



David Kilcullen. *Blood Year: The Unraveling of Western Counterterrorism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 288 pp. \$17.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-069226-1.

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“My intention here is simply to explain things as I see them—with all the limitations that any one person’s perspective inevitably implies,” writes David Kilcullen, the former senior advisor to General David Petraeus in Iraq in 2007 (p. x). In the closest thing resembling a confessional within policy circles, Kilcullen presents his perspective on the US counterinsurgency in Iraq based on his role and military experience. The book specifically focuses on the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014—the “blood year” when ISIS seized Mosul—and its impact on the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Using crisp prose and avoiding jargon, Kilcullen argues that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was not only poorly planned but also misguided; the United States should never have been there in the first place. Furthermore, it took attention away from Afghanistan at a crucial time of its recovery from the US invasion in 2001. From Kilcullen’s perspective, the Iraq “debacle” has been instrumental in making the world less secure, and the 2015 Paris attacks and ongoing war in Syria serve as proof. All is not lost though. With better management, creative thinking, sufficient resources to implement a strategic vision, and actual fighting, the war can still be “won.”

Kilcullen has used his experience and field notes very effectively. The book narrates the com-

plex nature of the GWOT in a candid and straightforward manner, making it easy to navigate and understand. For example, Kilcullen expertly explains the fissures between al Qaeda and its subsidiaries, the various paths to jihadism, the vulnerability of urban centers to terrorist attacks, how the Arab Spring contradicted al Qaeda’s narrative (and hence was problematic for global jihad), and ISIS’s strategic skills in using the internet and social media for recruitment. He is also constructively critical of himself and the US administrations he served. For instance, he recognizes that the failure to stabilize postwar Iraq showed how “disaggregation,” a policy he helped create, failed. His description of the political context that guided the policy’s formulation and the light footprint strategy that led to its failure is absent of any partisan rhetoric and is refreshingly matter-of-fact. He also does not shy away from voicing his contempt for then-defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and his successor, Robert Gates, calling him Rumsfeld’s “mirror image in virtually every way” (p. 24).

Kilcullen’s book is eye-opening, but perhaps not for the reasons he envisioned. To a more critical eye, his claim that the Surge of 2007 and the subsequent Anbar Awakening were both successful seems one-dimensional. This is not to say that the Surge, Awakening, and the lives lost were in

vain. There was an exponential reduction in violence, and Iraqis felt—and were—more secure than they had been since the invasion. Yet, he circumvents any role the Awakening had in forming Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's thirst for sectarianism, which became evident in 2011 as the US announced its plans for withdrawal. The Anbar Awakening refers to the alliance of thirty Sunni tribes with US forces to fight al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Initially partnered with AQI and its anti-Shi'a agenda, the Sunni tribes of the Anbar province wanted balance against the predominantly Shi'a government and Shi'a insurgent groups. The sheer amount of sectarian violence, however, prompted the tribes to break their alliance with AQI and partner with the United States instead.

Kilcullen's praise of the Surge is fact-based: it did reduce violence and stabilize postwar Iraq (albeit temporarily). But his reluctance to criticize it is puzzling. Coupled with his criticism of President Barack Obama for withdrawing US troops in 2011—"passivity in the face of catastrophe" (p. 4)—his averseness highlights two significant aspects of Kilcullen's own position as an architect of counterinsurgency. First, and foremost, he is a military man. His faith in military solutions remains intact despite his condemnation of the Bush administration's war call and mishandling of nation-building within both Afghanistan and Iraq. Even though in his conclusion he cautions against overcelebrating battlefield victories, he advocates for a heavier troop presence. Second, as a policymaker, he fails to acknowledge the larger problem of strong states (in this case, the US) using weaker, violent, nonstate actors (Sunni militias) to achieve their strategic goals on the ground (stabilize postwar Iraq). Although sponsoring militant groups may reap benefits in the short run—and did in Iraq by reducing sectarian violence—it is unpredictable in the long run, as is evident when looking at Iraq today. Finally, his story seeks to humanize the US tendency to launch unnecessary wars, which is

problematic for withdrawal policies, like the one the Obama administration implemented.

Despite my criticisms, I do sincerely believe that Kilcullen's book should be required reading for all politicians, liberal interventionists, and military officers in policy positions. It is an important book, not simply because of the time period it narrates, but also for the policy and scholarly questions it raises. For example: can counterinsurgency mediate sectarian divisions? Should militias play a central role in counterinsurgency? Finally, nation-building wars are time-consuming, costly, ineffective, and perhaps even never-ending. If you don't believe me, read Kilcullen.

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