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Principles of Modern American Counterinsurgency: Evolution and Debate

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Insurgency and counterinsurgency are not new to Americans. People often forget that the American Revolution was an insurgency by colonists against the British crown. In South Carolina, Frances Marion, the so-called "Swamp Fox" who hid with his band of guerrillas in the woods and led raids against British troops, is considered an American hero. Likewise, during the American Civil War, southern "partisans" such as John Mosby, of Mosby's Rangers, became infamous for their successful guerrilla tactics against Union soldiers.[1]

Americans have an even more extensive history as counter-insurgents –with a mixed record of success.[2] Early American expansion led to a number of bloody engagements between the Army (and sometimes the Marines) and various Native American tribes in the Northwest Indian War (1785-1795), in the Creek and Seminole Wars that followed in the South, and in the many famous clashes with the Sioux, the Comanche, and others in the West throughout the 1800s. Many of the lessons learned through trial and error on the American frontier were handed down through word of mouth by soldiers who brought their personal experiences from one fight to the next.

This nearly uninterrupted string of guerrilla and counter-guerrilla operations informed the U.S. military's approach in later conflicts, including the guerrilla elements of the Civil War and its aftermath; the Mexican-American War of 1846-48; the Spanish-American War and the long struggle against Filipino insurgents from 1898 to at least 1910.[3] The Marine Corps leveraged the only doctrine the Army had up to that point (*Small Wars and Punitive Expeditions)[4]* in the so-called Caribbean "Banana Wars," and ultimately recorded its lessons learned from that experience as doctrine in the 1940 publication of the *Small Wars Manual*.[5]

By the 1940s and through the 1980s, most of this knowledge was lost to the mainstream American military, which had completely re-focused its efforts on the challenge of winning WWII and then preparing for a conventional clash with the Soviets. Throughout the Cold War, *foreign internal defense* ("FID") and occasionally small-scale *unconventional warfare* ("UW") or counterinsurgency was practiced by Army Special Forces; but for the most part, the U.S. military focused on honing its technological edge over the Soviet Union and preparing for large-scale conventional war-fighting. During the Vietnam War, the military re-learned counterinsurgency, but took so long in adapting to the Vietnam environment that, although U.S. Forces arguably

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[1] See John Singleton Mosby Living History Association's website: http://www.mosbysrangers.com/
[2] Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1860-1941,* Center for Military History, United States Army, 1998.
[3] Janine Davidson, *Learning to Lift the Fog of Peace*, PhD dissertation, University of South Carolina, 2005.
[4] Keith Bickel, *Mars Learning: The Marine Corps Development of Small Wars Doctrine, 1915-1940,* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001.
[5] *Small Wars Manual*, United States Marine Corps, 1940.

defeated the Viet Cong guerrillas by 1972, they failed to defeat the North Vietnamese regular forces before the American people began to call for withdrawal.[6]

In the years following the Vietnam War, counterinsurgency thought, theory, and practice was again relegated to the special operations community, whose focus was primarily on small-scale FID and sometimes, UW. A string of humanitarian and peace operations in the 1990s, including Somalia, Haiti, and the Balkans, generated debate among national security leaders about the relevance of the military's overwhelming emphasis on large-scale conventional war and the appropriate use of the United States' armed forces in general. A generation of military troops gained experience in complex urban conflicts, where a focus on protecting populations and working with civilian agencies and non-governmental organizations over waging conventional battle against enemy forces became the key to success. This on-the-ground experience, combined with the many institutional learning systems put in place after the Vietnam War, were key factors in the American military's adaptation to counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan.[7]

When the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003, existing doctrine for counterinsurgency was slim. The Special Forces community had doctrine for foreign internal defense and low intensity conflict, but it was not widely disseminated and was narrowly focused. In the fall of 2005, over two and a half years into the struggle to stabilize Iraq and 4 years into the operation in Afghanistan, General David Petraeus partnered with Marine Corps General James Mattis to lead a year-long effort to craft a new Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM-3-24). This new doctrine, which was edited by counterinsurgency expert Dr. Conrad Crane, drew heavily on current operational experiences as well as historical case studies and "best practices" of past counterinsurgencies. The final draft of the manual was published in the fall of 2006, but prior drafts had been distributed liberally via email throughout the writing and editing process contributing to the bottom-up learning process among troops at various levels.[8]

The manual's popularity resulted in the University of Chicago Press publishing it in the spring of 2007 with a new introduction by Sarah Sewall, the Director for the Carr Center for Human Rights at Harvard's Kennedy School and a Clinton-era former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Humanitarian Operations and Peacekeeping. In this thought-provoking essay, the human rights expert discussed how much of a radical departure this new doctrine was for the conventional American military. "The counterinsurgency field manual challenges all that is holy about the American way of war. It demands significant change and sacrifice to fight today's enemies honorably. It is therefore both important and controversial. Those who fail to see the manual as radical probably don't understand it, or at least don't understand what it is up against."[9]

Sewall also pointed out that the manual was "written by the wrong people."

> …it emerged – of necessity – from the wrong end of the COIN equation. Because counterinsurgency is predominately political, military doctrine should flow from a

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[6] Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army in Vietnam,* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988; Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam.* New York: Harcourt, 1999.

[7] Janine Davidson, "Introduction to the University of Michigan Edition of FM 3-07 'Stability Operations' Next Generation Doctrine," University of Michigan Press, 2009.

[8] John Nagl, "Forward to University of Chicago Press Edition," in *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[9] Sarah Sewall, "Introduction to the University of Chicago Press Edition," in *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

broader strategic framework. But political leaders have failed to provide a compelling one.[10]

Sewall's call for political clarity on "when and why the United States will conduct counterinsurgency" requires that civilian political leadership have a core understanding of the basic principles of COIN. Understanding what is involved in such campaigns will give civilian leaders more realistic expectations when contemplating intervention. It was with this goal in mind that the State Department published a condensed *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* in 2009. This guide was written by representatives from various government agencies, including Departments of Defense, Agriculture, Treasury, Justice, and Homeland Security, USAID and the intelligence community, reflecting the requirement for multiple non-military expertise in a successful COIN campaign. Importantly, it warns policy makers, that "historically COIN campaigns have almost always been more costly, more protracted and more difficult than first anticipated."[11]

The *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* highlights the fact that the United States is most likely to be an *external* actor – an intervening third party – in a counterinsurgency campaign conducted in a foreign country. The assumption is that the United States will be in a *supporting* role to the affected government or host nation (HN).   Ironically, this reality is not highlighted very well in the Army's doctrine, FM 3-24, which was published two years earlier. Drawing heavily from many "classic" theorists and historical works on counterinsurgency, such as the French military officer, David Galula, FM 3-24 often conflates the role of the host-nation and that of the intervening force when it uses the term "counterinsurgent." The fact is that these two roles are not the same. While the host nation and the intervening force may be working toward a common objective – quelling the insurgency – they have slightly different roles; and these roles change over time as the host nation begins to build the capacity to protect the population and defeat the insurgents. The State Department's Guide makes this perfectly clear.

These two publications, along with hundreds of other articles, books, and internet blog-posts, have informed the American dialogue on the conduct and purpose of counterinsurgency. What follows is a distilled overview of some of the basic principles that have emerged. It is meant as a guide for discussion, as this conversation among national security policy-makers, military leaders, and civilian practitioners continues to evolve.

Principles of American COIN
Most successful COIN campaigns include the following characteristics:

(I)   **A long-term political strategy focused on creating a viable, sustainable stability – through building or enhancing *local* government effectiveness and legitimacy – while marginalizing insurgents and winning over their sympathizers.** Building the political legitimacy and effectiveness of the government, in the eyes of its people and the international community, is fundamental. Political reform and development represent the hard core of any counterinsurgency strategy, and provides a framework for programs and initiatives. In parallel, the political strategy is designed to undermine support for insurgents, win over their sympathizers to the government side, and co-opt local community leaders to ally themselves with the government.

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[10] Ibid.

[11] *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide*, State Department Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, January 2009.
Available on line at: WWW.STATE.GOV/T/PM/PPA/PMPPT

(II) **An integrated civilian-military effort based on a common assessment of the situation and which synchronizes development, governance and security efforts to support the political strategy.** COIN is said to be 80% political, 20% military**.** COIN is an operational concept that proceeds along four lines of operation – combat operations, the provision of essential services to the population, the training and equipping of host nation security forces, and the strengthening of the economy and government of the host state. It synchronizes civil and military efforts under unified political direction and common command-and-control, funding and resource mechanisms. This requires a shared diagnosis of the situation, agreed between civilian and military agencies, coalition and host nation governments, and updated through continuous, objective situational assessment. Often, military and civilian agencies – not to mention non-governmental organizations – do not share a common vernacular or planning process. For this reason, unity of command is desired, but due to bureaucratic and political realities, it is often elusive.

(III) **A close and genuine partnership with the host nation government in the lead and which builds self-reliant, independently functioning institutions over time.** The ultimate goal in COIN is a sustainable and viable peace. Achieving such stability requires a competent host nation government that keeps its promises and delivers value to the population to sustain legitimacy and momentum. Thus, COIN best-practice strategy puts the host government genuinely and effectively in the lead, via integrated planning and consultation. Intervening or external forces can apply their resources and expertise to cover local gaps and must carefully synchronize and sequence security operations to support development assistance and governance activities, and vice versa. As T.E. Lawrence said, "Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly."

(IV) **Population-centric security founded on the presence of security forces (military and/or police), local community partnerships, self-defending populations, and small-unit operations that keep the enemy off balance and make the people feel safe.** Counterinsurgency focuses on the population, rather than the enemy, because while the enemy is fluid, the population is fixed. Both the insurgents and counterinsurgents need the population to do certain things (support, acquiesce, etc.) in order to be successful. Effective counterinsurgency provides human security to the population, where they live, twenty-four hours a day. This, rather than destroying the enemy, is the key task. It demands continuous presence by security forces that protect population centers, local alliances and partnerships with community leaders, the creation of self-defending populations through local neighborhood watch and guard forces, and small-unit ground forces that operate in tandem with local security forces.

(V) **The continuity and commitment of key personnel, with sufficient authority and resources to do the job**. Counterinsurgency campaigns that experience frequent changes of leadership and direction are less successful. Insurgencies are inherently protracted events. Key personnel associated with the intervening force in a counterinsurgency campaign (commanders, ambassadors, political staffs, aid mission chiefs, key advisers and intelligence officers) should be there for the duration if at all possible. Key personnel must receive adequate authority and sufficient resources to get the job done while taking a long-term view of the problem. Short term strategies that fail to acknowledge what is actually required for success are like cheap coats of paint that fail to do the job and burn resources.

(VI) **A strong emphasis on building effective and legitimate local security forces, balanced by the ability to provide direct security to the population (engaging the enemy in direct combat where needed) while these security forces are being built**. Effective counterinsurgency requires indigenous security forces that are legitimate in local eyes, operate under the rule of law, and can effectively protect local communities

against insurgents. Building such forces takes vastly more time and resources than is usually appreciated by foreign advisors, as host nations often have corrupt or underdeveloped security forces. While these forces are being built, the coalition must be willing to close with the enemy in direct combat, thereby minimizing insurgent pressure on local institutions. Direct combat (not remote engagement) is essential to minimize collateral non-combatant casualties, ensure flexible responses to complex ground environments, and allow rapid political and economic follow-up after combat action.

(VII) **A region-wide approach that disrupts insurgent safe havens, controls borders and frontier regions, and undermines terrorist infrastructure in neighboring countries (which requires alliances with regional allies to be most effective).** The most favorable environment to the counterinsurgent is an isolated environment – preferably an island! Most counterinsurgency campaigns, however, necessitate engaging regional actors in order to be successful. Because of the active sanctuary insurgents rely on in neighboring countries, and the support they receive from trans-national terrorist organizations and cross-border criminal networks, an integrated region-wide strategy is essential. This must focus on disrupting insurgent safe havens, controlling borders and frontier regions, and undermining terrorist infrastructure in neighboring countries, while building a diplomatic consensus that creates a regional and international environment inhospitable to terrorists and insurgents.

(VIII) **A Host Nation government, that has a basic level of legitimacy among the population and is willing to make appropriate adjustments to address root causes of the insurgency**. Success in COIN is enhanced when a host nation is willing to examine and recognize local grievances. The basic pre-existing bureaucratic structures of governance should be built on and enhanced by the intervening advisors to build a viable peace based on the rule of law. Host governments not willing to address grievances or adjust practices based on external assistance will contribute to the problem, not the solution in an insurgency. As the U.S. Government's *Counterinsurgency Guide* asserts, "Much will hinge on the degree to which policy makers consider the affected government to be receptive to assistance, advice and reform; it is folly to intervene unless there is a reasonable likelihood of cooperation."[12]

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[12] *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide,* p.3 .

Appendix[13]
Key Terms and Conceptual Confusion

American military doctrine and theory has struggled with terminology for decades. Figure 1 depicts the many different terms applied to this non-traditional category of military operations. Below is an explanation of the most common terms in use today and brief discussions of the controversies surrounding them.

IRREGULAR POLITICAL WARFARE
UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE
REVOLUTIONARY WARFARE
TRANSNATIONAL WARFARE
ANTI-BANDIT CAMPAIGNS
REMOTE AREA CONFLICT
MODERN WARFARE
PROTRACTED WAR
PEOPLE'S WAR
ARMED PEACE
VIOLENT PEACE
AMBIGUOUS WAR
INTERNAL CONFLICT
INTERNAL WARFARE
GUERRILLA WARFARE
COUNTER INSRUGENCY
INSURGENCY
SUBTERRANEAN WAR
SUBVERSIVE WARFARE
ATTENUATED CONFLICT
CONCEALED AGGRESSION
HIGH PROBABILITY CONFLCIT
MARGINAL MILTIARY OPERATONS
INDIRECT WAR
DARK WAR
FID/IDID
SPECIAL WAR
NATION BUILDING

Post Conflict Reconstruction

Stability Operations

Military Operations Other Than War

Irregular Warfare

ANTI-IMPERIALIST WARFARE
AGGRESSIVE CONTAINMENT
CONSTRAINED OPERATIONS
RESTRICTIVE ENGAGEMENT
LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT
CONFLICT SHORT OF WAR
STRATEGIC OBLIQUE
BRUSH FIRE WAR
SHADOW WAR
COVERT WAR
SUBLIMITED WAR
LOWER LEVEL WAR
UNCOMFORTABLE WAR
HIGH PROBABILITY CONFLICT
PARAMILITARY CRIMINALITY
FOURTH DIMENSIONAL WAR
RS OF NATIONAL LIBERATION
INTERNAL DEFENSE & DEVELOPMENT
COUNTERSUBVERSIVE WAR
WAR AGAINST LESSER ADVERSARIES
REVOLUTIONARY GUERRILLA WAR
SMALL WAR

FIGURE I: Key Terms[14]

Counterinsurgency (COIN):
- DoD: "those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat an insurgency."[15]
- State Department: "comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes."[16]
- These two "official" definitions reflect the fact that countering an insurgency requires a strategy tailored to the particular nature of the insurgency. As discussed above, this

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[13] All Department of Defense definitions are available online at: http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/
[14] This chart prepared by William Flavin of the U.S. Army's Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, Carlisle, PA.
[15] DoD Dictionary version, 17 October 2008: url: http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/
[16] *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide*, State Department Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, January 2009. Available on line at: WWW.STATE.GOV/T/PM/PPA/PMPPT

entails a comprehensive assessment of the root causes as well as the tactics, techniques and strategy of the insurgents.

Counterterrorism (CT):
- DoD: "Operations that include the offensive measures taken to prevent, deter, preempt, and respond to terrorism."
- CT is different from COIN in that terrorists are not necessarily in a competition for control of the population against the local or regional governing authority. CT operations are thus offensive operations, focused less on a competition for governance and more on undermining and disabling the terrorist *network*. In some Commonwealth countries, there is a distinction made between "anti-terrorism,": which is defensive in nature, and "counterterrorism," with is more offensive, disruptive, or preventive, as described here.

Foreign Internal Defense (FID):
- DoD: "Participation by civilian and military agencies of a government in any of the action programs taken by another government or other designated organization to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, and insurgency."
- See also IDAD, which emphasizes the preventative steps a state takes to protect itself from such threats.

Guerrilla Warfare (GW):
- DoD: "Military and paramilitary operations conducted in enemy-held or hostile territory by irregular, predominantly indigenous forces."
- "Guerrilla" is derived from the Spanish word for war, *Guerra,* with the suffix for "little," "*illa.*" See "small war" below.

Insurgency:
- DoD: "an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through use of subversion and armed conflict."
- State Department: "the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region."

Internal Defense and Development (IDAD):
- DoD: "The full range of measures taken by a nation to promote its growth and to protect itself from subversion, lawlessness, and insurgency. It focuses on building viable institutions (political, economic, social, and military) that respond to the needs of society."
- IDAD is a term used since the Cold War and in many respects can be seen as the more preventative side of COIN or FID. COIN is conducted in response to, rather than in anticipation of, an insurgent threat. (Though early intervention is preferred). FID emphasizes the role of an intervening power in supporting the security elements of a state.

Irregular Warfare (IW):
- DoD: "A violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s). Irregular warfare favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capacities, in order to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will."
- This term is increasingly popular in the U.S. military, especially the Marine Corps and the special operations community. Others, including many in the U.S. Army, object to the term because of its conceptual confusion and because non-military partners object to having their mission sets re-crafted under the "war" terminology. This is especially the case among diplomats who understand that with respect to "diplomacy" and international law, "war" has very specific meanings. Other objections in the military community focus on the intellectual difficulty in categorizing too many things under one "umbrella" term (such as "MOOTW") and in defining something by what it is not (i.e. not "regular").

Kinetic:

- Kinetic is a non-doctrinal term used increasingly today to differentiate the more violent, direct, enemy-focused military operations from the more subtle, population-focused, often civilian-led operations conducted in counterinsurgency and stability operations. A key differentiating element of "kinetic" actions is that they can be potentially lethal.[17]

Low Intensity Conflict (LIC):

- No longer listed in the DoD Dictionary
- Previously, the U.S. Army defined LIC as " ... a political-military confrontation between contending states or groups below conventional war and above the routine, peaceful competition among states. It frequently involves protracted struggles of competing principles and ideologies. Low-intensity conflict ranges from subversion to the use of the armed forces. It is waged by a combination of means, employing political, economic, informational, and military instruments. Low-intensity conflicts are often localized, generally in the Third World, but contain regional and global security implications."[18]
- In the office of the Secretary of Defense in the Pentagon, there is still an Assistant Secretary of Defense for "Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict and Integrating Capabilities (SOLIC/IC)." This office was congressionally mandated in the 1980s and it would take a revision by Congress to change it. Currently, the ASD for SOLIC/IC oversees stability operations, counterinsurgency and irregular warfare capabilities development.

Military Operations Other than War (MOOTW):

- No longer in the DoD Dictionary
- MOOTW was a doctrinal term used in the 1990s by the American military to describe a large number of what they considered non-traditional tasks. The 1995 version of the *Joint Publication for Operations 3-07: Joint Doctrine for Operations Other than War*, defined the term as: "operations that encompass the use of military capabilities across the range of military operations short of war. These military actions can be applied to complement any combination of the other instruments of national power and occur before, during, and after war."[19] The manual goes on to explain that these missions can be either combat or non-combat in nature. They include categories as diverse and dangerous as "arms control; combating terrorism; …support to counter-drug operations; enforcement of sanctions/maritime intercept operations; enforcing exclusion zones; ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight; humanitarian assistance; military support to civil authorities; nation assistance/support to counterinsurgency; noncombatant evacuation operations; peace operations; protection of shipping; recovery operations; show of force operations; strikes and raids; and support to insurgency."[20] The diverse range of operations included under the category of MOOTW, combined with the military's tradition of focusing primarily on major theater warfare, led to a popular joke among officers that "MOOTW" really means, "military operations other than *what we want to do*."

Small Wars:

- No longer listed in the DoD Dictionary

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[17] Thank you to David Kilcullen for help in clarifying the common use of this term.

[18] *U.S. Army Field Manual 100-20, Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict.* 1990. Replaced by FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* (2006) and FM 3-07 *Stability Operations* (2008).

[19] Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 3-07: Joint Doctrine for Operations Other Than War* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing, June 16, 1995).

[20] Ibid.

- "Small Wars" was a term used to describe British colonial clashes in Asia and Africa in the late 19th and early 20th century. It was made popular at the time by the publication of *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* in 1896 by C. E. Caldwell, a British Colonel (later a Major General), and veteran of the Second Afghan and Boer Wars.[21] The term was used by the American Army to describe its own clashes with Native Americans in the 1800s. The Marine Corps used the term to describe their experience in the Caribbean "Banana Wars" of the 1930s and later published the *Small Wars Manual* in 1940.[22] Today, the popular website, www.smallwarsjournal.com, which is run by retired U.S. marines, publishes articles and discussions on counterinsurgency, stability operations and other matters relating to 21st century conflict, and hosts discussions by the key thought leaders in the field.

Stability Operations:
- DoD: "An overarching term encompassing various military missions, tasks, and activities conducted outside the United States in coordination with other instruments of national power to maintain or reestablish a safe and secure environment, provide essential governmental services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction, and humanitarian relief."
- Pentagon Policy: In 2005 a new DoD Directive issued by the Deputy Secretary of Defense placed greater emphasis on the military's role in stability operations. According to *DoD Directive 3000.05, Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations,* "Stability operations are conducted to help establish order that advances U.S. interests and values. The immediate goal often is to provide the local populace with security, restore essential services, and meet humanitarian needs. The long-term goal is to help develop indigenous capacity for securing essential services, a viable market economy, rule of law, democratic institutions, and a robust civil society."

Unconventional Warfare (UW):
- DoD: "A broad spectrum of military and paramilitary operations, normally of long duration, predominantly conducted through, with, or by indigenous or surrogate forces who are organized, trained, equipped, supported, and directed in varying degrees by an external source. It includes, but is not limited to, guerrilla warfare, subversion, sabotage, intelligence activities, and unconventional assisted recovery.
- UW has come to be seen as more offensive in nature. And as a type of warfare that usually involves non-state actors. UW is often conflated with GW or IW, highlighting the continued conceptual confusion and debate among theorists, policy makers, and practitioners.

Special thanks to Andrew Exum, of Kings College and David Kilcullen of the Crumpton Group, for comments and suggestions on this paper.

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[21] C.E. Caldwell and R. Douglas Porch, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice,* 3rd edition, University of Nebraska Press, 1996.
[22] *Small Wars Manual: United States Marine Corp 1940*, as republished in 1996, Sunflower University Press