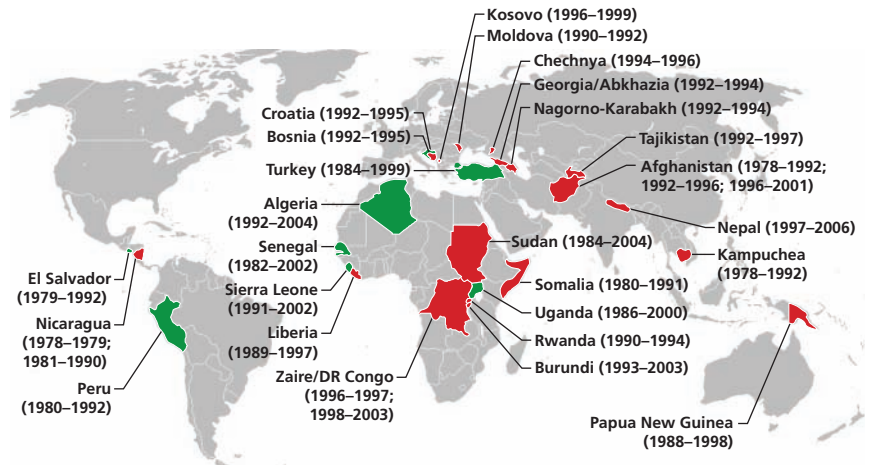
deficit with thorough analyses based on a firm foundation of historical data. This is clearly an area that can benefit from extensive data collection, rigorous analysis, and empirical testing.

Case Selection and Analytic Approach

This research quantitatively tested the performance of 20 distinct approaches to COIN against the recent historical record. Findings and analyses are based on detailed case studies compiled for 30 insurgencies. The locations, dates, and outcomes of these insurgencies appear in Figure S.1.

The selected cases are the 30 most recent resolved insurgencies.³ In addition to being perfectly representative of the recent history of

Figure S.1
Map of COIN Case Dates, Countries, and Outcomes



NOTE: Green shading indicates that the COIN force prevailed (or had the better of a mixed outcome), while red shading indicates that the outcome favored the insurgents (thus, a COIN loss).

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³ Only resolved cases were included because cases in which the outcome has yet to be determined are not useful for identifying the correlates of COIN success. After compiling a list of resolved insurgencies, we selected the 30 most recent by start date.

insurgency, these cases represent geographic variation (mountains, jungles, deserts, cities), regional and cultural variation (Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, the Balkans, the Far East), and variation in the military capabilities of COIN forces and insurgent forces alike.

Twenty distinct approaches to COIN, identified through a survey of the existing literature, were scrutinized through the lens of these 30 cases. Some of these approaches were drawn from classical perspectives on COIN from the previous century, such as pacification and cost-benefit; others are contemporary approaches suggested for ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, such as “boots on the ground” and the approach implicit in U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*.⁴ Also considered were practices advocated for the success of insurgents (as opposed to counterinsurgents).

Key Findings

Because this research was vast in scope, the results are rich, detailed, and sometimes complicated. While different readers may find different aspects of our findings to be the most interesting or illuminating, this section presents six findings identified as key in formulating successful COIN operations.

Effective COIN Practices Tend to Run in Packs

The first finding is the somewhat unsurprising observation that those who succeed in COIN operations do so by implementing a host of good COIN practices while avoiding adverse practices. This is wholly consonant with reports from commanders in both Iraq and Afghanistan that indicate success when engaging in numerous mutually reinforcing lines of operation. In the 30 cases studied here, the frequency

⁴ Headquarters, U.S. Department of the Army, and Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, Field Manual 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5, Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2007. For simplicity, we refer to this publication as FM 3-24 or COIN FM throughout. For a review of classic approaches to COIN, see Austin Long, *On “Other War”: Lessons from Five Decades of RAND Counterinsurgency Research*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-482-OSD, 2006.

with which good COIN practices occur in cases won by the government (COIN wins) and do not appear in cases won by the insurgents (COIN losses) is such that discrimination of any single practice as most important is impossible.

The “good” and “bad” COIN practices referred to were identified in one (or both) of two ways: first, based on a strong a priori grounding in existing COIN literature and research and, second, based on relationships observed in these data during preliminary analyses. Subsequent analyses validated these practices or factors as either positive or negative contributors to COIN outcomes (see Chapter Four for a full discussion). These factors are listed in Table S.1.

The Balance of Good Versus Bad Practices Perfectly Predicts Outcomes

What *is* surprising is that the core finding that effective COIN practices run in packs holds across the 30 cases considered *without exception*. That is, every COIN win in the data (eight of 30 cases) has a strongly positive balance of successfully implemented good versus detrimental factors, and every COIN loss (22 of 30 cases) has a zero or negative balance of good versus detrimental factors. This is illustrated in Table S.2.

Table S.2 presents four pieces of information for each case: the sum of good COIN factors or practices during the decisive phase of the case (out of a maximum of 15), the sum of bad factors (out of a maximum of 12), the balance of the good factors minus the bad factors, and the outcome of the case.⁵ The good and bad factors summed are the same as those listed in Table S.1. So, for instance, the very first row presents the post-Soviet insurgency in Afghanistan, in which the COIN force realized zero of 15 good factors and 10 of 12 bad factors, for a net balance of -10 and, unsurprisingly, a loss for the COIN force.

⁵ Case outcome is from the perspective of the COIN force. “Loss” is a COIN loss, and “win” is a COIN win. Mixed outcomes have been attributed to the side most closely favored. For example, “mixed, favoring COIN” has been included in “win”; “mixed, favoring insurgents” has been included in “loss.”

Table S.1
“Good” and “Bad” COIN Practices or Factors

15 Good COIN Practices	12 Bad COIN Practices
The COIN force adhered to several strategic communication principles.	The COIN force used both collective punishment and escalating repression.
The COIN force significantly reduced tangible insurgent support.	The primary COIN force was an external occupier.
The government established or maintained legitimacy in the area of conflict.	COIN force or government actions contributed to substantial new grievances claimed by the insurgents.
The government was at least a partial democracy.	Militias worked at cross-purposes with the COIN force or government.
COIN force intelligence was adequate to support effective engagement or disruption of insurgents.	The COIN force resettled or removed civilian populations for population control.
The COIN force was of sufficient strength to force the insurgents to fight as guerrillas.	COIN force collateral damage was perceived by the population in the area of conflict as worse than the insurgents’.
The government/state was competent.	In the area of conflict, the COIN force was perceived as worse than the insurgents.
The COIN force avoided excessive collateral damage, disproportionate use of force, or other illegitimate applications of force.	The COIN force failed to adapt to changes in adversary strategy, operations, or tactics.
The COIN force sought to engage and establish positive relations with the population in the area of conflict.	The COIN force engaged in more coercion or intimidation than the insurgents.
Short-term investments, improvements in infrastructure or development, or property reform occurred in the area of conflict controlled or claimed by the COIN force.	The insurgent force was individually superior to the COIN force by being either more professional or better motivated.
The majority of the population in the area of conflict supported or favored the COIN force.	The COIN force or its allies relied on looting for sustainment.
The COIN force established and then expanded secure areas.	The COIN force and government had different goals or levels of commitment.
The COIN force had and used uncontested air dominance.	
The COIN force provided or ensured the provision of basic services in areas that it controlled or claimed to control.	
The perception of security was created or maintained among the population in areas that the COIN force claimed to control.	

Table S.2
Balance of Good COIN Practices and Bad COIN Practices for 30 Cases

Case	Good Factors (15)	Bad Factors (12)	Good – Bad Factors	Outcome
Afghanistan (post-Soviet)	0	10	-10	Loss
Somalia	1	10	-9	Loss
Chechnya I	2	10	-8	Loss
Rwanda	2	10	-8	Loss
Zaire (anti-Mobutu)	0	8	-8	Loss
Nicaragua (Somoza)	0	8	-8	Loss
Sudan (SPLA)	2	9	-7	Loss
Kosovo	1	8	-7	Loss
Afghanistan (anti-Soviet)	1	7	-6	Loss
Papua New Guinea	3	9	-6	Loss
Burundi	2	8	-6	Loss
Bosnia	1	6	-5	Loss
Moldova	2	6	-4	Loss
Georgia/Abkhazia	1	5	-4	Loss
Liberia	3	7	-4	Loss
Afghanistan (Taliban)	2	6	-4	Loss
Nagorno-Karabakh	1	4	-3	Loss
DR Congo (anti-Kabila)	1	4	-3	Loss
Tajikistan	2	5	-3	Loss
Kampuchea	1	3	-2	Loss
Nepal	3	5	-2	Loss
Nicaragua (Contras)	4	4	0	Loss
Croatia	8	3	+5	Win
Turkey (PKK)	11	5	+6	Win
Uganda (ADF)	8	0	+8	Win
Algeria (GIA)	9	1	+8	Win
El Salvador	12	2	+10	Win
Peru	13	2	+11	Win
Senegal	13	0	+13	Win
Sierra Leone	14	1	+13	Win

Table S.2 is sorted from low to high on net balance of good versus bad, which puts all the high scores (those with a positive balance of good versus bad) at the bottom of the table. All of the cases that have a positive balance of good versus bad factors were won by the COIN force; all those with a zero or negative balance were COIN force losses.

This key finding of the importance of a positive balance of good versus bad COIN practices is even more remarkable given that many of the conventional explanations of the outcomes of these cases rely on a narrative of exceptionality—that is, list one or more distinctive, exceptional, or “unique” aspects of the case’s history that are critical to understanding the outcome.

These data show that, regardless of distinctiveness in the narrative and without exception, COIN forces that realize preponderantly more good than bad practices win, and those that do not lose. So, while every insurgency may be unique, that distinctiveness does not matter *at this level of analysis*. Successful implementation of identified good practices always allows the COIN force to prevail, independent of any uniqueness.⁶

Of 20 COIN Approaches Tested, 13 Receive Strong Support, While Three Are Not Supported by Evidence

Unsurprisingly, much of the received wisdom on COIN is validated in this analysis. As part of the analysis, we reviewed the literature on COIN and identified 20 distinct approaches to these operations. We tested each approach against the empirical evidence provided by the 30 case studies. Of the 20 approaches tested, 13 receive strong empirical support, and a further two receive some support. Three approaches, however, are not supported by the evidence, and, in fact, the results provide strong evidence *against* them: resettlement, “crush them” (repression), and various insurgent support strategies. These results are summarized in Table S.3.

⁶ This is not to say that contextual distinctions are not important. Successful implementation of an intended practice in the real world can be difficult indeed, and it can be highly contingent on the details of the situation.

Table S.3 lists each of the 20 approaches tested. From left to right, each row presents the summary name of the tested approach, the number of times the approach was implemented in a COIN loss (out of 22 cases that were COIN losses), the number of times the approach was implemented in a COIN win (out of eight COIN-winning cases),

Table S.3
Strength of Evidentiary Support for 20 Approaches to COIN

Approach	COIN Losses Implementing Approach (of 22)	COIN Wins Implementing Approach (of 8)	Degree of Evidentiary Support
Development	0	4	Strong support
Pacification	1	8	Strong support
Legitimacy (government)	3	7	Strong support
Legitimacy (use of force)	4	6	Some support
Democracy	7	8	Some support
Resettlement	8	1	Strong evidence against
Cost-benefit	2	8	Strong support
Border control	1	8	Strong support
"Crush them"	18	2	Strong evidence against
Amnesty/rewards	0	5	Cannot be tested
Strategic communication	2	8	Strong support
COIN FM	1	7	Strong support
"Beat cop"	4	8	Strong support
"Boots on the ground"	2	6	Strong support
"Put a local face on it"	NA	NA	Cannot be tested
Cultural awareness	NA	NA	Cannot be tested
Tangible support reduction	0	8	Strong support
Criticality of intelligence	0	6	Strong support
Flexibility and adaptability	6	8	Strong support
Insurgent support strategies	22	7	Strong evidence against
Continuation and contestation	18	0	Strong support

and the degree of support provided by the evidence. We considered approaches to COIN strongly supported if the relationship between the presence of the approach and the case outcome was very strong (using it and it alone is a very strong indicator of the outcome); “some support” indicates that the relationship is strong but the approach’s application results in a significant number of losses; and “strong evidence against” means that the approach’s application predicts a greater proportion of losses than wins. An approach was considered untestable if it was never applied.⁷

Next, we provide detailed results for two of these approaches, which merit special attention.

Repression Wins Phases, but Usually Not Cases

While some repressive COIN forces have managed to prevail, this analysis shows unambiguously that repression is a bad COIN practice. Only two of eight COIN winners used escalating repression and collective punishment during the decisive phase of the conflict: Turkey and Croatia. While these two COIN forces employed repression, they also employed a pack of good COIN practices, apparently enough to offset the negative impact of repression.

Repression was shown to win intermediate phases, but in these case studies, the vast majority of phases won with repression preceded ultimate defeat in the case. This occurs over and over in the data. Fourteen of 22 cases in which the insurgents prevailed include an intermediate phase in which the COIN force used escalating repression and collective punishment to temporarily take the upper hand on its way to defeat. Examples include all three Afghanistan cases, Somalia, Burundi, Tajikistan, and Kosovo. While it is possible to find examples

⁷ Two of the approaches, “put a local face on it” and cultural awareness, are corollaries to broader approaches that are only applicable when the primary COIN force is an external force. The primary COIN force was composed of outsiders in only three of the 30 cases informing this analysis, and the factors for “put a local face on it” and cultural awareness were present in none of these three cases. There is thus insufficient evidence to test these two approaches in any way. Similarly, the way in which the amnesty/reward approach was operationalized created possible causal conflation and precluded definitive results.

of success in COIN through repression, they are either exceptions or short-term victories.

Tangible Support Trumps Popular Support

The ability of the insurgents to replenish and obtain personnel, materiel, financing, intelligence, and sanctuary (tangible support) perfectly predicts success or failure in the 30 COIN cases considered here. In all eight cases in which the COIN force prevailed, it also disrupted at least three tangible insurgent support factors, while none of the COIN forces in the 22 losing cases managed to disrupt more than two.

How does tangible support relate to popular support? In 25 of the 30 cases, popular support and tangible support ran parallel. That is, if the majority of the population in the area of conflict wanted the COIN force to win (our operationalization of popular support), the COIN force was able to disrupt at least three tangible support factors; if the insurgents had majority popular support, the COIN force was unable to significantly reduce tangible support. This finding is consonant with population-centric approaches to COIN. When needed tangible support comes primarily from the population, popular support is the center of gravity.

What happens when popular support and tangible support diverge? In five of the 30 historical insurgencies, tangible support did not follow popular support. In three cases (Moldova, Rwanda, and Tajikistan), the COIN force had the support of the majority of the population but failed to significantly reduce the insurgents' tangible support (which was primarily coming from supporters outside the three countries). In all three of these cases, the COIN force lost. In two cases (Turkey and Croatia), the COIN force did not have the support of the majority of the population in the area of conflict but managed to significantly reduce tangible support to the insurgents anyway. In both of those cases, the COIN force prevailed.

This suggests an important caveat to population-centric COIN approaches: The population is the center of gravity if the population is the primary source of insurgents' tangible support. When insurgents' tangible support needs are being met elsewhere, a successful campaign will require additional areas of emphasis.

Poor Beginnings Do Not Necessarily Lead to Poor Ends

These analyses show that getting off to a poor start in the early phases of a conflict does not necessarily lead to a COIN loss. Of the eight cases won by the COIN force, in only two cases were the outcomes of all phases favorable to the COIN force (Senegal and Croatia). In fact, in three of the cases won by the COIN force, the COIN force had the upper hand only in the decisive phase (Peru, Sierra Leone, and Uganda). Changing practices can lead to changed outcomes.

Recommendations

Taken together, these findings suggest two primary recommendations for those preparing to undertake COIN:

1. *Plan to pursue multiple mutually supporting lines of operation in COIN.*
2. *Build and maintain forces that are capable of engaging in multiple mutually supporting lines of operation simultaneously.*

COIN forces that prevail over insurgencies *all* register a considerable positive balance of positive practices and activities over detracting practices. Not every positive approach attempted by the COIN force will actually be successfully realized in practice. There is no hard-and-fast threshold for the minimum number of good COIN practices in which a COIN force must engage to win. The various good COIN practices identified here are not conducted in sequence; they are conducted simultaneously. If one is serious about supporting or conducting COIN, one must be prepared to engage in as many of the identified good COIN practices as possible, for as long as necessary.

For the broader U.S. government, this means that U.S. COIN efforts must be sufficiently resourced, in terms of both staffing and other support, to give multiple areas of endeavor the attention needed. Further, non-U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) partner agencies must be sufficiently robust to contribute to development, governance, and legitimacy, and their activities must be coordinated with DoD

COIN operations. For DoD, this means rejecting out of hand any proposal or plan that emphasizes a single COIN approach or other “magic bullet” at the expense of other positive practices. Current best practices with regard to mutually supporting lines of operation from Iraq and Afghanistan must be carried forward into future contingency planning. While commanders who have served in contemporary operations intuitively accept the importance of multiple mutually supporting lines of operation to successful COIN, this intuition must be incorporated into the institutional memory of U.S. defense organizations—in joint and service doctrine both for planning and in areas that are specific to COIN or irregular warfare. Finally, these first two recommendations will require DoD to establish and maintain increased capabilities in the areas of building partner capacity, civil affairs and reconstruction, and information and influence operations.

3. *Ensure the positive involvement of the host-nation government.*

Several of the empirically supported approaches (e.g., democracy, government legitimacy, strategic communication) and several of the items on the list of good COIN practices depend on the nature and behavior of the host-nation government. If a host-nation government or its structure and practices do not comport with good COIN practices, all possible pressure should be brought to bear to ensure government reform. Failure to realize the good COIN practices associated with government, governance, and legitimacy leaves available significantly fewer members of the pack of good COIN practices and leaves no guarantee that victory remains possible. The United States should think twice before choosing to help governments that will not help themselves.

4. *Keep a scorecard of good versus bad factors and practices; if the balance does not correspond to the desired outcome, make changes.*

Table S.2 shows that, without exception, winning COIN forces had a significant positive balance of good practices relative to bad practices, and losing COIN forces had a zero or negative balance. When

engaging in COIN operations, as dispassionately and accurately as possible, assess the presence or absence of the factors listed in Table S.1, and add them up. Is the COIN force where it should be (remembering that the lowest-scoring COIN winner had a balance of five)? If not, change strategies (or implementation approaches). A blank scorecard can be found at the end of this volume.

5. *Recognize that there is time to adapt.*

Obviously, it would be better to start with and stick with good COIN practices, but that is sometimes easier said than done, especially when working by, with, or through partner nations. Just because a COIN or COIN-support operation gets off to a seemingly poor start, do not abandon the intention of following good COIN practices. Of the eight winning COIN forces in our case studies, only two (Senegal and Croatia) won every phase of the conflict. Three of the winners (Peru, Sierra Leone, and Uganda) won only the final phase. Getting off to a bad start does not doom a COIN operation. Recognize that providing support for a struggling COIN operation or reinvesting in a failing one is not a strategically quixotic or doomed endeavor.

Our fifth recommendation has important implications for balancing risk. If future scenarios include the possibility of major combat operations against a peer or near-peer adversary, failure to adequately program for that contingency is an unacceptable risk. Loss in such a conflict could be unbearably costly for the nation. If futures include COIN operations (and any plausible future must), the risk associated with being insufficiently prepared for such operations is lower: Operations may face initial setbacks and may take longer to see ultimate resolution, but initial failure does not necessitate ultimate failure—there is time to adapt. Risk calculation–based allocations must be mindful not only of the relatively greater likelihood of COIN operations than major combat operations against near-peer adversaries but also of the relatively lower levels of risk associated with initial shortcomings in the former.

6. *Avoid using and discourage allies and partners from using repression and collective punishment in COIN.*

Our analyses strongly suggest that repression is a poor COIN practice. Only two of eight COIN winners used repressive practices in the decisive phase of their cases, and they offset the negative impact by employing a host of good practices. Consider the case of Tajikistan in the mid-1990s, in which the Tajik government and its Russian allies aggressively and indiscriminately beat back an initially successful insurgency, temporarily gaining the upper hand but further alienating the population by ignoring its needs, grievances, and well-being. Repression can win phases by dealing the insurgents a blow and making support for the insurgents more costly for supporters, but our data show that the vast majority of phases that were won with repression ultimately increased popular support for the insurgency and ended in a COIN defeat for the entire case.

U.S. military doctrine and practice preclude the use of disproportionate force or collective punishment, so this is not a concern with regard to U.S. forces. However, all possible partners and allies do not share this prohibition. When joining allies or establishing or reestablishing partner security forces (or militias), all possible care should be taken to ensure that they maintain proper respect for human rights and have a full understanding of the likely long-term consequences of routine disproportionate or illegitimate uses of force. If partners are unlikely to adhere to these standards, they should be avoided as partners.

7. *Ascertain the specific support needs of and sources of support for insurgent adversaries and target them.*

When insurgents draw their support primarily from the population, a primarily population-focused set of COIN strategies should work. When insurgents' support comes from external actors (or other sources), then approaches explicitly targeting that supply chain are necessary, along with efforts to win over the population. DoD should ensure that this strategic and operational imperative is prominent in future plans and doctrine.