Counterinsurgency has not lacked critics recently, although most detractors have focused on its ineffectiveness or brutality. In his compelling new history, Joseph MacKay critiques counterinsurgency by framing it as an evolving political project, not just a military strategy.

MacKay uses four case studies of major counterinsurgency texts to trace two themes in the counterinsurgent's imagination, or “the varying ideological commitments that underwrite beliefs about counterrevolutionary war” (p. 4). First, counterinsurgency has been conservative in the sense of opposing and trying to reverse revolutionary movements. It is, almost by nature, a strategy of the powerful and those who control the state against the less powerful, deployed in an attempt to maintain that imbalance. Individual counterinsurgents may not identify as conservative, but this strategic tradition developed largely to defeat revolutionary as well as anti-imperial movements, making it conservative in function, according to MacKay.

Second, counterinsurgency has been high modernist and utopian in the sense of imagining a “linear, schematized world, effacing local difference and resistance” (p. 5). Borrowing from James C. Scott, MacKay views counterinsurgency as aiming to make territory and populations “legible,” or catalogued, mapped, and quantified, and thereby rendered capable of being controlled (p. 12). When counterinsurgents develop grids, population maps, oil spots, and so on, they are trying to simplify and exert authority over territory and people. Thus, while counterinsurgency is conservative in its politics, MacKay concludes, it has a highly modern way of viewing the world, reflecting the rise of the bureaucratic, centralizing state in the past few centuries. Counterinsurgents, moreover, are often utopian in the sense of imagining an ideal political order, albeit one that maintains the status quo, and seeking to construct it.

MacKay uses a set of concise and effective case studies to illustrate the development of counterinsurgency thought and highlight his core themes. However, some of his case studies fit his argument better than others.

Mackay starts with Johann Ewald, a Hessian officer who served the British in the American Revolutionary War. This conflict introduced Ewald to “armed political revolution” as the North American colonists fought for independence and a new political order (p. 90). He wrote two manuals on small wars that influenced Carl von Clausewitz and other theorists. His grudging respect for irregular American forces and his frustration with my-
opic British strategy make for fascinating reading. In this book, Ewald emerges as a transitional figure who theorized about early revolutionary warfare without grasping its political nature.

The British theorist C. E. Calwell's career and his 1896 manual *Small Wars* best illustrate MacK-ay's overall argument. Calwell fought in the Boer War and was a staunch defender of imperialism. He opposed liberal imperialism, which justified empire in the name of “civilizing” colonized peoples, in favor of unapologetic British rule and racial hierarchy. Calwell championed the idea of performative violence in which the soldiers of empire use overwhelming violence against civilian and military targets alike to cow entire populations into submission. For Calwell, counterinsurgency was an openly political project that sought to maintain strict colonial control and put subject populations back in their places. Guerrilla warfare was something that uncivilized or racially inferior peoples did, and they deserved no leniency from regular forces. Calwell and other fin-de-siècle imperialists also developed modernist systems of population control, including barbed wire grids, blockhouses, and concentration camps in places like South Africa and the Philippines.

For his third case study, MacKay profiles David Galula, the influential French theorist and practitioner of counterinsurgency in the French wars of decolonization. Galula believed in the French Empire and developed his doctrine as a means of preserving it. “I sound no doubt terribly colonialist, but it’s a fact,” he declared (p. 171). His theories nicely illustrate MacKay’s argument about counterinsurgency as a high modernist strategy. Galula saw the essence of counterinsurgency as controlling the political and social structure in which the population lived in order to compel them to support the state. Galula believed that reducing the influence of Islam on the population, especially on women, would facilitate this process. He pursued “surveillance, bureaucratization, and control” of both physical space and the population (p. 173).

MacKay’s final case study looks at Field Manual 3-24, the counterinsurgency manual that the US Army and Marine Corps published in 2006, which became the doctrinal basis of counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. MacKay argues that FM 3-24 shows how imperial currents run through counterinsurgency doctrine up to the present day. Its authors, including General David Petraeus, drew heavily on Galula and referenced Calwell while omitting their imperialist entanglements. MacKay portrays this manual as a product of the organizational culture of the US military because of its emphasis on bureaucratic process and inter-agency coordination, which takes up large sections of the manual.

FM 3-24 is where MacKay’s argument runs into some conceptual problems. He portrays counterinsurgency as “a status quo or reactionary response to successive projects of transformation” and “the ideological shadow of modern progressive and revolutionary ideas about socio-political change” (p. 87). Counterinsurgency doctrines, including FM 3-24, are “conservative in the basic sense of opposing political change and protecting privilege against resistance from below” (p. 232). In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States may have been the counterinsurgent, but it was hardly the conservative or status quo power. It sought to foster democratic political change in these countries along with liberal values like press freedom and women’s empowerment. Insurgent groups like Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) or the Taliban were the reactionaries in these conflicts who sought to seize control of the state and reassert strict hierarchies of gender, faith, and tradition. The United States sought to preserve a status quo in these nations in the sense of preventing them from falling into insurgent control, as counterinsurgents usually do, but it was simultaneously trying to change the political status quo of these nations.
US strategies in these nations, moreover, were hardly “utopian,” as MacKay contends (p. 235). By the time it launched major counterinsurgency efforts in 2007 and 2009 in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively, the United States sought mainly to pull these countries back from the brink of civil war, not to construct an idealized political order. The well-worn phrase “Afghan good-enough” speaks to the pragmatic orientation of US leaders in these countries. In addition, counterinsurgency during the war on terror does not fit MacKay’s imperialist paradigm. The United States put clear time limits on its counterinsurgency operations in these nations, and it never sought to rule them directly as France and Britain ruled their colonies. Petraeus may have adapted strategic concepts from Galula, but their politics remain significantly different.

MacKay’s larger conclusions are that counterinsurgencies are “conservative worldmaking projects,” that they are “bound up with racial and colonial ideals,” and that “counterrevolution may be inherently conservative” (pp. 5, 21, 246). These claims, however, slip into essentializing and do not account for the historical diversity of irregular wars. As Iraq and Afghanistan show, counterinsurgency, like strategic bombing or attritional warfare, is a strategy that can be deployed in the service of many political causes. While counterinsurgency may be historically entangled with conservatism and imperialism, that does not mean it cannot be used for other ends. Insurgents can be reactionaries, as the world witnessed in Iraq, Rhodesia, Nicaragua, and multiple times in Afghanistan. Counterinsurgents may seek by nature to hang on to power, either for themselves or a third party, but they can be the more liberal party to a conflict.

MacKay is on stronger ground with the claim that contemporary counterinsurgency reflects a modernist managerial approach to information, bureaucracy, and population control that may obscure the violence occurring on the ground. But such modern managerialism transcends the liberal-conservative binary. MacKay is not fully convincing on these matters, but his provocative arguments point to new directions for military historians.

This book has some organizational and stylistic shortcomings as well. MacKay tends to repeat his main argument to excess, and he spends too much time explaining his methodology, which will limit the book’s appeal to less specialized readers. His second chapter is a fifty-page summary of the history of counterrevolutionary war that most scholars will find familiar. Thus, the reader has to navigate about ninety pages before reaching the case studies, which form the heart of the book. More integration of background history into the case studies would have made this a smoother read.

Military historians will find MacKay’s work interesting for its broad scope, detailed analysis, and bold claims. However, it is less clear what a policymaker or military practitioner should take from this book. Academics like to highlight the darker histories of ideas like counterinsurgency that those in power often obscure. MacKay does this well. But is the strategy of counterinsurgency inherently tainted by its past? Practitioners first and foremost have to solve problems like the vicious civil war and overlapping insurgencies in Iraq in the mid-2000s. They should be aware that there are imperial and reactionary legacies in counterinsurgency and that this has most often been a brutal form of warfare, despite the sanitized managerial ethos of FM 3-24. Still, these realities should not stop them from drawing on history to learn how to better conduct this kind of warfare when political leaders call for it, as they seem to do in an almost cyclical pattern.
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