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Todd Greentree. "What Went Wrong in Afghanistan?" *Parameters* 51:4 (2021): 7-22.

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Among the many competing schools of thought within the field of counterinsurgency, perhaps no debates are as acrimonious as those between advocates of large-footprint and small-footprint troop presence. The writing team for the 2006 edition of FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* engaged in much discussion about whether there was some minimum recommended troop density required for effective COIN operations. Eventually General David Petraeus inserted a number of 20 security personnel for each 1000 inhabitants based on some historical analysis and his own need to support troop levels for the 2007 Surge in Iraq. He did so over the objections of the writing team that believed each situation was too unique and any number would become some sort of inappropriate yardstick.¹ A very systematic analysis of troop density in contingency operations by John McGrath recommends a planning factor of 13.26 per 1000 residents, with about a third employed as police.²

Todd Greentree has long been an advocate for limited military presence in counterinsurgency. He is a former academic and foreign service officer with active roles in five conflicts including El Salvador, and most recently as a political advisor for military units in Afghanistan. His seminal book, *Crossroads of Intervention*, provides an insightful insider's view of irregular warfare in Central America in the 1980s. American military presence there was limited by operational, diplomatic, and legal limitations. Ironically, the new COIN doctrine being developed in 2006 was required because that small-footprint experience, along with the continuing legacy of Vietnam, had left the US Army unprepared for large scale COIN. Greentree's book also cautions about inflated expectations from such operations, declaring that 'peace without victory' may be the best outcome possible.³

In this article, Greentree applies his extensive experience in irregular warfare to analyze the American failure in Afghanistan, looking primarily through his Central American lens. He points out that American involvement in Afghanistan really began over 40 years ago after the Soviet invasion in 1979. The mujahideen initially served as admirable "anti-Soviet proxies" (10) until the Taliban took control and welcomed Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Greentree argues that the American war was unwinnable the way it was fought. Military action came to dominate political and diplomatic activities. All Taliban members were viewed as enemies to be targeted, instead of being reintegrated into society such as the *Faribundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional* (Faribundo Marti National Liberation Front, FMLN) was eventually in El Salvador. The presence of many foreign troops generated local resistance that then created more targets for those troops to pursue. Greentree correctly recognizes that American strategy remained reactive until General Stanley McChrystal finally developed a comprehensive

¹ Conrad C. Crane, *Cassandra in Oz: Counterinsurgency and Future War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2016), 95.

² John J. McGrath, *Boots on the Ground: Troop Density in Contingency Operations* (Fort Leavenworth: CSI Press, 2006), 106.

³ Todd Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008).

counterinsurgency strategy in 2009, but by then the situation had deteriorated so much that a large increase in deployed troops was necessary. Their impact was negated by President Barack Obama's simultaneous announcement of their withdrawal date. Throughout the rest of the war focus remained on military actions, while civilian capacity and authority remained in short supply.

Greentree argues that a 'Small COIN' option could have been successful in Afghanistan as it was in El Salvador. Instead of concentrating on military defeat of the Taliban, US troops should have been kept out of the fighting while a political solution was pursued that reintegrated all indigenous combatants. Instead of allowing Afghan President Hamid Karzai to exploit his connections to the Taliban, the Bush administration prevented it, losing focus on the fact that the real enemy was al-Qaeda. Greentree's approach would have included conducting counterterrorist operations, creating a moderate Afghan security force of about 50,000, preventing interference from Pakistan, and fostering political unity. The result would not have met lofty western goals of democracy and human rights, but it would have been an Afghan solution that brought peace to that troubled nation. For Greentree, the whole debacle was the result of what he calls the "overmilitarization of American foreign policy" (21). For him, if the United States ends up fighting "Big COIN," it is already too late to avoid another disaster like Vietnam.

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Greentree's article is a provocative advocacy piece for small footprint COIN. But as the long history of counterinsurgency reveals, there is no 'one size fits all' solution. Even after General Petraeus's insertion of a recommended force ratio into the 2006 FM 3-24, the writing team managed to add an important phrase: "however, as with any fixed ratio, such calculations remain very dependent upon the situation."⁴ A big reason for the less-than-optimal results of early actions at Tora Bora and in Operation Anaconda was that there were insufficient numbers of American troops available to carry out missions that were too sophisticated for indigenous allies.⁵ Greentree acknowledges the advantages of the more enlightened COIN approach of FM 3-24, with emphasis on protecting the population and non-kinetic tasks, but sees it as emerging too late to salvage the mess that had already been created in Afghanistan. And one of the flaws of that FM was that it did not provide much guidance about COIN approaches other than full scale clear-hold-build.

There were indeed many lost opportunities early. An advisor to LTG Dan McNeil, Commander of Coalition Forces in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2003, told me that staff pleas to focus on key stability missions, like restoring the important 'Ring Road' were ignored because of an inordinate focus on counter guerrilla activities. This was not just an American failure. None of the participants at the 2002 International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan in Tokyo lived up to their pledges to help the country. The establishment of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) did attempt to bring military and political tasks into better balance, but the reemergence of the Taliban and lack of a coherent strategy among a disparate coalition limited the impact of the PRTs, as did the continuing lack of civilian capacity Greentree mentions. But while one of the advantages of counterfactual proposals is that they can never be proven wrong, there is no guarantee that his proposed approach would have worked better. It is doubtful that the Taliban would have accepted anything less than what they have now achieved, which would have been impossible for Americans to accept in the early years after what had happened on 9/11. It is also hard to believe that it would have been possible to sever the tight Taliban links to Pakistan. Perhaps a smaller Afghan security force could have been of a higher quality, but that is also a questionable assumption. The best that can be stated about Greentree's recommended approach is probably that the US would have ended up with the same unsatisfactory result much quicker with much less expenditure of blood and treasure.

The question remains whether a different result would have been obtained if a coherent COIN approach guided by the tenets of the 2006 FM 3-24 had been applied starting at the beginning. That would have been difficult with the distraction of Iraq in 2003. But Iraq also highlights more aspects of the big versus small-footprint dilemma. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's campaign to limit the number of troops in Operation Iraqi Freedom led to inadequate forces for post

⁴ Headquarters, Department of the Army, and Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-24/MWCP 3-33.5 (Washington, DC: USGPO, December 2006), paragraph 1-67.

⁵ Sean Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

conflict activities. They could not cover enough of the country or perform the required tasks that were necessary to prevent the rise of an insurgency. Perhaps the best answer for a military intervention is start with a big footprint that demonstrates to everyone overwhelming American military capacity and stifles initial resistance, while then drawing down as political and diplomatic initiatives become more important. But as Greentree notes, that will be difficult as long as Department of Defense capabilities and authorities dwarf those of other agencies. He is also right that any final solution must be an indigenous one, and not something dictated by outside powers.

Dr. Conrad Crane is currently the senior research historian for the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College. He has a B.S. from the US Military Academy and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Stanford. He is also a graduate of the Command and General Staff College and the War College. He published his most recent books in 2016, one for Naval Institute Press about the creation and application of American counterinsurgency doctrine, entitled *Cassandra in Oz: Counterinsurgency and Future War*, and another for University Press of Kansas on strategic bombing, entitled *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*. In that same year he was awarded the Society for Military History's Samuel Eliot Morison Prize for lifetime contributions to the field of military history." He was the lead author for the groundbreaking 2006 Army/Marine Corps counterinsurgency manual.