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H-Diplo/ISSF Editors: **Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse**
H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable and Web/Production Editor: **George Fujii**
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Introduction by Thomas Maddux

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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University Northridge

In 2015 the United States faces a number of opportunities to intervene with military force in countries of secondary or even less strategic importance to U.S. policy makers. President Barack Obama's completion of the withdrawal of American ground combat troops from Iraq, and plans to draw down U.S. troops from Afghanistan, have not reduced either the escalation of recent conflicts such as in Libya and Yemen, or the continuation of destructive ethnic and religious strife with international participation in Syria. As if that were not a sufficient number of states with contested conflict taking place, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) expanded from gradual growth after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, migrated into the Syrian Civil War, and in February 2014 charged into western Iraq to seize Mosul and other Sunni dominated areas. Boko Haram in Nigeria also escalated its attacks in northeastern Nigeria and engaged in the kidnapping of school girls, burning of villages, murder of residents, and attacks on Nigeria's neighbors such as Chad. The list does not even include Russian President Vladimir Putin's seizure of Crimea from the Ukraine in February 2014 and Putin's continued support of Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine with weapons, so-called 'Russian volunteers,' and funds.

President Obama has limited U.S. involvement in most of the conflicts listed above and so far has rejected full U.S. military intervention. He has slowed down the withdrawal from Afghanistan, unleashed U.S. airpower against ISIL in northwestern Syria and in Iraq, sent several thousand U.S. advisors back into Iraq to retrain an Iraq army that abandoned Mosul and U.S. supplied arms and vehicles to ISIL. Few American commentators have called for Obama to send in American combat forces to take on ISIL in Iraq or Syria.

Neoconservatives who recommended the invasion of Iraq in 2003 in part to overthrow Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and begin the modernization process of spreading representative government and capitalism in the Middle East have been silent about an opportunity to spread democracy. Faced with the continuing sectarian and religious strife in Syria and the failure of the Shiite dominated regime in Iraq to carry out an inclusive relationship with the Sunnis which contributed to the spread of ISIL in Iraq, think-tank specialists and former military officers who advocated counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan have also been reluctant to recommend sending U.S. ground troops back into the Middle Eastern cauldron.

In *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counter-Insurgency* Retired Colonel Gian Gentile has launched a frontal offensive against counter-insurgency (COIN) advocates for their misrepresentation of previous conflicts including the British defeat of a Chinese minority insurgency in Malaya from 1949 until 1960 and the U.S. COIN efforts in Vietnam from 1960 to 1973.¹ Gentile then focuses on the role of COIN in U.S. policy in Iraq, including his service as executive officer of a brigade in Tikrit in north central Iraq in 2003

¹ *Wrong Turn* does not have a bibliography but Gentile's "A Note on Sources" and endnotes contain references to his archival research and relevant published and secondary sources. The footnotes in the reviews by Bourque, Hazelton and Porch also contain many secondary sources that engage in the debate on COIN and national security strategy.

and as Commander of the Eight Squadron, Tenth Calvary in western Baghdad in 2006. Gentile concentrates on what changed or did not change with respect to U.S. military operations after the arrival of General David Petraeus in February 2007 with his “Surge” forces and new COIN strategy of which Petraeus had overseen the creation for the U.S. Army and Marine Corps in Field Manual 3-24 (FM 3-24), *Counterinsurgency*.² In a final chapter, Gentile evaluates U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and emphasizes problems similar to Iraq with respect to a failure to develop the right strategy to achieve the policy aim of the destruction of al Qaeda in Afghanistan. By focusing on COIN tactics to achieve armed nation building “to build up an Afghan government and economy that would win the population over to its side and thus prevent the return of al Qaeda” (118), Gentile concludes that the U.S. could not succeed. “This nation-building hypothetical is, of course, pure fantasy,” Gentile asserts, noting the lack of political will to do something that might take generations and the fact that “such an enterprise would simply not be worth the effort, especially when we remember that the core policy goal in Afghanistan is the limited one of defeating al-Qaeda” (134).

The reviewers are favorably impressed with Gentile’s *Wrong Turn*. Lloyd Gardner suggests that Gentile is a “mythbuster” and agrees with Gentile’s evaluation, most notably the emphasis on the role of a “savior general” who arrives in time to apply a successful COIN strategy, most notably British General Gerald Templer in Malaya, General Creighton Abrams in Vietnam (although some military specialists argue that the anti-war movement and Congress rescued defeat from Abrams’ strategy for victory), General Petraeus in Iraq, and General Stanley McChrystal in Afghanistan. Gardner compares the COIN theorists with a colleague’s comment about ‘deconstruction’ theories in literature and social science: “You go down to the end of the road, but all one finds is more road.” In conclusion, Gardner suggests that Gentile’s study should escalate the reassessment of COIN advocates “that will likely end with COIN theorists regarded in much the same way as climate change deniers.” Stephen Bourque also endorses Gentile’s evaluation of the Malayan and Vietnam conflicts and notes that, as Gentile stresses, Iraq was different than the earlier conflicts, and that Afghanistan was not similar to any of the three conflicts, yet COIN advocates tried to apply the same tactics in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Bourque also points out that Gentile probably assumes that readers recognize the implications of COIN for resources and capabilities. “A ‘wrong turn’ towards counterinsurgency doctrine means that the military’s finite resources are diverted,” Bourque warns, “meaning that the military is diverted from its fundamental task of fighting a well-equipped opponent ... from the actual conduct of national defense.” Douglas Porch considers Gentile’s discussion of Vietnam stronger than that of Malaya, but agrees with what he considers Gentile’s three major points. First, COIN may be just as violent and destructive as conventional warfare. According to Gentile, Petraeus’s ‘surge’ in 2007 tripled Iraqi civilian deaths. Second, FM 3-24, Petraeus’s COIN document “is counterfeit dogma anchored in bogus history,” concludes Porch, and the third

² In his first chapter, “The Construction of the Counterinsurgency Narrative,” Gentile critiques the origins of COIN and Petraeus’s FM 3-24 and emphasizes that during his leadership in Iraq his and other U.S. forces were already engaged in “armed nation building” and the major activities associated with COIN. See Gentile, 91-98.

issue is the “savior general” who arrives with a new COIN strategy to replace the failing, non-COIN efforts of the commander who is relieved: Abrams replacing William Westmoreland in Vietnam, Petraeus taking over in Iraq from General George Casey, and McChrystal succeeding General David McKiernan in Afghanistan. In all three cases, Porch agrees with Gentile that there was not a basic change in strategy to FM 3-24. Petraeus stood the “basic principle of 3-24 on its head when he armed the Sunni minority in Anbar Province to defend themselves against the very Shia-dominated government he was sent to Iraq to strengthen. So much for COIN as a strategy for nation-building,” concludes Porch.

Jacqueline Hazelton agrees that Gentile has produced an important study with emphasis on the “need for realistic assessments of costs and benefits and the likelihood of success in undertaking any military intervention; the imperative to link ends, ways, and means in a strategy that serves national interest.” Hazelton, however, does suggest that a “stronger editorial hand would have helped strengthen” Gentile’s analysis. Since Gentile takes the reader into the “middle of a long-running, painfully acrimonious debate between COINdinistas and COINtras (who do not believe in the good governance COIN narrative),” Hazelton suggests that the non-expert “is likely to be bewildered by Gentile’s passion and by his explanations” whereas “practitioners may long for a more systematic analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of different types of COIN with an eye to success and failure.”

Hazelton also notes a number of self-contradictions in Gentile’s account. A major target of Gentile are the ‘savior generals’ and he strives to “rehabilitate the reputations” of generals David Barno, McKiernan, Westmoreland and Briggs who implemented COIN before being replaced by generals “who gained more glory for” COIN tactics. Hazelton questions whether these generals should be praised if they practiced COIN as did their successors and notes that Gentile practiced COIN during his tours in Iraq before the issuance of the Army FM 3-24 that Gentile “vehemently criticizes ...and its authors and supporters.” Gentile’s critique of COIN lacks systematic development, according to Hazelton, on several major issues such as Gentile’s conclusion that COIN “will work with the commitment of millions of troops and generations of effort” along with necessary “firepower and hunting and killing.” Another issue is why COIN has such “longstanding appeal to practitioners, policymakers, and publics” and why COINdinistas do not consider “either the interests of the other players or the will and capability of the client state to make sustainable the intervener’s necessarily short-term efforts.”

The reviewers agree with Hazelton that Gentile raises important policy questions that need to be considered so that the U.S. does not end up following through COIN “a recipe for perpetual war” (33). As Hazelton concludes, “questions of when and how to intervene on behalf of clients will remain painfully salient as long as the United States defines itself as the indispensable nation, as long as it identifies important national security interests in many (if not all) internal conflicts, and as long as it considers itself capable of righting the wrongs of the world through the military tool that is pop [ulation]-COIN.”

Participants:

Gian Gentile received a Ph.D. at Stanford University and taught for many years at West Point. He is a retired Colonel in the U.S. Army and he commanded a combat battalion in west Baghdad in 2006. He is a contributor to the *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Policy*, *Small Wars Journal*, and the *World Politics Review*, and author of *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counter-Insurgency* (The New Press, 2013).

Stephen A. Bourque (Ph.D. Georgia State University) is professor of history at the School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where he teaches subjects related to the theory, history, and practice of the operational art of war. He retired in 1992 after twenty years enlisted and commissioned service, earning a bronze star for his service on Operation DESERT STORM. He is the author of several books and numerous articles including *Jayhawk! The VII Corps in the 1991 Persian Gulf War* (2002), *The Road to Safwan* (2007), and *Soldiers' Lives: The Post Cold War Era* (2008). He is a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* (University of Calgary), and an active member of the Society of Military History. Currently, he is working on a manuscript on the Allied bombing of France during the Normandy Campaign.

Lloyd C. Gardner is Professor Emeritus of History at Rutgers University. A Wisconsin Ph.D., he is the author or editor of more than fifteen books on American foreign policy, including *Safe for Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 1984), *Approaching Vietnam* (W.W. Norton, 1988), and *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Ivan Dee, 1995). He has authored several books on the U.S. in the Middle East, most recently *Killing Machine: The American Presidency in the Age of Drone Warfare* (The New Press, 2013). He has been president of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Affairs, and at present he is working on a book on leakers from Daniel Ellsberg to Edward Snowden. He lives in Newtown, Pa, with his wife Nancy.

Jacqueline L. Hazelton (Ph.D. Brandeis University, Politics, 2011) is a Professor of strategy and policy at the U.S. Naval War College. Her research interests include compellence, asymmetric conflict, military intervention, counterinsurgency, terrorism, the uses of military power, and U.S. foreign and military policy. She is writing a book on intervention counterinsurgency success.

Douglas Porch earned a Ph.D. from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge University. Distinguished Professor Emeritus and former Chair of the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, he is at present an Academic Visitor at St Antony's College, Oxford and Visiting Fellow at Oxford's Changing Character of War Programme. His books include *The French Secret Services. From the Dreyfus Affair to Desert Storm* (1995), *The French Foreign Legion. A Complete History of the Legendary Fighting Force* (1991) which won prizes both in the United States and in France, *The Conquest of the Sahara*, *The Conquest of Morocco*, *The March to the Marne. The French Army 1871-1914*, *The Portuguese Armed Forces and the Revolution*, and *Army and Revolution. France 1815-1844. Wars of Empire*, part of the Cassell History of Warfare series, appeared in October 2000 and in paperback in 2001. *The Path to Victory. The Mediterranean Theater in World War II*, a selection of the Military History Book Club, the

History Book Club, and the Book of the Month Club, was published by Farrar, Straus, Giroux and Macmillan in the UK in May 2004. It received the Award for Excellence in U.S. Army Historical Writing from The Army Historical Foundation. His latest book, *Counterinsurgency. The origins, Development and Myths of the New War of War*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2013 and has been placed on the Army Chief of Staff's reading list for all officers. At present, he is researching a book on French combatants in World War II.

Review by Stephen A. Bourque, School of Advanced Military Studies, U. S. Army Command and General Staff College

Gian Gentile's *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counter-insurgency* summarizes the arguments of one side of an ongoing debate within the United States Army about the nature of twenty-first century war. After a decade of its chasing Iraqi Shiite and Afghan Taliban insurgents, it is sometimes difficult to remember that the American military that invaded Iraq in 2003 was there to fight a traditional conflict. Two corps-sized units, modernized descendants of similar organizations that fought in World War II, Korea, and the 1991 Gulf War, crossed the Iraqi border that March to overthrow Saddam Hussein's government. U.S. Army and Marine Corps conventional forces, supported by an impressive array of attack helicopters, jet fighters and bombers, quickly annihilated a decrepit Iraqi Army, scattering its survivors back to their homes. As the official history of the invasion pleaded: "It was a campaign of liberation."¹ However, it did not seem that way for the average Iraqi citizen as American strategic and political blunders followed the military success. Once Saddam Hussein was in hiding, public order disintegrated and soldiers and Marines watched the massive looting and civil mayhem without taking action to stop it. The Bush administration's government administrator, L. Paul Bremer III, with two strokes of his pen, destroyed the military and civilian infrastructure that had run Baathist Iraq since the 1970s. Ignoring the only other authority in the country, the Shiite, and Sunni tribal leaders, the United States government tried to reshape Iraqi society. It failed miserably and by early 2004 the country had disintegrated into a civil war, with American forces in the middle.² The military units the American government had sent to defeat Saddam's army were not the ones it needed to restore order and help create a new government after hostilities. The Bush administration had not planned, in sufficient detail, for the post-war era.

As the situation worsened, commentators began to decry how unprepared the military was for fighting this 'insurgent' conflict. It was an unfair assertion, as the administration refused to admit the nature of the war, referring to those opposing the occupation as 'dead enders' and other euphemisms, masking the depth of Iraqi resistance. Many in the service, however, based on other post-war histories of other conflicts, knew what was coming and anticipated the problem. Commenting on how little thought the administration had given to the post-war environment, a panel at the Army War College had warned before the invasion that "the possibility of the United States winning the war and losing the peace is real and serious. Thinking about the war now and the occupation later is not an acceptable

¹ Gregory Fontenot, E. J. Degen, and David Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom*, vol. 2004 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 2004), xxii.

² Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Endgame: The inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), 18-39.

solution.”³ Policy makers gave little attention to the force requirements, which are different from the invasion units, to stabilize the Iraqi government and help rebuild its economy. Since the administration was not interested in this kind of investment, the elimination of the Baathist bureaucracy and the Iraqi Army meant that there was no chance to prevent the state from exploding into a civil war. The administration took a long time to acknowledge it had a problem and to direct the Department of Defense to change its focus in Iraq from conventional offensive combat to stability operations. Yet, rather than focus on administration policies, many commentators and pundits asked why the Army was not prepared for this kind of war?

John Nagl, in *Learning How to Eat Soup with a Knife* (2002),⁴ argued that the Army needed to learn from previous experience, such as insurgencies in Malaya and Vietnam, and change its approach to war. This book, praised by officials at the highest level of the Army, became the centerpiece for those who wanted a counterinsurgency-centered program of training, organization, and doctrine. Believing the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan were going to be the norm for the future, Nagl and others argued for a major shift from conventional state-centered war to solving problems based on nation building rather than the destruction of the enemy army.⁵ Almost overnight military schools, journals, and presses began addressing issues of counterinsurgency to the near-exclusion of traditional fundamental techniques of warfare. The combat training centers reduced their emphasis in combined-arms training and began focusing on the specific skills that leaders believed they needed in the unconventional environment. Units deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan put their tanks and artillery pieces in storage and prepared for war by focusing on tasks of advising and ‘host nation capacity building.’ In pursuit of these revisions, the Army and Marine Corps published a field manual called *Counterinsurgency* in 2006,⁶ in an attempt to inform those who would train and lead units into Iraq and Afghanistan. The primary author of this document was the dean of the American counterinsurgency movement, General David Petraeus. Challenging ‘King David,’ as he was often known in officer circles, was not a way to further one’s career, so most in the military went along with the counterinsurgency narrative. Moving to Iraq, Petraeus supervised the so-called ‘Surge’ of 2007, credited by politicians as providing America a victory in Iraq. Soon the general was off to Afghanistan and gathering praise from many in the government and news media. It seemed like everyone in the military and politics was supporting this new way of American war: counterinsurgency.

³ Army War College Study cited in Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 72.

⁴ John A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁶ Department of Army, *Field Manual 3-24, Counterinsurgency*, (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2006) <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/Repository/Materials/COIN-FM3-24.pdf>

However, not everyone accepted this argument. Back in 2007, Lieutenant Colonel Gian Gentile began questioning the basis of this doctrinal revision. He argued that: “We’ve come to see counterinsurgency as the solution to every problem and we are losing the ability to wage any other kind of war.”⁷ Gentile, with two tours in Iraq and a doctorate in history from Stanford University, had the experience and education to rival Petraeus, and simply did not agree with the direction in which Petraeus was taking the Army. Following battalion command, and while serving as a professor at the United States Military Academy, Gentile began challenging this emphasis on counterinsurgency. Writing in the popular *Small Wars Journal*, he unleashed a series of attacks with titles such as “Nation-Building at the Barrel of an American Gun” (2009), “COIN is Dead, (2011),” and “Beneficial War: The Conceit of American Counterinsurgency” (2011).⁸ His articles in *Foreign Policy* and other journals and newspapers have the same bomb-throwing flair, such as his August 13, 2013 op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times*, “America’s Nation Building at Gunpoint.”⁹ Obviously, he has made more than his share of enemies within the current military and foreign-policy hierarchy. Gentile’s current book, *Wrong Turn: America’s Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency*, ties together many of the ideas and concepts he has been exploring for the last few years and attacks what he calls the “cult of counterinsurgency” (6).

Gentile is disturbed that the current approach to counterinsurgency warfare is based on events in British Malaya from 1949 until 1960, and American operations in Vietnam, especially after the appointment of General Creighton Abrams as commander of American forces in Vietnam following the Communist 1968 Tet Offensive. Neither of these examples, Gentile suggests, are appropriate models for American military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The evidence indicates that neither conflict was an example of state building. In addition, changing commanders did not change the tactical conduct of the war, and the new commanders in each instance fought no differently than their predecessors. In two short chapters, he investigates both wars with the purpose of showing how each case study is different from the other in context, but similar in the way it was fought. Tactics did not fundamentally change with the arrival of a new commander. The Malayan Emergency was the British suppression of a Chinese minority with only about 7,500 actual fighters. While they were tenacious opponents, the British were, over a long period, able to consolidate support from the ethnic Malayan population and isolate the insurgents. The Vietnam conflict, in contrast, was a war of national liberation that had been in progress at least since 1945. While the insurgents in the south suffered an operational defeat during the Tet Offensive, the North Vietnamese Army was still intact, improving its weaponry, and showing no signs of giving up the fight, no matter what Abrams did. Gentile’s arguments about the differences in the events and the way Americans fought them are generally sound and supported by his evidence.

⁷ Yochi J. Dreazen, “Officer Questions Petraeus’s Strategy,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 7, 2008.

⁸ <http://smallwarsjournal.com/author/gian-gentile>.

⁹ <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/aug/13/opinion/la-oe-gentile-army-colonel-gives-iraq-and-afghanis-20130813>

The author then moves on to two chapters involving the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. He clearly establishes that the Iraq war was not like either Malaya or Vietnam, but rather was a civil war between at least three groups (Kurds, Shiite, and Sunni) that was enabled by the destruction of Saddam's rule. As Gentile points out, and many officers who served in Iraq during that period can attest, the arrival of General Petraeus and the beginning of the so-called 'surge' of 2007 did not fundamentally change how the U.S. military was fighting the war. The additional troops were certainly helpful, and Petraeus did infuse a new spirit into the conflict. However, the methods American units were using across the war zone changed not because of the commander, but because the nature of the war had changed. The difference was the desire of the Sunni tribal leaders to break ties with al Qaeda and reassert their control. What also changed was the American strategic decision to leave in 2010, an event none of the local leaders were inclined to delay. Gentile wonders whether had Petraeus not arrived, and had the so-called 'Sunni Awakening' developed as it did, the ultimate outcome would have been any different. He argues that the war in Afghanistan, that is still ongoing at the writing of this review, is completely different from any of the other three examples. Yet, the counterinsurgency narrative continued with new generals, initially Stanley McChrystal and later David Petraeus. Gentile argues that there was no fundamental change in military operations with their arrival. What did change was the American and NATO resolve to remain in the region indefinitely. The problem in Afghanistan, as in Vietnam and Iraq, was one of strategy, not tactics. As Gentile points out, "Tactical and organizational improvements do not save wars fought under failed strategy" (116). The cult of counterinsurgency, as he calls it, promises easy fixes to difficult problems. It is, as he points out, strategy and policy that determines a conflict's outcome, not tactics. Afghanistan is, in many ways, still a feudal society based on tribes and does not have a coherent central government. No amount of short-term adjustments and improvements can fundamentally change that environment. But why, he asks, "do Americans think that Afghanistan can be taken from its current condition to that of a stable nation in only a handful of years?" (133). The counterinsurgency myth is "catnip for advocates of U. S. intervention overseas..." (139). The doctrine's danger is that it promises success in a complex world, no matter how bad the strategy.

Those not involved in national security debates might wonder at why all of this is an issue. Missing from Gentile's discussion, probably because he understands it so well, is the debate over resources and capabilities. A 'wrong turn' towards counterinsurgency doctrine means that the military's finite resources are diverted, meaning that the military is diverted from its fundamental task of fighting a well-equipped opponent; in other words, from the actual conduct of national defense. The problem with low-intensity conflicts is they actually diminish the effectiveness of the military force, as units do not practice their fundamental combat tasks. If population-centric operations are the wave of the future, then the nation does not need expensive tank, mechanized infantry, and artillery battalions. These organizations require high levels of training and leadership to be effective, as they were in the Iraqi invasions of 1991 and 2003. These obviously successful operations were the product of years of tactical refinement and practice, skills not easily regained once lost. As long as the nation is not going to require these capabilities, then an Army focused on counterinsurgency is acceptable. If, however, the country must confront another organized

military force, then this “wrong turn” could have serious consequences. It took the U.S. Army a decade to recover from its wasted years in Vietnam, and not until the late 1980s was it again an effective instrument of American policy. We should remember that no kind of counterinsurgency tactics and techniques, under any American general, could have prevented the North Vietnam Army’s tank columns driving into Saigon in 1975. Today, an entire generation of military officers has only rudimentary proficiency in the elements of modern combined arms warfare. Yet, for example, the fact that the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) threatening Syria and Iraq today is using tanks, artillery, and other conventional means that it will ultimately require an appropriate traditional response. The author is correct to be concerned.

Gentile writes with the passion of a practitioner engaged in active debate. His fundamental argument that American talent and expertise cannot overcome a people’s history, culture, social relations, and current bad government is solid. For someone familiar with these debates and arguments, the book makes great sense. However, especially for the informed and interested reader, this book is in need of expansion. The author assumes the reader’s familiarity with details surrounding the conflicts in Malaya, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Most importantly, he does not embellish the key paragraph on the nature of American war based on “improvisation and practicality” (15), which, in my view, is at the core of the argument. While the U.S. Army has fought many small wars, from the Indian wars of the 1870s, through the Philippines in the early 1900s, through the Vietnam conflict of the 1960s, its fundamental focus for training and intellectual development has been on conventional war. What I believe the author fails to do is explain the price the military and the nation will pay for taking this wrong turn and why it is so deadly.

Review by Lloyd Gardner, Emeritus Rutgers University

Gian Gentile is a mythbuster. The claims for the new way for waging colonial wars known as ‘counter-insurgency,’ or more simply, ‘COIN,’ Gentile writes, originate in misleading accounts of the successful effort of the British to defeat a pro-Chinese Communist uprising in Malaya after World War II. Here the most important postulate of all future counter-insurgency narratives arose: the appearance of a savior general who understood that his predecessors had been fighting the wrong war, the wrong way, and turned defeat into victory. In Malaya that general was Gerald Templer, then in Vietnam it *could have been* Creighton Abrams, and finally in Iraq and Afghanistan, it was David Petraeus. Of course, the narrative did not really take off until after the publication of Field Manual 3-24, the new army doctrinal manual written under the watchful eye of General Petraeus at Fort Leavenworth.¹ Then, almost as if some Greek tragedian had written the story, savoring the irony of casting Petraeus in the role, President George W. Bush sent him to Iraq in 2007 to prove that the theory worked. Behold the master of the ‘Surge’! The legend grew almost at once that Petraeus, holding up FM 3-24 ahead of him, turned the war around. There were even thoughts that General Petraeus might run for president – and win – and there was a brief campaign to give him a 5th star. All this -- at least until he exited the stage before the final curtain.

The very first charge Gentile places against the theorists is that none of the savior generals actually reversed what was already underway in each of the cases from Malaya to Afghanistan. True, there were adjustments, as would inevitably happen under new commanders, and in some instances a more efficient chain of command, and coordination of efforts with other agencies of government. The mantras were, ‘Now we’re all on the same page,’ and ‘We now have the right inputs.’ The Malayan example supposedly demonstrated how Templer managed to sort out the pro-Communist guerillas from the ‘squatter population’ of ethnic Chinese through the use of what would become known in Vietnam as strategic hamlets when President Ngo Dinh Diem attempted to separate the peasants from the Vietcong with disastrous results. In Malaya, however, the ethnic question was crucial to victory because the majority of the population supported the government from the outset. The doctrinal manual, FM 3-24, suggested a different proportion of ten percent diehards on each side of the struggle, however, with the population in the center to be won over. It was never that way in Malaya. The British won the war with conventional firepower, on a very small scale compared to Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan. Yet the myth of COIN was born.

It was carried over in the early 1960s to Vietnam by Sir Robert Thompson, one of Templer’s advisers in Malaya. Although Gentile does not discuss it, Thompson also impressed President John F. Kennedy with theories about how to separate the population from the guerillas. The strategic hamlet experiment was not only Diem’s failure, but America’s as well. It was General William Westmoreland’s fate to play the role of the man who lost the war in Vietnam, or, in some accounts, almost lost the war until General

¹ <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/Repository/Materials/COIN-FM3-24.pdf>

Abrams appeared on the scene after the Tet offensive by Hanoi in 1968. In this narrative, 'Westy' did not pursue pacification, but instead continued search and destroy missions that alienated the 'people' from the Saigon government and its American supporters. In these narratives of a better war, the 'people' to be saved are almost an inert gas, waiting to be energized into activity, but, as Gentile effectively demonstrates, Westmoreland and his commanders understood it was a political war, and attempted to meet both objectives in a persistently dynamic situation where what could be accomplished on either end depended on a whole series of factors. The testimony from the enemy, moreover, as in the Malayan case, was that it feared much more American firepower than the pacification programs. After General Abrams came onto the scene in Saigon, and the pacification programs had had two years, senior communist leaders recalled that even with superior firepower and pacification, while the "enemy had achieved some temporary results ... they failed to destroy or wipe out the revolutionary infrastructures of our local and guerrilla forces." (62)

What Vietnam demonstrated, argues Gentile, was that COIN *did not work* and that pacification was really armed nation-building. "Unless the United States was willing to stay in Vietnam for generations to do armed nation building, the collapse of South Vietnam was inevitable." (83) But the legend grew anyway, and became part of the official narrative of the Iraq War, with David Petraeus as the savior general and the 'Surge' as the proof the theory worked, and would have worked in Vietnam. But even as the first reports of success were coming in, it was known that the Sunni 'Awakening' against al-Qaeda and the payoffs to tribal members who had been hurt by all the violence and the interference with trade outlets had been the major factors that really turned the war around. Ironically, moreover, the American election in 2006 that signaled domestic exasperation with the war may have had more to do with events in Iraq than the surge because it hastened the Sunni tribes' decision-making about opposing Al-Qaeda, and pushed forward the so-called 'Sunni Awakening' to meet the prospect of an American withdrawal!

Gentile had personal experiences of these events as a commander in the war in Iraq, and details here how the violence had already begun to decline before the Surge. Since that time, despite what has happened, a powerful coalition of think-tank experts has lined up to offer testimony about COIN's effectiveness, and how, indeed, the Vietnam War was all but won under General Abrams until President Richard Nixon's Watergate troubles, combined with a weak-kneed Congress that quaked before the raucous sounds from college campuses, forced a humiliating withdrawal. And, leaping forward four decades, in a repeat of the tragedy, President Barack Obama abandoned a victory in Iraq by only half-heartedly trying for an agreement to keep troops in Iraq, and has left Baghdad's struggling government in the lurch.

The flexibility of COIN advocates is truly amazing in making such comparisons. Given the American inability to influence Iraq's leadership to be more inclusive, a factor that doomed the Maliki regime, blaming Obama for forfeiting a victory is no more than a legend. Less is said in the COIN narrative about the mess in Afghanistan. With good reason, because COIN became a back-page story after the day of the drone began. Yet in a telling comment, writes Gentile, one general told "his political masters" that they needed to be patient because they were in it for "the long haul." He concludes that "Such thinking by military leaders

produces a situation in which the military's tactical methods eclipse strategy and even policy" (118).

COIN thus becomes what one of my colleagues once said about 'deconstruction' theories in literature and social science: You go down to the end of the road, but all one finds is more road. An early convert to COIN theories was Barack Obama, who embraced them in his first major speech on foreign affairs as a presidential candidate at the Wilson Center in Washington in July 2007. His speech was actually part of a running critique of the Bush Administration's conduct of the war, including the Surge – although he later took back criticism of the Petraeus offensive. Describing the global situation in terms of a 'wild frontier,' where older military strategies would not work, he implied he knew how to do COIN better. But in June 2014 at a West Point Conference, one of the most famous pundits of our day, Max Boot, argued for Petraeus's unquestioned success, and looking back to Vietnam, now saw General Edward Lansdale as an early-on savior general, who could have provided a sound strategy while there was still time to win over the population. What doomed the American efforts was not the error of allowing tactics to eclipse strategy, but Congressional short-sightedness in Vietnam and presidential passivity in Iraq. Gentile's book should begin a re-assessment of all such claims that will likely end with COIN theorists regarded in much the same way as climate change deniers.

Gian Gentile's *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* demands attention for the author's critical questions about U.S. foreign and military policy choices since 9/11 and for the passion he shows in raising them. Gentile is appalled by the waste of U.S. counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts in Iraq, where he served as a U.S. Army officer, and in Afghanistan. He aims to drive a stake through the heart of the popular, military, and policymaker belief in population-centric COIN (pop-COIN), also known as hearts-and-minds COIN, and sometimes as simply COIN, though there are a variety of ways in which a state may conduct a campaign against insurgents that are more or less effective and more or less compassionate. This governance model of COIN, briefly, posits that the results of bad governance, such as poverty and repression, cause insurgency and that as a result good governance (comprising such goods as liberal democracy, free markets, transparency, and respect for human and political rights) defeats insurgency because it meets popular needs and interests, gaining popular allegiance for the state and depriving the insurgents of the support they need to exist.

Gentile's book joins a growing, important literature spawned by U.S. intervention adventures since 9/11 that drills down into the reality behind U.S. military, policymaker, and popular assumptions about the Western way of COIN.² This body of work examines topics such as the limits of U.S. power, the utility of military force, the dynamics of COIN, and the processes of state building. Such examinations are not new. Previous U.S. military interventions on behalf of clients threatened by insurgencies have also produced powerful work. But it appears that the U.S. government is not very good at learning the lessons of intervention.³

¹ These opinions are the author's own, not those of the war college or the U.S. government.

² E.g., Paul Staniland, "States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders," *Perspectives on Politics* 10:2 (June 2012), 243-264; Andrew Radin, *The Limits of State Building: The Politics of War and the Ideology of Peace* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Ph.D. thesis, June 2012); Colin Jackson, "Government in a Box? Counter-insurgency, State-building, and the Technocratic Conceit," in *The New Counterinsurgency Era in Critical Perspective*, eds. Celeste Ward Gventer, David Martin Jones, and M.L.R. Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Karl Hack, "The Malayan Emergency as Counterinsurgency Paradigm," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 32:3 (June 2009), 383-414; Paul Dixon, "'Hearts and Minds?' British Counterinsurgency Strategy from Malaya to Iraq," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32:3 (June 2009), 353-381; Richard Betts, *American Force* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012); Gregory Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014); Jason Brownlee, "Can America Nation-build?" *World Politics* 59:2 (January 2007), 314-340; Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Joshua Rovner, "The Heroes of COIN," *Orbis*, 56:2 (Spring 2012); Dale Andrade, "Westmoreland Was Right: Learning the Wrong Lessons from the Vietnam War," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19:2 (June 2008), pp. 145-181; and Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 2006).

³ See, for example, Robert A. Packenham, *Liberal America and the Third World: Political Development Ideas in Foreign Aid and Social Science* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973); D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Douglas J. Macdonald, *Adventures in Chaos: American Intervention For Reform in the Third World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Benjamin C. Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency*

Gentile wants to destroy the myth of the efficacy of the governance model of COIN because he sees it as profoundly damaging to U.S. interests. He also wants to shatter the false idol of the hero general who rides into a conflict on his metaphorical white horse and wins the war with a new, pop-COIN strategy. He also wants to annihilate any last shred of faith in the value of the U.S. Army's 2006 COIN manual, which appeared as a popular trade paperback in 2007,⁴ because he finds its premises and advice unrealistic (xvii) compared to his experiences in Baghdad in 2006. Gentile also attacks the triumphalist narrative of the success of the 2007 surge of additional U.S. forces into Iraq as the main cause of the reduction in violence.

His is a very personal quest. As an historian and a soldier, Gentile writes, still pondering his experiences in Iraq long after returning home, "I continued to examine the historical underpinnings of the COIN narrative and the problems with American strategy. ... struggling to come to terms with the nation's history of interventions in places like Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan" (xviii). His goal is to "shed light on the truth of American counterinsurgency warfare and expose the myth of the counterinsurgency narrative" (xviii). Gentile, until his recent retirement from the Army, taught in the storied history department at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the book, he lingers over his memories of loss and heartbreak amid the devastation of war to try to help the reader understand his visceral response to the costly speciousness of the prevailing COIN narrative (e.g., xiv, xv, 130, 138, 140).

Gentile takes aim at his juicy targets through consideration of four COIN campaigns: the British success in Malaya, the failed U.S. effort in Vietnam, the failed U.S. campaign in Iraq, and the failing U.S. war in Afghanistan. Gentile asserts that contrary to the COINdinitas' (those who believe in the conventional narrative of COIN success) conventional wisdom, pop-COIN did not achieve the successes attributed to it in these cases (8). COIN, as Gentile defines it, "aims to win the hearts and minds of local populations by providing security along with economic assistance, bridges, schools, roads, and other elements of infrastructure, and finally good governance" (2). The goal of this provision of public goods is to gain popular support for the state and the intervening COIN force, "thereby forcing the insurgents to fight in the open, where they will be hunted down and killed or captured" (2). This model, Gentile states flatly, "is wrong" (3). He also argues that COINdinitas have inflated and distorted the role of individual leaders in order to burnish the narrative of the hero general that supports the false COIN narrative.

Why is all this a problem? According to Gentile, belief in this will-o-the-wisp that is pop-COIN entices Americans to embark upon foreign adventures unnecessary to U.S. national

Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1991).

⁴ U.S. Department of the Army, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

security that have costs too high to pay. Presidents and pundits who believe that “war is about soft power” (7) enable or support the transformation of the U.S. military into a worldwide constabulary rather than a real fighting force (8).

In the Malaya case, which is often referenced as the leading model of a successful, humane COIN campaign, Gentile primarily attacks the narrative of the hero general, the belief that the arrival of General Gerald Templer heralded a new, winning approach to British COIN in the colony. In fact, Gentile says, the campaign under Templer was a continuation of the effective campaign under earlier commanders. The British success was due not to a hero general but to inherent British advantages (37-38) and to the so-called Briggs Plan, written by an earlier commander, General Harold Briggs. The Briggs Plan focused on resettling Malaya’s ethnic Chinese squatters, largely unwilling providers of the resources the insurgents needed to survive, as well as other Malaysians into tightly controlled prison camps to cut the flow of resources to the insurgents. These population and food control efforts were paired with efforts to kill or capture the insurgents themselves (41-42).

In terms of Vietnam, Gentile strikes out against the belief that the U.S. Army won in Vietnam thanks to a hero general but was stabbed in the back by the perfidious, weak-willed public and policymakers (84). General Creighton Abrams did not win the war; the war would only have been winnable if “the United States was willing to stay in Vietnam for generations to do armed nation building” (83), Gentile concludes. Abrams did not, in fact, radically change the strategy of his much-maligned predecessor, General William Westmoreland.⁵ Abrams too focused on search-and-destroy operations, though he increased Westmoreland’s focus on ‘pacification,’ the hearts-and-minds-winning element of the campaign, and on Vietnamization, the process of handing the war over to the South Vietnamese to fight (71). What the United States won under Abrams, Gentile says, was increased state control of the civilian population driven “by the hard hand of war,” not popular allegiance gained through pop-COIN pacification efforts such as land reform (75).

Gentile argues that it was the widely held, pernicious belief in the narrative of the hero general in Vietnam as well as the yoked belief in the power of pop-COIN to defeat insurgencies that led to the U.S. debacle of Iraq (84). His primary target is the narrative proclaiming that the surge in U.S. forces into Iraq in 2007, urged upon President George W. Bush by General David Petraeus and other COINdinistas, saved the day by instituting a new strategy that protected the populace and knocked down the insurgents. Gentile defends Petraeus’s predecessor, General George Casey, from the imputation that he did not get COIN and thus had to be replaced by the more politically acute and thus successful Petraeus (102-108). He argues that Casey was also a thinking general; he understood the complex situation in Iraq and Petraeus did not make significantly different campaign choices as Casey’s replacement (108). Casey and Petraeus oversaw similar strategies focused on dispersing U.S. troops throughout cities in conjunction with Iraqi forces,

⁵ The leading voice in the ‘Westmoreland got it wrong, Abrams won’ narrative is Lewis Sorley, originally in *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books, 1999).

protecting the populace, suppressing sectarian violence, fighting al Qaida, and handing over fighting to Iraqi forces to allow a U.S. withdrawal (108). The reduction in violence that took place in 2007 after the announcement of the Surge was due to several factors, Gentile writes, only one of which was the eventual increase in U.S. troop strength (87).⁶ It could not have been the U.S. Army-Marine Corps' 2006 Field Manual 3-24 on Counterinsurgency⁷ that led to Surge success in Iraq, Gentile says, because the U.S. Army was adapting and innovating from the beginning, using the tactics of pop-COIN or state building. His own brigade in Tikrit in 2002, for example, focused on setting up local governments, stationing U.S. forces inside population centers, rebuilding infrastructure, developing the economy, and building local security forces while conducting combat operations as part of the overall U.S. COIN framework (93). It was this popular but false Surge narrative, for Gentile, that led directly to what he calls the Surge II in Afghanistan in 2009 (111).

In Afghanistan, Gentile argues, there was again little change in the COIN campaign plan from previous commander to the heralded hero general, from General David McKiernan and his predecessors to General Stanley McChrystal. McKiernan did understand COIN, the author insists, and was only replaced because of the political need to focus attention on tactics rather than strategy (124-125, 114, 127).

Gentile raises powerful points that should be considered by every policymaker, military leader, and citizen. But if he had made his points more powerfully the book would be far more convincing. He is on target in insisting on the need for realistic assessments of costs and benefits and the likelihood of success in undertaking any military intervention; the imperative to link ends, ways, and means in a strategy that serves national interests; and the inevitability of suffering and death no matter how well-intentioned the intervention and the skill level of those executing it. He is correct in his identification of some of the bad assumptions of pop-COIN, the flaws in the hero general narrative, and the weaknesses of Army-Marine Corps FM 3-24. Gentile brings forth material providing a powerful, important corrective to the popular demonization of Westmoreland in Vietnam and the perhaps less-familiar hero general myth of Malaya. Yet a stronger editorial hand would have helped strengthen a case marred by unsystematic presentation and analysis of primary and secondary evidence, repetitive, confusing structure and disjointed writing style, and reliance on catchphrases more than logic, evidence-based critique, and explanation.

A surer editorial hand might also have helped focus the book. It is difficult to tell what audiences this work might serve. Gentile delivers the unwary reader into the middle of the long-running, painfully acrimonious debate between COINdinitas and COINtras (who do not believe in the good governance COIN narrative), a debate taking place largely among a small number of practitioners and a few scholars. The non-expert is likely to be bewildered by Gentile's passion and by his explanations. Practitioners may long for a more systematic

⁶ Gentile draws heavily on Stephen Biddle et al., "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?" *International Security* 37:1 (Summer 2012), 7-40.

⁷ <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/Repository/Materials/COIN-FM3-24.pdf>

analysis of the strengths and weakness of different types of COIN with an eye to success and failure. Scholars will wish for a clearer, more fully developed argument with a more systematic presentation of research both primary and secondary, and a bibliography.

A stronger editorial hand might also have resolved the self-contradictory nature of Gentile's story. He insists that the conventional narrative of pop-COIN success is false and damaging, but also wants to rehabilitate the reputations of several individuals whom he says prescribed it and put it into practice and yet were replaced by other leaders who gained more glory for it. His defense of generals David Barno, McKiernan, Westmoreland, and Briggs falls into this confusing category. In attempting to demolish the hero general myth, he defends them for understanding and doing COIN as COINdinstas prescribe and argues that their successors, the hero generals, did nothing significantly different. But if pop-COIN is a shortsighted waste of national resources and human lives, why are these men to be praised for executing pop-COIN campaigns when he vilifies others for advocating the very same thing? This confusion extends to Gentile's accounts of his own activities in Iraq. He insists that he and others were practicing pop-COIN well before the arrival of Army FM 3-24 (e.g., 92, 93, 95), yet vehemently criticizes 3-24 and its authors and supporters. His introduction of the personal element also leaves the reader curious about the reasons for his pop-COIN efforts in Tikrit and Baghdad and wondering if their unstated outcomes contributed to his dislike of the governance COIN narrative.

A related and bigger problem, and again one that a strong editor could have helped the author resolve, is Gentile's criticism of pop-COIN for its many limitations as a false narrative (e.g., 29) without systematically spelling out what they are and why they are incorrect, or why they exist. An author can only cover so much ground, admittedly, but Gentile's scattershot approach muffles the hammer blows that he would like to deliver. Gentile says that pop-COIN will work with the commitment of millions of troops and generations of effort (e.g., 9, 60, 83, 128), and also asserts that firepower and hunting and killing is what successful COIN requires (e.g., 46, 62). These are not necessarily contradictory statements, and both deserve more explanation than the book provides. Similarly, Gentile asserts that in Vietnam firepower could not achieve U.S. political objectives (83). That is precisely the COINdinstas' concern, but the author does not pursue the implications of this interesting agreement. Similarly, while Gentile accuses the COINdinstas of privileging tactics over strategy, he tends to do the same thing. On page 32, for example, he lays out nine tenets of successful COIN according to FM 3-24 of 2006 without explaining why these normatively powerful ideas are strategically unwise or unpacking the strategic logic that produced and reified them. Gentile also quotes policymakers on the importance of COIN as state-building without sufficiently explaining why they are mistaken (122).

The logic of the governance model of COIN is of fundamental importance to understanding its longstanding appeal to practitioners, policymakers, and publics in intervening states such as the United States and Britain. COINdinstas focus on tactics, as Gentile complains (7), because their diagnosis of the disease (lack of modernization and democratization cause insurgency) and prescription (good governance) are already clear to them. The underlying, often-unexamined beliefs that lead to support for pop-COIN stem from widely

held if not always accurate understandings about the bad effects of incomplete political, social, and economic modernization and the good effects of democratization. Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Zedong's characterization of insurgents as the fish swimming in the sea that is the populace (16) is not why Westerners tend to see the people as the prize in COIN. Western actors see COIN as an insurgent-versus-state battle for popular allegiance fought through competing provision of good governance because they are mirror imaging their adversaries and the populace involved based on their own normative assumptions about what states do and what governing means to them personally. They assume that competition to govern is separate from and more virtuous than competition for power and that states combating insurgency desire nothing more than to meet popular interests and needs.⁸

Another significant problem with the COINdinstas' and Gentile's focus on tactics is not that they fail to consider national interests, as Gentile contends of the COINdinstas, but that they do not consider either the interests of the other players or the will and capability of the client state to make sustainable the intervener's necessarily short-term efforts. Gentile argues that pop-COIN is a recipe for perpetual war (33) without giving this insight the powerful explanation it deserves.

There are other missed opportunities here as well. If pop-COIN generally or in specific cases fails due to political-military disagreement about political objectives (119), then the author would have done well to work this important insight into his overall argument. Similarly, if a belief in inputs as drivers of success is a major problem with pop-COIN (e.g., 115), then it should be part of the argument throughout. Gentile also uses buzzwords freely but without the definitions that would make his argument more rigorous and clear. What is 'nation building'? Is it like 'state building'? When the author asserts that COIN does not work (3), is he referring to all forms of counterinsurgency, or to one specific normative variant? Gentile writes that Malaya is a bad model of COIN success because the British had advantages (37-38). The British advantages are an important element of why Malaya does not provide a useful model for future intervention COIN campaigns, but a substantive discussion of what types of cases make good models or, alternatively, why there is no such thing as a good model, would be a critical addition to Gentile's argument. Gentile expresses frustration with euphemisms like 'protecting the populace' that are used to whitewash severe human rights violations in COIN campaigns but misses the opportunity to explain why this is a euphemism, what actual COIN practices are used in successful cases, why they are whitewashed, and by whom. The book generally is better at weakening the hero general myth than in challenging the pop-COIN narrative. This is unfortunate because there is much that is incorrect in the conventional understanding of what causes COIN success. Gentile's targeting of personalities is unfortunate as well because it suggests a lack of objectivity ill intent, making the book uncomfortably personal in ways that weaken the strength of the evidence that he does present.

⁸ Michael Fitzsimmons explores the Enlightenment roots of governance COIN in "Hard Hearts and Open Minds? Governance, Identity, and the Intellectual Foundations of Counterinsurgency Strategy," *Strategic Studies* 33:3 (June 2008), 337-365.

None of the flaws in this work should overshadow the importance of the policy questions Gentile raises. Other authors are delving deeply into these empirical and theoretical questions about COIN and Gentile will surely continue his own work. Overall, if *Wrong Turn* can draw public, policymaker, and practitioner attention to the critical issues of U.S. foreign and military policy that the author raises, and to the work that Gentile builds on within and outside this book, then it can be judged a success. Questions of when and how to intervene on behalf of clients will remain painfully salient as long as the United States defines itself as the indispensable nation, as long as it identifies important national security interests in many (if not all) internal conflicts, and as long as it considers itself capable of righting the wrongs of the world through the military tool that is pop-COIN.

Gian Gentile's message is fairly straightforward and emphasizes three salient points: First, contrary to claims made by its legions of boosters, counterinsurgency (known by its acronym COIN) is not a 'soft power' or an indirect approach to war geared to capture 'hearts and minds' through winning over the population 'in a less harmful way.' Gentile insists that like all warfare, COIN is basically about "death and destruction. Counterinsurgency warfare is no different, and its results on the ground can be as destructive as conventional warfare" (7-8). And as a squadron commander in Western Bagdad in 2006, Gentile should know. Indeed, he contends that Iraqi civilian deaths at the hands of U.S. troops tripled in 2007 when General David Petraeus's supposedly enlightened, more humane 'surge' was applied.

Second, Field Manual 3-24, the much ballyhooed December 2006 Army and Marine Corps manual and 'foundational document' of contemporary COIN, is counterfeit dogma anchored in bogus history. Completed at Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) under Petraeus' direction, FM 3-24 allegedly provided the blueprint for victory in the 2007 Anbar 'surge.'¹ Don't believe it, contends Gentile. The manual oversimplifies the counterinsurgency dynamic to the point of parody. According to COIN's classic scenario, a friendly government is attacked by an insurgent 'minority.' Western military intervention is required to prop up that government until it gets its act together to gain popular legitimacy among 'the rest of the population,' and muscle up its security forces to 'protect the people.' However, Gentile failed to find that this black/white, Cold War legacy scenario particularly useful in the wake of the February 26, 2006 bombing of the al-Askari shrine in Samarra. "It also became very clear to me [that]...we were not dealing with a simple problem of insurgency, but instead were in the middle of a complex Iraqi sectarian civil war...There were few fence-sitters in this civil war – only fences, and a red line drawn right through the population – Shia versus Sunni" (xiv/xvii).

Indeed, Gentile insists that FM 3-24 is a rerun of the habitual COIN cant most lately inspired by French Lieutenant-colonel David Galula's theories² lifted from his self-serving re-write of his experience in the Algerian War (1954-1962). As Iraq slithered toward failure in 2006, Galula's 1960s-era RAND studies were resuscitated to inform the Petraeus-managed COIN revival. In Gentile's view, 3-24 is anchored in outdated scholarship and optimistic assumptions about how non-Western peoples dream of being liberated from their Oriental squalor by blond, M-16 toting Western soldiers who, thanks to warrior anthropologists like

¹ <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/Repository/Materials/COIN-FM3-24.pdf>, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 7 Sept. 2007).

² David Galula *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Wesport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 1964) and *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958* (RAND Corporation, 2006).

David Kilcullen³ and Montgomery McFate,⁴ totally get their culture. Others have noted that 3-24 fails to address some fundamental existential questions about war: What are we fighting for? How can we use the means at our disposal to attain desired outcomes? How will we know when we have achieved these outcomes? How do we achieve them at proportionate costs?⁵ 3-24 talks tactics, not strategy or political context. But in the wake of ‘the 2007 Anbar coronation of ‘King David,’ to quibble about the absence of Clausewitz, not to mention the sustainability of the “Anbar Awakening,” appeared ill-mannered and boorish, even defeatist. With the benefit of hindsight, Petraeus’s insistence that among the “big ideas” ensconced in FM 3-24, “living our values,” and “being first with the truth,” (32) seem to have been conspicuous by their absence in the December 2014 Senate report on CIA torture, not to mention at Abu Ghraib. Indeed, FM 3-24 never questions the moral and professional costs of COIN operations.

Gentile’s third point, one central to the COIN chronicle, is the “stock narrative of counterinsurgency” (11) -- that of the ‘maverick savior’ general, in the words of right-wing historian Victor Davis Hanson.⁶ The story-line goes like this: a collection of conventionally-minded soldiers apply faulty, big-war tactics, and predictably skid toward defeat, until rescued in the nick of time by a COIN-savvy, light-infantry leader. This is the narrative of successful COIN endeavors like Malaya, Anbar in 2006, and Afghanistan circa 2009. However, Gentile insists that this interpretation of success, however inspiring, runs counter to the historical record in the (admittedly limited) cases he examines -- Malaya, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan -- although you would not glean this from the COIN-besotted chronicles of H.R. McMaster, Andrew Krepinevich, John Nagl and Lewis Sorley, not to mention those of David Kilcullen, Kimberly and Frederick Kagan, and *Washington Post* reporter Tom Ricks.⁷ Gentile points out that these authors merely recycle in an academic or

³ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) and *Counterinsurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴ “Human Terrain Systems,” interview with Montgomery McFate, *The Current*, October 17, 2007.

⁵ Celeste Ward Gventer, David Martin Jones, and M.L.R. Smith, “Minting the New COIN: Critiquing Counterinsurgency Theory,” in Celeste Ward Gventer, David Martin Jones, and M.L.R. Smith (eds.), *The New Counterinsurgency Era in Critical Perspective* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 12.

⁶ Victor Davis Hanson, *The Savior Generals: How Five Great Commanders Saved Wars That Were Lost – From Ancient Greece to Iraq* (Bloomsbury Press, 2013).

⁷ H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (NY: Harper Collins, 1968); Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, [Johns Hopkins University Press; Reprint edition (1 Mar. 1988)]; John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (University of Chicago Press, 2005); *Knife Fights: A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice* (Penguin, 2014); Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam*, (Orlando: Houghton Mifflin, 1999); *Westmoreland* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011); Fredrick Kagan, *Lessons for a long war: how America can win on new battlefields* (AEI Press, 2010) Kimberly Kagan, *The Surge: A Military History* (Encounter Books, 2009); Tom Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*. (Penguin, 2006) and

journalistic format the story line laid down in Sir Robert Thompson's memoir-based account of the British defeat of communist insurgents in the 'Malayan Emergency' (1948-1960).⁸ In fact, the narrative is of far older provenance, dating at least to the nineteenth century when General Thomas Robert Bugeaud replaced a hapless succession of Napoleonic warfare-minded generals and went on to conquer Algeria for France in the 1840s. Bugeaud's 'victory,' won at the cost of enormous human misery inflicted on the Maghreb's indigenous population using methods that if applied today should earn one a trip to The Hague, was fêted by an analogous clique of 'patriotic' journalists and imperialist historians. Likewise, Petraeus's 2007 Sunni Awakening success, as ephemeral as it has proven to be in the wake of the 2014 Mosul meltdown of Iraqi government forces in the face of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), was made possible because he picked sides in a Sunni-Shia civil war which U.S. intervention in Iraq had triggered. Indeed, America's latest 'savior general' should perhaps be given credit for actually standing the basic principle of 3-24 on its head when he armed the Sunni minority in Anbar Province to defend themselves *against* the very Shia-dominated government that he was sent to Iraq to strengthen. So much for COIN as a strategy for nation-building.

Gentile dismantles each of these myths in turn. His treatment of the Malayan Emergency is cursory and aims principally to challenge the COIN legend forged when General Gerald Templer replaced General Harold Briggs in February 1952, allegedly to revolutionize British strategy against the largely ethnically Chinese insurgents by implementing "a proper 'hearts and minds' strategy." (40) Templer introduced no strategic revolution, Gentile argues convincingly. He merely continued a squeeze begun in 1948 that had gradually debilitated the insurgency and forced it deeper into the jungle and ever more remote from its support base, which was by then comprised of people who in any case had been locked away in concentration camps. In fact, according to the historians of Southeast Asia Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, the British were never clear on what or who they were fighting in Malaya. When the British colonial governor first called it an "insurgency," insurance rates skyrocketed. So Whitehall settled on "bandits," a name that Templer later improved to "communist terrorists."⁹

From the beginning, the British had concentrated their efforts against Chinese squatters employed mainly in the tin mines on the jungle edge who supplied food, information, and recruits to the insurgency. By end of 1949, many of the elements of the Malayan counterinsurgency model – civil direction, population control, and food denial – were already in place. "[The MCP's] defeats and reverses in 1948-1949 proved fatal," conclude

The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008 (Penguin Press, 2009).

⁸ Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966).

⁹ Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars*, 436-437.

Bayly and Harper.¹⁰ The ‘Briggs Plan’ implemented from April 1950, began the concentration of the squatters into camps where their movements could be restricted and their calorie intake strictly limited. By the end of 1954, 572,917 Chinese had been resettled in 480 “New Villages” which were often controlled with British connivance by “Triad” criminal groups, while 560,000 more “regrouped” in towns and on rubber estates. In the process, families and communities were divided and conditions were frequently worse than in wartime Japanese-run sites.¹¹ Briggs also began a process to centralize intelligence collection in order to guide coordinated police and army operations to search out insurgent camps and supply depots. (48-49) By October 1951, the level of violence had plummeted as the insurgents totally abandoned the towns to government control. Because he occupied positions both as High Commissioner and Director of Operations, Templer was better positioned to refine, coordinate, and codify these tactics into a doctrinal manual, and to concentrate on police reform, which heretofore had been the Achilles’ heel of the counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya. While Templer received credit for the victory, a verdict echoed by his staff and an adoring press in search of a uniformed redeemer, it was clear that the back of the insurgency had been broken well prior to the arrival of Briggs, much less Templer.

Scholars have advanced other reasons for the British ‘victory’ in Malaya beyond a focus on counterinsurgency tactics. Had the insurgency launched in 1946, there was little that the British army, its hands full in India and Palestine, could have done to oppose it. Nevertheless, the communists were ill-prepared to launch an insurgency, especially after the Party General Secretary Lai Teck absconded with Malayan Communist Party funds in 1947. They had few weapons, and their geographic isolation made it virtually impossible to import more. The Malayan Chinese community had been riven by the Chinese Civil War. A settler pogrom of rubber plantation owners and tin mine managers, most of whom had military experience and were armed, hit the insurgency hard in its initial phase. A British crackdown on trade union activism actually fueled the rebellion, as many Chinese activists fled to the jungle to avoid deportation to Chiang’s Kuomintang, a death sentence given the conditions of the time.¹² Gentile notes that the insurgents never numbered more than 7,500 ill-armed, poorly financed mainly Chinese in a majority Malay population hostile to their goals. The economic spike caused by the skyrocketing demand for Malayan rubber and tin with the outbreak of the Korean War probably did more to doom the communist insurgency than did any military tactic – sustaining an uprising amidst an economic boom offers challenges which few insurgent groups can surmount. Furthermore, the real insurgency was occurring right under the noses of the British, as a new generation of Chinese and Malays, organized around the University of Malaya, which had been founded in

¹⁰ Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars. The End of Britain’s Asian Empire* (London: Penguin, 2007), 497, 513.

¹¹ The British abetted Triad control which they saw as a check on the Malayan Communist Party. Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars*, 490-91.

¹² By 1952, 13,317 Chinese had been deported to Chiang. Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars*, 484.

1949, worked to define a post-colonial, multi-racial society liberated from the constricted opportunities offered them by continued British sovereignty.¹³

Gentile hits his stride with Vietnam, which is really the strongest section of the book. He agrees with American historian of the Vietnam conflict George Herring¹⁴ that Vietnam was unwinnable for the United States, “at a moral or material cost that most Americans deemed acceptable.” (60) Although, in the aftermath of the Senate report on torture, may one safely conclude that most Americans appear indifferent to the moral costs of counterinsurgency/counter-terror operations? Indeed, the cost of counterinsurgency campaigns, not least on the level of military professionalism, is a theme that Gentile returns to in his final chapters. The central problem with the COIN narrative is the assumption that all insurgencies look alike, are anchored in a set of predictable grievances, and follow similar patterns of development. Hence, successful techniques developed for one insurgency (Malaya) necessarily transfer to another (Vietnam), irrespective of the strategic, not to mention operational and tactical environments.¹⁵ In this way, COIN offers a menu of tactical remedies that discount the Clausewitzian character of war, with its emphasis on politics, escalation, and reciprocity. COIN enthusiasts predictably lay the blame for failure in counterinsurgency warfare, not on the intellectual and strategic limitations of their approach, but rather on a predictable cast of villains -- conventionally-minded generals, micromanaging politicians, and a civilian public impatient for withdrawal from remote conflicts whose relevance to the nation’s core interests remain difficult to convey.

One reason that Vietnam remains a focus of contention is that the post-war debate never resolved, exactly, the nature of the Indochina conflict. Those who argued that the United States faced an insurgency there in the 1960s were short-circuited by Harry Summer’s 1982 *On Strategy*,¹⁶ which insisted that the center of gravity in Vietnam was the conventionally organized North Vietnamese Army (NVA). One of the effects of the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq was to reignite this unresolved dispute. Lewis Sorley has lately revived the hoary argument that an earlier switchover in U.S. leadership in Vietnam from William Westmoreland to the more-COIN savvy Creighton Abrams might have tipped the balance in Vietnam.¹⁷ The problem with Sorley’s ‘better war’ scenario, as Gentile notes, is that “Westmoreland [as did Abrams] actually saw both of these ground wars as essentially one.” (66) ‘Pacification’ with the object of bolstering the legitimacy of the Government of (South) Vietnam was a central plank in U.S. strategy under Westmoreland,

¹³ Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars*, 501-511.

¹⁴ George Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001).

¹⁵ Gventer, Jones, and Smith, “Minting the New COIN: Critiquing Counterinsurgency Theory,” in *The New Counterinsurgency Era*, *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶ Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Presidio press, 1982).

¹⁷ Sorely, *Westmoreland*.

as were ‘search-and-destroy’ operations against Viet Cong (VC) and NVA forces. The U.S. army had a developed COIN doctrine in Field Manual 31-22,¹⁸ while Westmoreland understood full well the political dimension of the war. Therefore, the problem as Gentile sees it is that significant groups of hostile forces had to be defeated before ‘hearts and minds’ could prove effective. Despite Sorley’s contention that Abrams sought to transition U.S. strategy from ‘search and destroy’ to ‘hearts and minds,’ the hand-off from Westmoreland to Abrams was seamless, Gentile argues. Pacification went into high gear following the 1968 Têt Offensive, which sought to fill the vacuum created by the decimation of communist cadres. One problem, as even the VC realized, was that the fighting had emptied the countryside, whose inhabitants had fled, or who were forcibly removed from ‘contested’ areas, to the relative safety of the cities. Therefore, ‘hearts and minds’ paid increasingly diminishing dividends. United States Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons (CAPs), small units of Marines inserted into villages, have often been cited as a potential war-winning technique. But Gentile insists that the Vietnamese saw the CAPs as trigger-happy interlopers ignorant of the local environment whose unpredictability terrorized the population. (77) In the end, the Americans in Vietnam, like the British in Malaya, in the thrall of their tactically focused doctrine anchored in a black-white, hubristic, soft-power narrative really had no clue about the nature of the society in which they were operating, nor the impact that their ‘strategy’ was having upon it. By February 1973 as American forces withdrew, Gentile notes, nothing had really changed in Vietnam, despite years of American exertions: large numbers of VC and NVA remained in the south, “and the South Vietnamese government and its military were still corrupt.”(81) When the communist offensive began in March 1975, the Government of Vietnam (GVN) and its ARVN collapsed faster than had the French in 1940.

The narrative for Iraq followed the familiar COIN-dinista script largely thanks to Tom Ricks’s dual books.¹⁹ *Fiasco* detailed the bungled response of conventionally-minded soldiers to the emerging Iraqi insurgency, followed by *The Gamble*, an account of how General David Petraeus snatched victory from the jaws of defeat in Anbar Province by “returning to COIN basics” (86). Gentile pours another bucket of cold water on these COIN certainties, by pointing out that Petraeus’s predecessor, General George Casey, had correctly diagnosed Iraq’s civil war crisis as a power struggle, but could not address it for several reasons, among them the fact that he was dealing with his own intra-command insurgency in the form of General Petraeus and his supporters who argued that Iraq was deteriorating because of Casey’s COIN shortcomings. The point made here is that, in their righteous quest to impose the ‘correct’ doctrine, the COIN-dinistas actually undermine military discipline. He also believed that admission of a state of civil war would quite rightly call into question the foundations of U.S. policy in Iraq, and demand far more

¹⁸ Department of the Army, *U.S. Counterinsurgency Forces*, November 1963, http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCEQfjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fsmallwarsjournal.com%2Fdocuments%2Fmaxwell1963doctrine.pdf&ei=8bPOVI6CCdTtarWlgZAI&usg=AFQjCNGfm7eCnq_aRs_QLbsO1y5xiF8ROQ&bvm=bv.85076809.d.d2s

¹⁹ Ricks, *Fiasco* and *The Gamble*.

resources. In other words, while Casey asked whether the ends justified the means, he never advocated withdrawal. Had he stayed in command, the internal dynamics of the Shia/Sunni feud in 2007 would have meant that violence would have declined on Casey's watch. As timing is everything, however, it was Petraeus who took the victory lap.

The reversal in U.S. fortunes in this corner of Iraq had little to do with a change in U.S. military leadership or with a 'better war' approach by a 'maverick savior,' notes Gentile. Rather, deeper changes were afoot in the form of what came to be known as the 'Sunni Awakening,' which had been brewing at least two years before Petraeus' arrival, as these Anbar tribes began to push back against the excessive demands of Al Qaeda militants in their midst. They also realized that they were losing the civil war against Shia militants backed by the American-installed Baghdad government, and looked to the American military, flush with cash and weapons, to assist them. In August 2007, Shia militia leader Moqtada al Sadr stood down his militias, which helped to reduce the violence. Finally, the sectarian cleansing had run its course in Baghdad, a battle which the Shias had won. U.S. troops sealed this victory by erecting concrete barriers to separate Sunni from Shia neighborhoods. "By the time Petraeus took command in February (2007) the overall levels of sectarian violence had decreased by at least one third," Gentile writes. (89)

But the press and Petraeus's underlings, led by his mistress Paula Broadwell,²⁰ as well as counterinsurgency "experts" like David Ucko²¹ and the ubiquitous Kilcullen, seized upon the happy coincidence which appeared to offer a straight-forward account of how COIN had worked to pacify Anbar and saved the U.S. effort from "defeat" in Iraq. The fact that improvements in Anbar had little to do with Petraeus, or with FM 3-24, seemed irrelevant. The 'surge' provided more troops. But the tactical outreach of individual U.S. battalions, who broke out of the large Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) to establish smaller combat outposts (COPs) in the neighborhoods, to establish contacts with Sunni tribal leaders, had begun up to eighteen months *before* Petraeus's arrival. At that time, U.S. units, in Gentile's words, noticed "that the Sunni insurgent groups were beginning to grow tired of al Qaeda, raising the very real possibility of an alliance between them and the U.S. military."²²

In Gentile's telling, McKiernan fell victim to the 'savior general' narrative. Indeed, *Wrong Turn* leaves the reader with the impression that in counterinsurgency, the greatest threat of a stab in the back comes neither from micromanaging politicians nor a feckless U.S. public, but from one's own military colleagues. The by-now familiar script would be duplicated in Afghanistan, where Stanley McChrystal replaced allegedly (according to the

²⁰ Paula Broadwell, *All In: The Education of General David Petraeus*, Penguin 2012. On the scandal, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petraeus_scandal; <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/1/david-petraeus-felonychargespaulabroadwell.html>

²¹ David Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the U.S. Military for Modern Wars* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009).

²² See also, James Russell, *Innovation, Transformation and War. Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa Provinces, 2005-2007* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

narrative) COIN-clueless David McKiernan in the spring of 2009, and was in turn replaced by Petraeus in 2010 following McChrystal's disastrous public relations encounter with *Rolling Stone* reporter Michael Hastings, who was convinced that McChrystal was trying to "jam" the President with his public pronouncements on Afghan strategy.²³ Why McChrystal, a 'black ops' guy whose specialty was 'manhunting' was chosen to carry the COIN banner remains something of a mystery. But in the event, he talked the COIN talk of a 'biddable' enemy, who could be 'reintegrated' through 'reconciliation' with the government of Ahmed Karsai. Neither of McKiernan's substitutes, Gentile points out, altered in any fundamental way the strategy in place since 2002. On the contrary, the Americans continued to throw billions of dollars at a corrupt and predatory Afghan government in the name of armed nation-building; Vietnam *redux*. Meanwhile, civilian casualties during McChrystal's tenure as Afghan commander-in-chief skyrocketed as American troops and their private contractor allies destroyed canals and bridges, killed locals by firing from convoys or road blocks, or traumatized them in door-kicking night raids. 'Government in a box' needed to be renamed 'corruption in a box' while the Afghan National Army remained a study in military demoralization, desertion, and incompetence despite the ministrations of American trainers. By 2011, even some of COIN's most high profile political enthusiasts like Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, not to mention the President, had lost faith in COIN as a vehicle for Afghanistan's rehabilitation.²⁴ Unfortunately for the COIN-dinistas, the 'better war' success in the 2007 Anbar 'surge' failed to transfer to a 'different war' in Afghanistan, and collapsed completely in Iraq in 2014 when confronted by ISIS.

Wrong Turn is a pioneering work. While this writer can attest from personal experience that many U.S. officers had doubts about the efficacy of COIN doctrine early on, to my knowledge Colonel Gian Gentile was the first serving U.S. officer publically to point out its limitations, no doubt at great risk to his career. The public doubts and academic critique of COIN have since expanded and broadened. Above all, Gentile demonstrates the high price the military pays in the debasement of its ethical foundation and sense of professionalism when 'savior generals' enlist the press, academic and think tank boosters, and even lovers to promote their own renown. Indeed, others have noted how doctrine, once accepted, becomes a career ladder and a vehicle for professional preferment.²⁵ Fame, of the sort fervently courted by David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal, becomes the enemy of professionalism, of a strategy that seeks to balance of ends and means, and potentially over time even jeopardizes democratic control of the military. Perhaps the exposure of COIN failure both as doctrine and in practice, as well as the national hubris and military careerism that lurks at its core, in this and other studies, will work to quell Gentile's fear that the counterinsurgency myths spun by the usual suspects

²³ <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/the-runaway-general-20100622>

²⁴ Lloyd C. Gardner, *Killing Machine. The American Presidency in the Age of Drone Warfare* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 103-104, 107, 122.

²⁵ Gventer, Jones, and Smith, "Minting the New COIN: Critiquing Counterinsurgency Theory," *Ibid.*, 22.

will “seduce... American policy makers to believe that wars of nation building can be won simply by technique and better generals” (30-31). Most worrying in the view of Gentile and others is that, deprived of any sense of balancing ends and means, COIN-dinistas and their right-wing allies on a permanent quest for ‘savior generals’ appear almost eager to commit the nation to open-ended counterinsurgency wars. As Hew Strachan has noted, in this way FM 3-24 became an overtly political document meant to exert pressure on politicians and civilian policymakers by imposing a strategy from the bottom-up.²⁶ Unless this sort of institutional politicking is controlled, in Gentile’s view, the United States may be doomed to repeat the same mistakes in future.

²⁶ Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War. Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 220.

Author's Response by Gian Gentile, Colonel (retired), U.S. Army

I would like to thank Tom Maddux of H-Diplo for putting this roundtable together. And of course I thank the four reviewers for providing what I think are excellent reviews and comments on my book with which I largely agree. The four reviews highlight a number of important themes that I had hoped my book *Wrong Turn* would bring out, and seeing them mentioned in generally positive ways means that they resonated with the reviewers and hopefully with any others who have read the book. So in addressing the four reviewers' comments I will focus on four themes that at one point or another are touched on by the reviews: the counterinsurgency (COIN) myth; the coin narrative and the abuse of history; the idea of a savior general; and my personal experience with the topic of the book. I will also respond to a criticism of *Wrong Turn* that three of the four reviewers addressed.

The connection between the British counterinsurgency effort in Malaya and the United States' war in Vietnam has been one of the key foundational elements of the myth of counterinsurgency: namely that the British were successful against the Malayan insurgents because they practiced 'classic' counterinsurgency methods, and the U.S. in Vietnam was unsuccessful because it did not apply them. This myth unfortunately has been propagated in the guise of either serious scholarship or serious journalism. Lloyd Gardner in his review of *Wrong Turn* highlights, correctly, the fundamental difference between Malaya and Vietnam, notably that the British in Malaya had a relatively simple problem to deal with while the scale of difficulty and complexity for the U.S. in Vietnam was exponentially greater. Yet as Gardner notes, the myth that eventually emerged reduced the nuance of history into a happy tale of why the British succeeded and the United States lost its respective counterinsurgency wars.

Douglas Porch summarizes quite effectively the counterinsurgency 'myth' that was codified in U.S. Army official doctrine. Porch notes that the Army and Marine Corps' 2006 Field Manual 3-24 is really nothing more than "counterfeit dogma anchored in bogus history." I could not agree more. In fact as we are approaching the ten-year anniversary of the publication of FM 3-24, the idea that the doctrine to fight an insurgency essentially amounts to nation building, and its use of history, becomes more and more deeply flawed as the years move on. Porch also makes a key point in his review that I did not address in *Wrong Turn*: that American COIN of the 3-24 persuasion did not emerge as something fresh and new as Iraq burned by the end of 2006. Instead, Porch highlights FM 3-24's colonial linkage going all the way back to French General Thomas Robert Bugeaud in Algeria in the 1840s. This is not, mind you, a hearts and minds, happy colonial legacy, as Porch spells out quite clearly the nature of small wars against insurgencies as brutal, destructive and costly, not only to the state carrying them out in foreign lands, but especially to the indigenous populations.

A key component to the counterinsurgency myth is the notion of the savior general who rides onto the scene of a failing army that does not get coin and then almost immediately turns that army around and puts it on a path to victory. Stephen Bourque correctly notes that no kind of COIN tactics "under any American General, could have prevented North

Vietnam's tank columns driving into Saigon in 1975." Bourque also laments, as do I, the debilitating effect of a decade of counterinsurgency on the US Army's core fighting competencies by correctly stating that today an entire generation of army officers have "only a rudimentary proficiency in the elements of modern combined arms warfare."

Another related problem of the 'savior-general' myth is that it has tended to cover up the real reasons for America's failure in Iraq and Afghanistan, which have to do with serious miscalculations of strategy and policy at the start of these wars and as they proceeded. Porch notes that the Savior general fantasy, combined with the allure of the COIN checklist approach to solving problems in an insurgency, prevents the appreciation of the "intellectual and strategic limitations" to the strategy and policy approaches in both wars. Instead, as Porch points out, the COIN narrative focuses its critical gaze in the wrong direction of the "predictable cast of villains:" dolt generals, and "micromanaging politicians." Gardner sees the problem of the myth of 'savior generals' in the same way. He is troubled, as am I, by the "legend" of a savior general saving the Vietnam War that continued with the same notion that General David Petraeus "saved" the American army from itself, transformed it, and in so doing "won" the war in Iraq (a word General Petraeus recently used in a published article) only to have it lost by bumbling Iraqi politicians.¹

One criticism that Jacqueline Hazleton, Douglas Porch, and Stephen Bourque all hit on in varying degrees is the brevity of my book and the problems a short book created in writing about a sweep of history by focusing on four historical cases of counterinsurgency war. I intentionally kept it short because I wanted to focus on the narrative of counterinsurgency and how it has developed within the arc of the four cases of Malaya, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. However, I acknowledge that in the process of focusing on the narrative some necessary historical girth was left out of the four chapters. For example, Porch is right when he says my Malaya chapter is "cursory" as it aims to challenge the COIN myth as it applies there.

From the very first articles I wrote in criticism of FM 3-24 and the developing Surge triumph narrative in 2007 ²a number of folks have taken my critiques of the idea of the 'savior general' to be personal attacks against these men. This has been a curious thing to me since I have critiqued the idea of certain generals turning these counterinsurgency wars around based on evidence and argument. I have never attacked any of these men personally. However I have learned that simply by questioning whether or not these

¹ David H. Petraeus, "How We Won in Iraq: And Why All of the Hard-Won Gains of the Surge are in Grave Danger of Being Lost Today," *Foreign Policy*, October 29, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/29/how-we-won-in-iraq/>

² Michael O'Hanlon and Stephen Pollack, "A War We Still Might Win," *The New York Times*, July 30, 2007; Hugh Hewitt Interview with Victor Davis Hanson, "Victory Davis Hanson on the Politics of the Surge Compared to History," August 13, 2007, <http://www.hughhewitt.com/victor-davis-hanson-on-the-politics-of-the-surge-compared-to-history>; Clifford May, "Coin is Not Small Change," *National Review Online*, October 4, 2007 and his "al Qaeda in Iraq on the Run," *National Review Online*, October 18, 2007;

generals actually 'saved' these counterinsurgency wars translates to some readers as personal attacks. Hazelton in her review of *Wrong Turn* uses such terms in describing me taking "aim" at my "juicy targets" by my "targeting of personalities" is, as she asserts, "unfortunate." I think this is an inaccurate characterization of what my book does. Is my questioning the effectiveness of a general a 'personal attack?' Does positing in *Wrong Turn* that there was no significant shift in strategy between Generals George Casey and Petraeus qualify as a personal attack against General Petraeus simply because I do not see any significant difference in strategic approach between him and his predecessor? If she is right and that is the case, well then military historians ought to simply stop writing about generals. Or in other words if I criticize Napoléon Bonaparte for not being forward at the battle line at the battle of Borodino in 1812 because he was sick that day, does that make my assertion toward Napoleon a 'personal attack'?

All four reviewers do sense from *Wrong Turn* my personal experience as a combat battalion commander in west Baghdad in 2006 and how my experience is played out in the pages of *Wrong Turn*. As I state in the Preface to the book, it was my experience in the middle of a vicious Shia-Sunni civil war in West Baghdad in 2006 that hit smack up against my first reading of FM 3-24 upon my return from Baghdad that was so jarring for me. I still remember the first time reading FM 3-24 and thinking to myself that it was a reductive caricature of the western counter-Maoist approach to dealing with insurgencies that emerged after World War II. My experience in west Baghdad did have a powerful shaping effect on me as I approached the next five years of research and writing on counterinsurgency. And *Wrong Turn*, and I hope the four reviewers would all agree, is a worthwhile work of scholarship and a contribution to knowledge, even while acknowledging some of the problems with it that the four reviewers have brought out.