

## Monkey Cage: Posts on Civil War and Insurgency

Paul Staniland

### How do Counterinsurgencies End?

I really appreciate Henry asking me to guest post on the Monkey Cage (it's also a welcome distraction from fixing my dissertation's bibliography). My research and fieldwork have focused on insurgent organizations in South Asia, especially Kashmir and Sri Lanka, and Northern Ireland. I'm going to write about insurgency and counterinsurgency. Afghanistan is now at the center stage of American foreign policy, along with a set of challenging questions about the nature of civil war.

This post is about the \$64,000 question: do we know how counterinsurgencies are won? There is a [conventional wisdom](#) that "population-centric" counterinsurgency (COIN) holds the ultimate key to victory against militant movements. This is sometimes also called hearts-and-minds or population security COIN. The [basic argument](#) is that if counterinsurgents provide governance, security, public goods, and opportunities for legitimate representation, the civilian population will shift its loyalty to the side of the state and marginalize the insurgents. This is appealing, since it is a kinder, gentler form of war that focuses on development and institution-building, and sounds reasonable enough (see Max Boot [here](#) on its virtues in Afghanistan).

The problem is that there isn't great empirical support for this argument and there are several persuasive reasons to be skeptical of it.

Put simply, COIN is characterized by multiple pathways to the same, or very similar, outcomes (in less simple social-science-speak, this is called "[equifinality](#)"). As I [noted](#) back in November, in South Asia there have been several routes to stabilization, including coercion, formal deals, and tacit live-and-let-live bargains. First, there is evidence, contrary to the conventional wisdom, that victimizing civilians may in fact help counterinsurgents (see [Lyll](#), [Downes](#), and [Johnston](#)). [Kalyvas](#) argues that civilian collaboration with counterinsurgents is driven more by territorial control than by political sympathy or government services. Counterinsurgency is still fundamentally war, and coercion, extraction, and ethnic dominance are often integral to the exercise. It's possible, and indeed very common, for counterinsurgents to be both "population-centric" and ruthlessly coercive (population displacement and control, torture, abductions, blackmail, assassinations, etc). This unpleasant truth should seriously temper enthusiasm for COIN: the game is frequently not worth the candle.

But raw coercion, population-centric or not, is certainly not the only way to end wars. Deals with, and the co-optation of, insurgent groups can bear fruit, whether in Northern Ireland, El Salvador, South Africa, or Mizoram. As I'll discuss more in a future post, there are a number of ways to re-bind political order during and in the wake of conflict, from simple log-rolling to [power-sharing](#) to [third-party intervention](#) to [peacekeeping](#) to careful [institutionalization](#). It simply may not be necessary to win hearts and minds through public goods and governance if the state can instead cut an adequate deal with the insurgents' political and military leadership.

In yet other contexts (Nagaland, Karachi, Iraq, and parts of the Burmese periphery, for instance) we see the emergence of “ugly stability,” political environments that lie somewhere between war and peace but below the level of active rebellion. This outcome can be totally acceptable to counterinsurgents, at a much lower cost than engaging in full-spectrum COIN to impose the metropole’s brand of order on the periphery (see Baruah on this “[durable disorder](#)” in India). Building a capable, legitimate central state that provides governance and security is very clearly not the only solution, particularly when the target population isn’t wildly interested in what the counterinsurgent is selling. The claim that there are [no “middle ways” in COIN](#) is unambiguously contradicted by the historical record: there are actually a number of ways to get from here to there.

This is borne out by academic studies. For example, Lyall and Wilson III’s [cross-national study of COIN outcomes](#) finds several variables that influence the results of wars (with COIN defeat associated with foreign occupation, counterinsurgent mechanization, external support for insurgents, and, sometimes, the regime type of the counterinsurgent). These are very distinct mechanisms, rather than any single underlying logic. Similarly, [Wickham-Crowley](#) focuses on the complex interaction of insurgent social ties, regime characteristics, and guerrilla military strength. [Colin Jackson](#), now at the Naval War College, shows that even when militaries learn to efficiently operate the technocratic apparatus of population security, they are nevertheless often unable to forge sustainable political order.

The pathways to stabilization have been hugely diverse, from formal negotiating to vicious repression. This complexity means that anyone advancing a straightforward general policy for COIN success should be met with skepticism (beware pundits bearing platitudes!). Some of the most [influential policy writing](#) on COIN has focused on aspects of a few cases (Malaya and Vietnam) while largely ignoring less popular conflicts that may actually be far more relevant to Afghanistan and Iraq. Policy prescriptions built on supposedly-classical precepts, derived in turn from unrepresentative or inapt cases, need to be treated with caution.

The bad news is that there isn’t a reliable blueprint to stabilization. But the good news is that there is room for innovation and flexibility; multiple pathways allow for diverse policy approaches. I’m no expert on Afghanistan, but given these findings it’s not obvious that only some form of hearts-and-minds/state-building campaign can deliver results acceptable to the US and its allies (COIN advocate Andrew Exum offers a slightly chastened [take](#) on its applicability). For instance, Austin Long has provided an outline of an [alternative light-footprint strategy](#), [Thier et al](#) point to a variety of possible strategies, and [Coll](#), [Barfield](#), and [Giustozzi](#) have noted that the Soviet/Russian strategy of propping up Najibullah after the Soviet withdrawal actually worked surprisingly well as long as patronage resources kept flowing. The range of strategies that can provide something like stability to Afghanistan may in fact be quite broad, instead of being restricted to a particular model of counterinsurgency that is hazily, at best, grounded in the empirical record.

In my next post, I’ll get more micro-level and discuss what factors political scientists and sociologists think cause people to become insurgents and insurgent supporters.

Posted by Paul Staniland on June 25, 2010 05:21 PM | [Permalink](#)

## Becoming an Insurgent

In my previous [post](#) I discussed big macro-level processes of victory, defeat, and compromise. In this one, I want to continue using academic research to speak to policy issues, but shift focus to a more nitty-gritty question: who joins insurgent groups? There are many reasons for mass populations to grow discontent with a political situation: ethnic competition and status reversal, state weakness or collapse, shifts in economic distribution, imposition of direct rule, etc. But in most rebellions the actual number of fighters is small relative to the population. Even insurgent supporters may form a minority of the group in whose name the insurgents fight. Why do some discontented people join or support insurgent groups, while others, even with the exact same political beliefs or ethnic/class identity, stay on the fence?

The basic challenge of insurgent mobilization is the [collective action problem](#) – even if I want the insurgent movement to succeed, my individual contribution probably doesn't matter much and it would be less dangerous to let others do the fighting for me. Insurgency is incredibly risky and costly, and so my best strategy is to keep my head down rather than risk the tender mercies of the Burmese or Pakistani military. Though there have been some challenges to this conceptualization ([Kalyvas and Kocher](#) argue that sometimes it can actually be riskier to stay neutral), it remains a useful framework for thinking about the problem. What are the existing scholarly arguments, and what might they tell us about broader questions of insurgency and counterinsurgency?

One major perspective focuses on social networks and institutions as the conduits of mobilization ([Scott](#), [McAdam](#), [Gould](#), [Petersen](#)): members of a political party, school, or religious institution, friends and family, solidary villages, and other preexisting social relations can best communicate, cooperate, and monitor, making it easier to overcome the challenges of mobilization. Risk-acceptance may be higher in these contexts, since norms of reciprocity are more likely to kick in.

This is a particularly powerful dynamic when the networks are imbued with ideological content that provides a political frame justifying rebellion: nationalist church groups opposing Soviet occupation, Sunni veterans' networks opposing Shia dominance, Islamist political parties opposing control by non-Muslims, leftist student groups targeting landlord dominance (see [Wittenberg](#) and [Darden](#) on enduring loyalties embedded in networks). The overlap of a clearly-framed political grievance with an embedded social infrastructure can make specific networks the locus of recruitment and leadership, rather than a broader, representative cross-section of the aggrieved population.

However, we also have significant evidence that people join insurgent groups due to selective incentives: benefits of protection, money, social services, redistribution, or local power that can only be acquired by becoming a fighter or supporter (see [Weinstein](#), [Popkin](#), [Berman](#), [Collier](#) and [Hoeffler](#)). This solves the collective action dilemma by providing goods and services that people could not acquire if they just stayed on the fence. Attracting these new recruits is necessary if an armed group is to expand beyond its initial social milieu. These scholars focus less on political grievance or social structure than on the provision of specific material benefits in return for support and joining; a variety of fairly mundane reasons can pull people into rebellion.

The social ties/community approach and selective material benefits approach have been framed as competitors, but [Humphreys and Weinstein](#) find that both of these motivations are important, and they suggest that the two schools are compatible rather than competitive (see also [Wood](#) for a different take).

How might this compatibility work? The answer may lie in the sequencing and type of insurgent mobilization. The first-movers in rebellions - the organizers, risk-acceptant fighters, and core command cadres – seem to be drawn from robust networks, whether they represent “the people” or not. These are the people who turn riots and protests into insurgencies and their networks form the enduring social heartlands of insurgency; as Selznick [refers](#) to them in the communist context, they are “the steeled cadres upon whom the continuity and the basic power of the party rest.”

By contrast, selective incentives can only be provided once the insurgency has become at least loosely institutionalized: protection needs people who can protect, material benefits require channels of acquisition and distribution, and shifts in local status and power are contingent on the ability, both social and military, to reshape local relations. Only once these are in place are fence-sitters attracted to join the insurgency by selective incentives; selective incentives need to come from somewhere. Thus, all else being equal, different kinds of fighters will join insurgencies at different times and for different reasons. Methodologically, as Humphreys and Weinstein note, systematically understanding these temporal sequences and variations in insurgent role requires deep historical knowledge of waves of recruitment and processes of organization-building.

In terms of policy, this heterogeneity suggests that insurgent movements are likely to be characterized by different social blocs with diverse motivations for fighting. From the insurgent leadership’s perspective, this means managing the varying goals of “core” vs. “peripheral” fighters and supporters. The internal life of the insurgency thus becomes an endless battle to maintain control, balance disparate factions, and keep the selective benefits flowing while trying to satisfy the interests of the networks at the heart of the organization. Different organizations will face very importantly different types of balancing acts, but the specter of disastrous internal feuding hangs over almost all rebel groups - as Monty Python [insightfully noted](#) quite awhile ago (warning: language). When movements fall apart, peace may become [more difficult](#) to build.

From the perspective of the counterinsurgent, this creates both opportunities and frustrations. It opens the possibility of splitting the insurgency by pulling away social blocs and factions. However, it also creates enormous complexity in the incentives at play within the insurgent movement that make it hard to cleanly induce fragmentation. States tend to have awful information about the actual balance of loyalties and interests within insurgent groups (even after nine years of American war in Afghanistan, the exact relationship between the Haqqani network, Quetta shura, and Pakistani ISI remains a matter of [informed guesswork](#)) and so clever games of divide-and-rule are far easier proposed than implemented. Exploiting variation in the social underpinnings of an insurgency requires extremely fine-grained information and policy dexterity that are not generally the calling cards of counterinsurgents.

Despite these challenges, awareness of heterogeneity should encourage COIN policies like amnesty and differentiated targeting that can exploit internal insurgent contradictions. This seems to have been valuably [recognized](#) by US forces in Afghanistan, even if it is only a partial solution.

Therefore both insurgent leaders and their foes are constantly forced to deal with the consequences of different insurgent motivations. My next post will take up two directly related questions: first, why insurgents jump ship to the side of the state, and, second, the causes of collaboration with counterinsurgents.

Posted by Paul Staniland on June 29, 2010 05:29 PM | [Permalink](#)

## **Afghanistan, the Taliban, and Foreigners**

My post on defection and collaboration is running behind schedule as I experience the administrative joys of planning a move, but in the meantime I wanted to highlight a couple of interesting pieces on Afghanistan.

The first is Thomas Ruttig's "[How Tribal are the Taleban?](#)" Ruttig examines the social base of the Taliban and argues:

*"The combination of vertical (religious/ideological) and horizontal (tribal) structures gives the Taleban movement a high degree of cohesion while maintaining organizational elasticity."*

and

*"There is no organized or recognizable 'moderate' (or any other 'political') 'faction' in the Taleban to counterbalance the 'religious' hardliners."*

Local networks maintain the Taliban's social embeddedness on the ground, but instead of these local communities becoming rival centers of power, the religious-clerical ties between key commanders pull them together into a more unified, interlocking whole. If Ruttig is right (Giustozzi suggests greater decentralization, though not fragmentation, [here](#)), this suggests that efforts to split the Taliban may be more difficult than US policymakers would hope. As unsavory as it will be, some kind of deal with the Taliban may end up happening, especially if [Pakistan has its way](#).

This [interview](#) with Rory Stewart (author of the amazing [The Places in Between](#)) on Afghanistan is also worthwhile. He cautions that:

*"The only way in which we could move beyond the counter-insurgency theory, or the hundred other theories which buttress and justify the Afghan war, is by rejecting their most basic underlying premises and objectives. Instead of trying to produce an alternative theory (on how to defeat the Taliban, create an effective, legitimate and stable Afghan state, stabilize Pakistan and ensure that al-Qaida could never again threaten the United States) we need to understand that however desirable such things might be, they are not things that we — as foreigners — can do."*

This is a reminder to scholars studying international interventions that it's not just the policies and capabilities of the UN, US, or NGOs that matter (even if they are easy and/or pleasant to study): the incentives and perceptions of local political actors are essential to explaining outcomes.

Posted by Paul Staniland on July 3, 2010 01:45 PM | [Permalink](#)

## Collaborating and Defecting

“Collaborator” is a loaded term. It's used by insurgents to condemn those who work with the state, and counterinsurgents avoid it in favor of ally, patriotic citizen, or local partner. Regardless of rhetoric, collaboration is an integral process of civil conflict: information is hugely valuable and so local informers are essential to the war effort of the state and its foes. Collaborators, and those accused of being collaborators, of both sides are liable to be found dead in ditches.

There are many reasons for ordinary people to become collaborators – blackmail, settling scores and rivalries, political commitments, contingent events, economic gain, etc (for human faces of collaboration in Vichy France, watch [The Sorrow and the Pity](#)). But what I want to focus on here is a specific type of collaboration with the state, by former insurgents. These are insurgent “ethnic defectors” who jump ship and become an arm of the counterinsurgency apparatus waging war against their former comrades. These are a particularly [useful](#) type of collaborator because of their detailed knowledge of the insurgency.

This type of defection is a central goal of American policy in Afghanistan. Flipping parts of the Taliban and/or tacitly allying with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami have been broached as possible ways out of the American predicament. But defection is difficult and rare – actively and publicly turning on former comrades is a dangerous choice, even more so than dropping out of the fight, surreptitiously informing, or cutting a de facto separate peace. “Selling out,” with lethal consequences for all involved, is not a decision taken lightly.

Given these challenges, what do we know about why it happens?

There are at least three non-mutually-exclusive mechanisms that seem to be at play. The first are government policies aimed at attracting “moderates” to its side. By offering political programs satisfying the war aims of particular factions, the goal is to exploit internal ideological differences to create splits (see related work by [Stedman](#), [Bueno de Mesquita](#), and [Kydd and Walter](#)). One problem with deploying this mechanism in practice is that it can be awfully hard to tell *ex ante* who the moderates are. Insurgents willing to cut a deal, for instance, are glowingly lauded as moderates by peace processors after the fact, but before the fact they may have been assessed by observers as hard-line militants (a la Brian Keenan, Slab Murphy, and Martin McGuinness in Northern Ireland)

A second mechanism is some variant of state divide-and-conquer. Counterinsurgents exploit personal rivalries, blackmail and extortion, informants, revenge, personal gain, bribery, and

misinformation to sow mistrust and division within the insurgent milieu (see work by Johnston on [Sudan](#), Pearlman on the [Palestinians](#), Kalyvas on Greek [counterinsurgent militias](#)). The difference with the first mechanism is that this does not necessarily involve big political concessions, but instead a nitty-gritty, unpleasant exploitation of internal difference.

Third, in some preliminary [recent work](#) I've been using historical cases and fieldwork to trace out a third mechanism that focuses less on state policy and more on the internal politics of insurgent movements. Serious, lethal fratricide between insurgent factions, whether over politics, cash, drugs, or personal prestige, can create a point of no return beyond which insurgent rivals become open to lethally allying with the state against their enemies in the insurgency. Internal violence makes defection more likely, since the stakes are higher, other choices are restricted, and the powerful emotions of betrayal, anger, and fear integral to feuding create a willingness to take the final step. States can *then* exploit these internal contradictions, but their policies tend to be reactive rather than the causal trigger for defection.

Ultimately, while I think the state can be hugely important, it's crucial to remember two things. First, insurgents are political actors too, with their own political interests and rivalries. The state's policies are not a *deus ex machina* driving variation in outcomes. Second, states (especially foreign ones) are often pretty awful at clearly identifying the salient cleavages within insurgencies and the right incentives to appeal to. Insurgent movements are often opaque and fluid, while counterinsurgents tend to spend much of their time [Seeing Like a State](#). Only after years of bloody trial and error can states start to accumulate the intelligence they need. As a result, it's hard, though not impossible, to play clever games of divide-and-rule in any fine-grained way.

The implication, at least for me, in Afghanistan is that the US probably doesn't have a reliable sense of exactly what the structure of incentives, divisions, and loyalties is, and so expecting ISAF to be able to easily split off defectors or manipulate the Taliban is unrealistic. It's more likely the Karzai regime has this knowledge, but it appears that Karzai is playing a different game than the US. Instead, the goal should be to be prepared to exploit internal strife as it appears, with guns, money, and protection; if [feuds](#) between local Hezb-e Islami and Taliban units in Afghanistan escalate to a broader inter-organizational clash, Americans and Afghans bearing gifts should be ready to parley with Gulbuddin Hekymatyar, or whichever side most needs help. This may involve extremely unlikely bedfellows and morally problematic alliances. As Giustozzi has noted in his [study](#) of warlordism in Afghanistan, many of the defectors to the Kabul regimes of 1979-1996 jumped ship because of blocked promotion paths, feuds, and rivalries within the insurgency, not just manipulation by the regime or sudden ideological conversions.

This is all well and good as an exercise in armchair counterinsurgency. But encouraging and exploiting the rise of unofficial pro-state militias can create severe problems of political order and basic human decency, since they often engage in horrific rights abuses and escape accountability. "India's Secret Army" in Kashmir, the defectors who joined with the Indian security forces in Kashmir in the mid-1990s, are still referred to with a shudder; Tamil pro-state paramilitaries have been installed as quasi-warlords in parts of Sri Lanka. There are long-run

consequences of defection and collaboration that remind us how bloody, nasty, and morally compromising counterinsurgency can be.

Posted by Paul Staniland on July 7, 2010 09:30 AM | [Permalink](#)

## **Should we care about failed and weak states?**

This will be my last guest post, and I want to thank Henry for the opportunity to contribute (I even got Andrew Exum to deign to [“not begrudge”](#) academics studying civil war; gee, thanks!). Since 9/11, there has been a growing emphasis on the security risks of weak failed states and “ungoverned spaces,” which can breed terrorism, refugee flows, and internationalized conflicts. In response, policymakers, scholars, and analysts have advocated thoroughgoing international efforts to strengthen weak states and bring order to failed states. Articles and books abound with titles like [State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror](#), [Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World](#), [“Sharing Sovereignty: New Institutions for Collapsed and Failing States,”](#) [“The Case for American Empire,”](#) and [“The Reluctant Imperialist: Terrorism, Failed States, and the Case for American Empire.”](#) Proposals have been made for an [expeditionary civilian state-building capacity](#) that can both bolster US counterinsurgency and prevent/react to state weakness all over the world. Dealing with state weakness/failure has been a goal embraced both by the right (with the Bush freedom agenda) and the left (with its “soft” and “smart” power).

This link between state weakness/failure and US security interests is worth probing a little more thoroughly, however, because it’s actually extremely unclear that most failed and weak states pose any real security threat to US interests. They matter for humanitarian reasons, and should be dealt with as such by concerned states and international organizations. But that’s not a good reason for the United States to build up an “expeditionary” state-building capacity for a neo-imperialist foreign policy.

### **Is State Failure a Core Security Threat?**

Logan and Preble [persuasively said “no”](#) four years ago, and there aren’t great reasons to disagree with their analysis now (on ungoverned spaces, see this [CFR](#) piece). Foreign Policy just released its [2010 Failed States Index](#). It frankly may be useless in terms of validity (is #19 North Korea equally failed, or failed in the same way, as #20 Niger?), but as a very rough cut it’s worth examining the 25 most-failed states to assess their relationship with US foreign policy.

As far as I can tell, there are four truly major security challenges in the top 25: North Korea, Pakistan, Iraq, and Afghanistan. It seems clear that North Korea is primarily a problem because of its coercive, internally predatory regime. If anything, North Korea’s state is too strong, rather than not strong enough (a similar issue can be found in #16 Burma). Iraq became a failed state after the 2003 US invasion, so the causal arrow is flipped around there. And Afghanistan on 9/11 was not a failed state in terms of coercive power, but instead a state largely (excluding the Northern Alliance areas) ruled by people hostile to the United States. The Taliban wouldn’t have been a friendlier bunch if they had a better tax system, a larger army, or more effective food distribution (Thomas Friedman runs into a similar issue, [proclaiming](#) the existence of “a Hamas-

run failed state in Gaza, a Hezbollah-run failed state in south Lebanon and a Fatah-run failed state in Ramallah” – failed states are either not run, or they are not failed states).

So only Pakistan really poses a problem because of state weakness itself. Which is a good reason to have policies aimed at bolstering the Pakistani state (or, at least, its civilian side – the military is plenty strong already), but not a good reason to decide to state-build anywhere else and it’s not even a good reason to create an intrusive American footprint on the ground in Pakistan. Moreover, given Pakistan’s particular historical context, it’s not clear that experiences there would be applicable to the Democratic Republic of Congo or Laos.

In Somalia (#1) and Yemen (#15), there are potential threats to US interests derived from weaknesses in state infrastructural power, but both have been reasonably managed without a group of earnest Americans trying to run the place. If we go farther down the list, we see some other states of interest – Iran, for instance, is at #32, but it’s not a problem due to state weakness or failure as opposed to a regime we don’t like.

The major threats to US interests are thus primarily derived from regimes that view the US as its enemy – not regimes too weak to control their territory. Bolstering state capacity in Pyongyang, Tehran, or Naypyidaw (or Rawalpindi) would not be a recipe for [Renewing American Leadership](#).

There are important humanitarian reasons to be interested in weak and failed states, whether or not they directly impinge on US interests – famine, disease, mass sexual violence, civil war, genocide, refugees. But as I’ll argue below, the best way to deal with these problems is not likely to involve big state-building missions, as opposed to cheaper and less ambitious but effective peacekeeping and aid initiatives.

### **Can International Interventions Help?**

Yes, to some extent and under some circumstances. Page Fortna has persuasively shown that [peacekeeping can reduce the risk](#) of a return to civil war. Barbara Walter has noted that [third-party guarantees](#) can help keep the peace (though see Toft on the virtues of [military victory](#) rather than settlements). But note that, while important, these are relatively restricted policies – basically trying to hold together a settlement agreed on by warring parties. Peacekeeping can be engaged in by a whole variety of states, not just the US. The same applies to humanitarian aid missions, which can provide basic necessities without trying to restructure the basic relations of power in a foreign society. These, as well as low-key development and advising projects, can improve governance.

But more ambitious policies overseas are much riskier. There are moral hazard risks to ambitious military interventions (see [Kuperman](#) and [Greenhill](#) on how the KLA played NATO in Kosovo). Genocide prevention is a worthy goal, but genocides are quite rare and their prevention even more rarely has anything to do with state weakness, state failure, or capacity-building (Valentino shows that many mass killings were done by [motivated, powerful states](#)). Doyle and Sambanis argue that UN interventions during civil wars, i.e. when the state is most failed, are [not very successful](#).

Large state-building missions are notoriously unsuccessful in achieving maximalist goals. Bosnia and Kosovo remain profoundly ethnically divided, East Timor continues to struggle, and Roland Paris has found a consistent [pattern of failure](#) in “deep” state-building efforts. [Brownlee](#) has found that US state-building primarily succeeds when it is not ambitious and relies on local capacity. It’s incredibly hard to reshape society, to figure out and then manipulate the incentives of key players, and to build new institutions imported from a totally different context. The prospective state-builder, and the NGOs, academics, and pundits who favor aggressive internationalism, would do well to remember Adam Smith’s critique of the imperial “man of system” (quoted in Jennifer Pitts’ [A Turn to Empire](#)):

“He goes on to establish it completely and in all its parts, without any regard either to the great interests, or to the strong prejudices which may oppose it. He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board”

Rarely, in Smith’s view, do such efforts succeed and recent empirical research seems to agree. There are few reasons to devote huge American effort to state-building initiatives as a tool of security. Basic security interests can be achieved with basic policy tools, and the pursuit of ambitious or transformative goals is a recipe for costly disappointment.

Posted by Paul Staniland on July 8, 2010 03:02 PM | [Permalink](#)

## **Academics and Counterinsurgents**

Well I’m back for one more long post. One of John Sides’ grad students sent him this quote from a David Kilcullen [article](#) about counterinsurgency and John has asked me to comment:

Find a political/cultural adviser from among your people — perhaps an officer, perhaps not (see article 8). Someone with people skills and a ‘feel’ for the environment *will do better than a political science graduate*.

This is also relevant because, based on his Twitter feed, it’s clear that I was [too snarky](#) in response to an [Abu Muqawama post](#) about academics and counterinsurgency, for which I apologize (my visceral reaction was: “why exactly *would* anyone begrudge people doing their jobs?” but that was unfair).

Is Kilcullen right that a political science graduate is useless? Well, sometimes – you wouldn’t want anyone in that role to lack people skills, a feel for local environments, or basic competence. If a political science graduate is going to be bad at the job, then obviously it’s a bad idea to make him or her your adviser. And I’m under absolutely no delusion that a world run by political scientists would somehow be a utopia, as opposed to an extremely protracted committee meeting. Kilcullen’s advice is aimed at people who are mixing it up on the ground and it’s quite sensible.

But political science, and academia more generally, at its best provides skills and knowledge that can be useful both on the ground and back in DC. Kilcullen himself has a PhD, after all, and the

various agencies of the federal government annually inhale huge numbers of political science BAs and PhDs and public policy masters graduates. Studying abroad, learning languages, acquiring statistical analysis skills, and knowing history often come out of this background. These can be incredibly useful, in Afghanistan or on the Hill. Many of the best think-tankers in the South Asian security world have academic training, whether as professors (like [Stephen Cohen](#), [Stephen Biddle](#), and [Marvin Weinbaum](#)) or political science PhDs (like [Vanda Felbab-Brown](#), [Seth Jones](#), and [Ashley Tellis](#)). Barnett Rubin's brilliant, extremely relevant [The Fragmentation of Afghanistan](#) was written while he was in a political science department, and his acknowledgments include various political scientists and other academics. There are lots of ways to get useful knowledge and skills, and academia certainly seems to be one of them.

What of those who stay in the academy? Based on limited experience, it appears that some academics view involvement in policy discussions as degrading "journalism" that necessarily undermines scholarship. This is part of the [consolidation of expert professions](#): the creation of barriers to entry that limit competition on terms most suitable to those trying to advance a particular vision of a discipline. In addition, there have been strong trends militating against regional focus and fieldwork that [leave political scientists at a disadvantage](#) when it comes to providing detailed information about particular places.

I see no reason why this should be the case. There are academic standards that must be met to get tenure and be published in refereed journals, but op-eds, TV appearances, and government work need not undermine those standards. Instead, new ideas and insights can emerge from confronting policy issues. Much of the seminal work on deterrence, coercion, and conventional war in international relations that now populates our graduate syllabi, for instance, came directly out of trying to figure out contemporary Cold War dilemmas (loosely similar dynamics seem to be at play in development economics - see this [profile of Esther Dufflo](#)).

Ideas, evidence, and theories can also emerge from fieldwork, language study, and regional knowledge - how can we know what questions to ask about politics and society (much less their answers) if we don't know anything about politics or society? Some of the best recent research in insurgency has come from deep field studies, including both quantitative and qualitative work, that provide data and insight difficult to extract from a library cubicle or computer screen (though such research is also hugely valuable and usually complementary). That strikes me as a comparative advantage to be embraced rather than shunned.

And what of policy makers, analysts, and the press? I have a ton of sympathy for policymakers - they have a brutally difficult job, facing life and death decisions under intense pressure. A lieutenant in Afghanistan doesn't have time to ponder the finer methodological questions raised by [States and Social Revolutions](#); Hillary Clinton has enough on her plate that expecting her to write memos about the implications of [Identity in Formation](#) for Afghanistan's ethnically mixed areas is totally absurd.

That said, given how massive and wealthy it is, I don't think it's unreasonable to expect engagement with academic work on the part of at least some of the government apparatus. In my very limited experience (and that of friends and colleagues), this engagement is highly uneven. Overseas, I've found people from the military, State Department, and USAID quite receptive to

new ideas and interested in real dialogue. But back in the States, I've sometimes observed an uncomfortable dynamic in which academics are told to be relevant, but then when they present arguments at odds with what policymakers find affirming or convenient, or that are complicated, academics are dismissed as "just not getting it" or being irrelevant (even when they're obviously not being irrelevant). This can strike academics as a very disingenuous kind of engagement, and creates more barriers rather than fewer.

Providing quick and convenient recommendations and conclusions isn't what academics are paid to do, nor should it be. The job of academics is to do first-rate research and teaching. As John and others have [noted](#) in a different areas, many arguments made by academics focus on big structural variables that are frustratingly hard to manipulate, or rely on assumptions and evidence that policymakers find disconcerting. But if those arguments are important and will shape the likely outcome of policies, academics should be able to say so without being ignored or dismissed. Only taking professional research seriously when it agrees with you, or after you've realized your policy is in really bad shape, is not the best way to draw on academic expertise.

I have less sympathy for the roving packs of pundits, analysts, thinktankers, consultants, and journalists who fill out the policy community and have provided much of the discourse around contemporary US foreign policy. They have a lot more time on their hands to get into the intellectual weeds on COIN, state-building, and other important topics. A lot of academic work is certainly abstruse, inaccessible, and policy-irrelevant, but there's also a lot of good, accessible research out there that goes almost totally unmentioned. Instead of using it, thinktank reports, op-eds, and pop-foreign policy books often toss in a couple citations of some "lesson learned" pieces, make sweeping assertions about the nature of counterinsurgency, and highlight aspects of a couple cases that nicely fit in with the argument being advanced. While there are important exceptions, it's generally a recipe for fuzzy thinking, dubious analogizing, and platitude reproduction (see: [David Brooks](#)).

For this group of people, I can't think of a good excuse for not picking up a copy of [At War's End, Guerrillas and Revolutions in Latin America, Terror, Insurgency, and the State](#), or a bunch of other serious, accessible, relevant pieces of academic research (I'm happy to provide more examples in comments) and using them to clarify arguments, probe assumptions, and find more appropriate historical cases. That should be done *before* making policy recommendations and *before* pontificating on the topic of the day. If self-proclaimed expert authorities aren't willing to do some very basic due diligence, I'm not sure why we're supposed to listen to them. I would never write an op-ed about, say, the Japanese economy without reading a lot of serious research on the Japanese economy, and COIN and security issues aren't any different.

Academic-policy relations should be a two-way street, not just a venue for academics to look down their noses at "applied" work or the policy community to lecture academics about how useless they are. Both sides can certainly do better.

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