Soldiers and Afghan National Police coordinate security for Afghan national election, September 2010

U.S. Army (Chris G. Neeley)

An Actor-centric Theory of War

Understanding the Difference Between *COIN* and *Counterinsurgency*

By SEBASTIAN L.v. GORKA *and* DAVID KILCULLEN

*Everything in war is very simple,
but the simplest thing is difficult.*

—Carl von Clausewitz

Dr. Sebastian L.v. Gorka teaches on the Faculty of the College of International Security Affairs at the National Defense University and is Military Affairs Fellow with the Foundation for Defense of Democracy. Dr. Gorka is contributing author and coeditor of *Toward a Grand Strategy Against Terrorism* (McGraw Hill, 2010). Dr. David Kilcullen is a Counterinsurgency Advisor to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, International Security Assistance Force, the U.S. Government, and other governments. Dr. Kilcullen is the author of *The Accidental Guerrilla* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

The United States, the most powerful nation in the world, is reassessing its approach to war. With America entering the 10th year of what was originally called the global war on terror, the Nation finds itself engaged in conflicts in Central Asia and the Middle East that challenge decades of planning, training, and doctrine. Although collectively this series of campaigns recently crossed the marker-point for America's longest combat engagement ever, arguments persist—even in the pages of this publication—as to whether we have the correct approach.[1]

This debate is, for the most part, limited in scope.[2] In general, it can be summarized as revolving around one contentious point: whether one agrees with the idea that the United States must redefine its fighting capacity based upon irregular threats—such as insurgency—or not. On the one hand, we have the proponents of a counterinsurgency, or COIN, approach often associated with one of Washington's newest think tanks, the Center for a New American Security, and its energetic president, retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl.[3] In brief, the argument on this side of the current debate is that the U.S. Army (note, *not* the U.S. Marine Corps) deliberately shunned irregular warfare, and counterinsurgency in particular, after it was "not allowed" (politically) to win the Vietnam war.[4] Only when faced 30 years later in Iraq with an insurgency that seemed to be winning did the uniformed establishment return to the library of irregular warfare and, under the leadership of General David Petraeus, rewrite and embrace this form of war in the shape of revised Field Manual 3–24, *Counterinsurgency*.[5] This doctrinal revival, so the story goes, was operationalized in the "surge" that stabilized Iraq. The strongest proponents of this rediscovery and renewed emphasis on counterinsurgency see the future as predominantly shaped by irregular challenges and thus argue for an approach to the use of force that sees conventional warfare as passé (at least for the time being). Some go on to assert that future conflicts will be determined less by the kinetic effect of our units and their weapons than by the "shaping" and influence that we bring to bear nonkinetically and, additionally, that the adaptability of America's forces is paramount.[6]

On the other side, we have experienced experts, such as Army Colonel Gian

Gentile—who has made a name for himself by writing of the "cult of COIN"—who are convinced that the recent war on terror–driven overemphasis on COIN seriously degrades the essential core combined arms competencies of the Army, such as artillery, and that we must "return to basics" if we are to maintain essential national security capabilities.[7] To some observers and commentators, COIN is an ambiguous concept that has gained such popularity because either side of the political aisle can emphasize very different policies under the same doctrinal banner—aggressive kinetic approaches for the right, softer nation-building priorities for the left.

We believe that neither side of this argument has a monopoly on the truth. Rather, the question of how America should and could apply force in the post–Cold War and post-9/11 environment can be answered only after taking a more historic perspective, which places Iraq and Afghanistan into a far broader and richer context than just the last few decades. Additionally, we need to be aware of the fact that *COIN—in the American mode—is but one small reflection of the much older, even ancient, practice of countering* insurgents, or irregular enemies. Finally, we propose that a theory of war based on who is using violence against us makes much more sense today than theories based on putative generational changes in warfare or the asymmetry of combatants.

Irregular Warfare at the Meta-level

COIN, as the U.S. Armed Forces and policy elites currently understand it, is an intellectual fad, a way to think about irregular warfare. Before COIN, there was "asymmetric warfare," before that, "AirLand Battle." Next will come another transitory doctrinal lens such as "stability operations" to replace COIN, and another lens after that. While war against nonstate actors using unconventional means has existed for millennia and under many names (such as "tribal warfare" and "small wars"),[8] COIN, as the Western world understands and uses the concept, developed out of key meetings at the RAND Corporation in 1958.[9] Yet the activities so described should be understood as a specific subset of the overarching, far older activity of counterinsurgency. The doctrinal principles that resulted—eventually in FM 3–24—were shaped not by the lessons of past centuries of war against nonstate actors but by the limited experiences of Western nations during the 20th century. In fact, COIN is but one small example of the various forms of warfare the world has witnessed over time. These forms can be classed with regard to the characteristics of the parties involved—State versus State, State versus nonstate actor, or conflict among nonstate actors (see figure). We argue that these constricted foundations upon which classical COIN doctrine was built have not only distorted our understanding of the current threat environment but also dangerously limits our ability to defeat current and future enemies.

Data and Doctrine

The Army's rediscovery of COIN theory following the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq led scholars and officials to revisit case studies and doctrinal texts on the subject long overlooked by political and policy analysts. The drastically deteriorating events in Iraq were followed by the wholesale return of serving officers and strategists to the study of classic texts on previous insurgencies, foremost among them Frank E. Kitson on Northern Ireland, Roger Trinquier and David Galula on the French experience in Algeria, as well as Robert Taber's original *War of the Flea,* and, of course, the works of T.E. Lawrence (of Arabia), in an effort to relearn that which we once knew.

As a result, thanks in part to mass media coverage and the exposure of theater commanders such as Generals Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal, millions of people a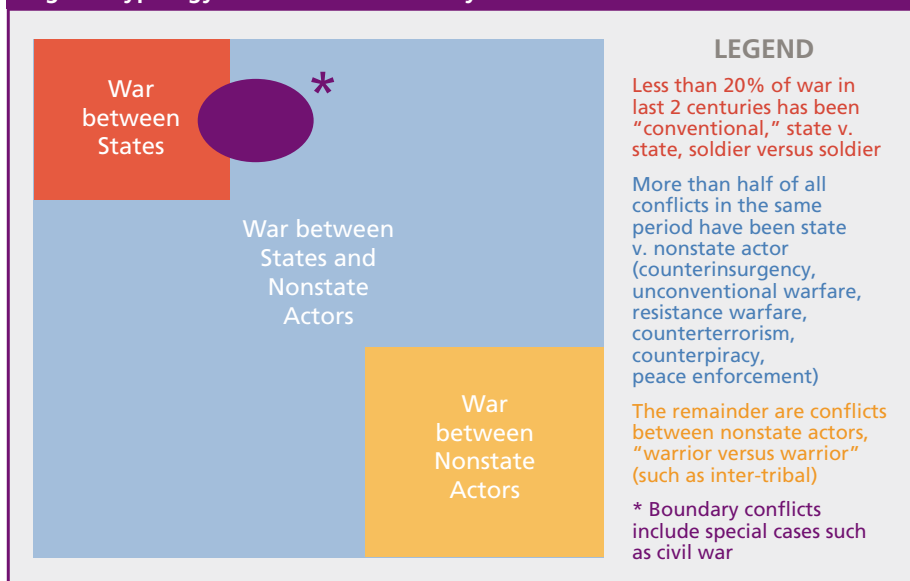cross the Nation are familiar with COIN concepts such as "winning hearts and minds" or "clear, hold, build." Nevertheless, despite this nationwide doctrinal revival, two disturbing issues lay unresolved.

First, for some opaque reason, the list of conflicts that the military and academic worlds examine under the category of "insurgencies" is incredibly restrictive and ignores many cases of irregular warfare that could be included without undue justification. (In most cases, these ignored conflicts have for some reason been labeled civil wars or revolutions and not insurgencies.) Second, despite the number of canonical texts and individual and comparative studies, no one has attempted a categorization of previous COIN cases that differentiates among the original conditions at the start of a given conflict and the eventual strategic endstate that it wished to achieve.

Together, these two factors—the restriction of COIN analysis to just a handful of famous 20th-century cases and the mistake of examining each doctrinally without first separating them based upon the strategic aims of the government and the political, economic, and military point of departure—have greatly distorted what can be learned from existing examples of irregular warfare and what in fact the lessons for today may be. If the data set of COIN analysis is enlarged to include other 20th-century conflicts that were not analyzed as insurgencies by the RAND team (and others), the results are striking.

The disturbing truth that modern Western COIN theory is built on a handful of books based upon practitioner experiences in

Figure. Typology of Conflict: The Reality of War

War between States

*

War between States and Nonstate Actors

War between Nonstate Actors

LEGEND

Less than 20% of war in last 2 centuries has been "conventional," state v. state, soldier versus soldier

More than half of all conflicts in the same period have been state v. nonstate actor (counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare, resistance warfare, counterterrorism, counterpiracy, peace enforcement)

The remainder are conflicts between nonstate actors, "warrior versus warrior" (such as inter-tribal)

* Boundary conflicts include special cases such as civil war

a handful of 20th-century conflicts is not mitigated by the less famous but broader COIN works. Country studies by lesser known writers are similarly restricted. The core texts cover Vietnam (French Indochina), Algeria, Northern Ireland, the Philippines, and Malaya. The less-well-known writers will go on to discuss Mozambique, Angola, El Salvador, or Afghanistan under the Soviets. Only the most adventurous writers and theorists braved traveling as far as Kashmir or India to look at what could be learned there. Subsequently, the modern study of counterinsurgency and the doctrine it gave birth to are limited to less than two dozen conflicts in a century that witnessed more than 150 wars and lesser conflicts, domestic and interstate (see table 1).

Just as worrying and influential to the formation of a comprehensive modern COIN doctrine is the fact that almost all of the better known examples of counterinsurgency are limited to cases where a colonial or postimperial government was fighting on the territory of its dependent (ex)colonies. In the vast majority of these

cases, the insurgent was interested in self-determination or similar politically (as opposed to religiously) motivated goals. Limiting our understanding of insurgency to such historically particular anticolonial and areligious cases seems very hard to justify in today's decidedly postcolonial, post–Cold War era. Most importantly, none of the insurgents discussed within the canon of classic COIN studies was religiously motivated with the aim of initiating a global revolution, as is al Qaeda and its associated movements. As a result, any translation of classic COIN doctrine to the threat posed by a religiously informed and globally ambitious al Qaeda would seem forced, to say the least, and misguided at best. There must be a distinct limit to how useful a doctrine based on what used to be called colonial "policing actions" on the sovereign territory of the counterinsurgent can be to a United States fighting a religiously motivated enemy with global ambitions that outstrip older ideas of nationalism and self-determination.[10]

If we were more scientifically rigorous and broadened the scope of COIN analysis to include other examples of irregular warfare that occurred in the 20th century, our doctrine might be far more relevant. Such a list, if it is to be intellectually sound, must include those instances—internal or international—where unconventional warfare was used by one or both sides, to include civil wars and revolutions. Such a list would include conflicts that classic COIN strategists, both pre- and post-9/11, rarely discuss, such as the Boer War, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, partisan and resistance efforts in Europe during World War II, and even the Chechen-Russian conflict of the 1990s. Such an expanded pool of case studies would include dozens of conflicts and enrich the field of data that can be examined by the counterinsurgency theoretician, strategist, and practitioner alike.

This expanded set of case studies lends itself to at least a preliminary classification (see table 2). Several of those listed are rarely, if ever, examined as instances of insurgency or counterinsurgency, such as the Hungarian Revolution or French Resistance. Additionally, and most importantly for the current threat environment, several in this newly expanded data set are irregular conflicts wherein actors were substantially informed or influenced by religion as well as politics (for example, the Chechen wars and the Iranian revolution),

and which therefore have greater relevance to today's threat environment.

There is no scientific reason why the study of these "nonclassic COIN" conflicts has been all but ignored by those wishing to find doctrinal answers as to how to defeat today's irregular foe. By enlarging the pool of conflicts to be studied, we automatically include cases far closer to the current challenges we face. Not only do we include more cases where the enemy was religiously as well as politically motivated—as are Osama bin Laden and his Salafi allies—we now include examples of conflicts similar to Iraq and Afghanistan insofar as the goal of the counterinsurgent was not a return to the status quo ante, a return to previolence normalcy, but instead a drastic alteration of political, economic, and social structures, the forcible reengineering of a nation.

Given the heterogeneous categories within this new data, it becomes evident that a single unified counterinsurgency doctrine is not possible, that there can be no universal set of best practices evolved over time that can cover such diverse starting points, endstates, and local contexts. After all, how can the same guidelines be used to reestablish order by a strong central government that has been challenged by a minority (such as was the case in Northern Ireland or even Malaya) but also guide the use of force in creating a completely new economic, political, and social system in a country that was formerly controlled by a fundamentalist religious regime (Afghanistan) or a secular dictatorship (Iraq)? To illustrate by comparison, would we ever have insisted on using a doctrine based on lessons learned in mass-maneuver warfare in a conventional campaign in Europe (for example, World War II) for a campaign consisting of unconventional raiding missions in Central Asia (for example, America's support to the anti-Soviet mujahideen in the 1980s)? At the very least, we need to have doctrine in each case bounded by two fundamental variables: the starting point for the intervention and the ultimate (political) goal for the intervention.[11]

When one discusses the former, it is useful to ask whether the initial predeployment situation is one of unrest and low level violence among people tied to us historically, culturally, and linguistically (the colonial scenario), or the use of force in a nation-state that suffered under a dictatorship for decades (Iraq) or that has a failed and corrupt central government of its own (Afghanistan). In the

Table 1. COIN Data Set of Case Studies
Most Analyzed:
Malaya
Algeria
Vietnam
The Philippines
Burma
Nicaragua
Northern Ireland
Less Popular:
Angola
Afghanistan (Soviet)
Greece
Mozambique
Zimbabwe
East Timor
Congo
Oman
El Salvador
Colombia
China
India (Naxalite)
Jammu and Kashmir
Sri Lanka
TOTAL: 21

latter two instances, we need to think about whether our objective is simply the suppression of relatively low levels of violence, or the radical reengineering of the political and economic reality of another country previously unconnected to us directly.

On top of the need to recognize the differences in the strategy that one would adopt based on these underexamined factors, there is also the question of religion. If counterinsurgency is, in the final analysis, about which side has the greatest legitimacy, then we cannot simply measure that legitimacy as a function of political recognition by the majority of the population (representation, as opposed to "democracy"). It should be obvious that if our forces are not only from a different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural group from those communities in which they are operating, but also not of the same faith, then this will drastically affect the legitimacy of our intervention and the chances for success. At the least, it will affect our credibility in the eyes of a different faith community. Put another way, if after World War II, U.S. troops had had to occupy Saudi Arabia or Turkey for a number of decades, would they have used the same rules and doctrines—and been as successful—as they were in their occupation of (West) Germany?[12]

COIN's Proper Place

The observations above on the limitations of today's "best practices" approach to COIN are based upon how little our understanding of this type of conflict is actually a reflection of the realities of unconventional warfare in the 20th century. Classic COIN is simply the current lens we use to try and comprehend an ageless form of conflict that is in fact more prevalent than conventional war.

Within the 464 conflicts recorded on the *Correlates of War* database since 1815, we can identify 385 in which a state was fighting a nonstate actor.[13] Surprisingly, despite the conventional wisdom, in 80 percent of conflicts, the government defeated its irregular foe (victory measured by whether the counterinsurgent government stayed in power and was able to vanquish the threat for at least a decade). Irregular warfare is, therefore, more regular or conventional than our strategic lenses would propose. (If we understand that *regular* is another word for *regulated*, the observation seems almost tautologous, since states monopolize the regulation of war and therefore any conflict involving a nonstate

Table 2. Broadening the Counterinsurgency Data Set	
Colonial Policing Action	Algeria
	Boer War
Domestic Regime Change/Revolution	Russian Revolution
	Cuban Revolution
	Hungarian Revolution
	Iranian Revolution
Separatist/Self-Determination	Northern Ireland
	Chechnya
International Regime Change	Afghanistan 1979
	Afghanistan 2001
	Iraq 2003
Domestic Resistance/Partisan World War II:	Yugoslavia
	Finland
	Norway
	Estonia
	The Ukraine
Internationally Assisted/ Coordinated Resistance World War II:	France, etc. (Special Operations Executive, Office of Strategic Services)

actor will necessarily fall outside of the regulated sphere of war.) If we shift from the more doctrinal and philosophical to the programmatic and historically demonstrable, we find more unsettling evidence.

To begin, if we look at the recorded insurgencies, we find certain conditions for success. Governments that usually win against nonstate opponents are most often those that fight on their own sovereign territory.[14] Contrast this to the challenge that America faces today in Central Asia and the Middle East. Second, winning governments are usually prepared to eventually negotiate with their nonstate enemy.[15]

Additional data show that on average, the successful counterinsurgent will need 12 to 15 years to defeat an insurgency. According to several studies, those insurgencies that defeat governments do so in 5 to 9 years. Therefore, time is an important factor in this type of conflict since the grievances that fuel a threat to the sovereignty of the government will take a long time to ameliorate. It is not, however, simply a question of just throwing resources at the problem. One cannot artificially accelerate the resolution of complicated economic, social, and political problems. We have seen this in Iraq and especially Afghanistan. A functioning state and the provision of fundamental services must be arrived at in an organic fashion that is self-sustaining. Throwing money at a

deficit does not engender growth in complex systems bounded by human agency and embedded structure.[16]

Also, the historical data do not support the prevalent winning-hearts-and-minds hypothesis. In a protracted conflict between a state and nonstate actor, making a population "like" the government is much less important than the population believing that there is a sense of order and predictability to their lives—in other words, the perception of what social scientists call a normative system. A successful insurgency provides an alternative normative structure, a predictable "box" of its own within which an ever larger part of the population defines its life. Counterinsurgency is therefore about breaking alternative normative systems (for example, the system of justice provided by the Taliban in increasingly greater areas of Afghanistan).

Actor-based Approach to War

The depth of the strategic conversation in the United States has bogged down at a superficial level of analysis. We remain at the level of debating COIN versus traditional military capabilities, or COIN versus counterterrorism. We must go deeper, or rather higher. The first step toward this level of richer debate requires recognition of the fact that COIN—as defined in the classic theory of the 1950s—is not the same as "countering insurgency"—the

age-old activity of countering insurrections. The United States must accept that what it has attempted to do in Central Asia and the Middle East is not directly comparable to the experience Western nations gained in postcolonial policy actions of the 20th century. The description of our missions there as COIN, or COIN plus stabilization operations or nation-building, is inadequate. For what we are trying to accomplish is not even an updated COIN 2.0, but in fact nation-formation and the establishment of representative nation-states where before there were none. Subsequently, should the political masters of our military establishment deem it necessary to execute similar missions in the future, we would do well to broaden our scientific catchment of scenarios used to inform our doctrine. This would allow us to move toward a more stochastic approach to 21st-century warfare.

Instead of approaching the threats we face solely on the plane of tactical or operational questions and making the choice of which field manual we should use in theater a primary issue—rather than treating this properly as a doctrinal issue—we should start by establishing the context of conflict. Such a stochastic approach to war today would not posit new qualities of war, or new characteristics of our foe, but ask the simple question: whom are we fighting? Why are they fighting us? For it is highly unlikely that the Taliban fighter whom our Soldiers and Marines face on the ground in Afghanistan or the al Qaeda operative who intends to kill Americans on U.S. soil wakes up and chooses to fight irregular war, or network war, or fourth-generation war. They simply choose war. It is who they are that shapes their approach, not some detached, independent, quality of "modern" war. For although the Great Prussian may have been shaped conceptually by the crucible of state-on-state conventional war, Carl von Clausewitz was so very right when he warned us that we must remember that the nature of war is immutable. Who fights us, why they wish to kill us, and to what end they wish to destroy us will always be different. As the living legend General Carlos Ospina, who more than anyone else was responsible for defeating that very unconventional foe, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, stated: "War is war."[17] **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] See the heated Nagl versus Gentile debate in *Joint Force Quarterly* 58 (3d Quarter, 2010), or the more strident writings of Andrew Bacevich, such as *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War* (New York: Macmillan, 2010). For a workmanlike analysis of why the latest Quadrennial Defense Review represents a weak appreciation of current warfighting needs, see Roy Godson and Richard H. Schultz, "A QDR for All Seasons? The Pentagon Is Not Preparing for the Most Likely Conflicts," *Joint Force Quarterly* 59 (4th Quarter, 2010). See also Sebastian L.v. Gorka, *Al Qaeda and von Clausewitz*: *Rediscovering the Art of War*, U.S. Joint Special Operations University Symposium: "Countering Global Insurgency," May 5, 2006, available at <www.itdis.org/Portals/11/JSOUStrategy.pdf>.

[2] Two exceptions that prove the rule are, of course, Phil Bobbitt's masterly *The Shield of Achilles* (New York: Anchor, 2003), and numerous works of Martin van Creveld, but especially *The Transformation of War: The Most Radical Reinterpretation of Armed Conflict since Clausewitz* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).

[3] Some label the one side of this debate the "COIN-dinistas." See the swinging observations of Kelley Vlahos such as "One-Sided COIN," *The American Conservative*, August 1, 2009, available at <http://amconmag.com/article/2009/aug/01/00038/>; and *Gian Gentile: Exposing Counterfeit COIN*, Anti-War.com, May 7, 2009, available at <http://original.antiwar.com/vlahos/2009/05/06/gian-gentile-exposing-counterfeit-coin/>; as well as Mehdi Hasan, "Two Sides of the Coin," NewStatesman.com, November 2009, available at <www.newstatesman.com/asia/2009/11/mehdi-hasan-afghanistan-coin-counter>.

[4] John A. Nagl, interview on National Public Radio, "Army Unveils Counter-Insurgency Manual," December 15, 2006, available at <www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6630779>.

[5] See John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*: *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Dr. Nagl was heavily involved as part of General David Petraeus's team in the drafting of the new COIN manual.

[6] One of the authors had the pleasure of being informed at a North Atlantic Treaty Organization–funded seminar by a representative of the UK Ministry of Defence that "The British Army doesn't do kinetic operations anymore. It's all about influence now."

[7] See Gentile's remarks at the Atlantic Council conference "NATO Beyond Afghanistan," September 28, 2010, available at <www.acus.org/event/nato-beyond-afghanistan-conference-strategic-implications-nato-isaf-mission>.

[8] David Kilcullen, "Building a 'Ladder of Tribes,'" keynote address, Tribal Engagement Workshop, March 24, 2010.

[9] For a survey of RAND's work and the evolution of the U.S. COIN approach, see Austin Long, *On "Other War": Lessons from Five Decades of RAND Counterinsurgency Research*, available at <www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2006/RAND_MG482.pdf>. For one of the original works that catalyzed the analytic process in the United States, see David Galula, *Pacification in Algeria*, available at <www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2006/RAND_MG478-1.pdf>.

[10] For a lengthier discussion of the data set problem and its limiting effect on modern COIN doctrine, see Stephen Sloan and Sebastian L.v. Gorka, "Contextualizing COIN," *Journal of International Security Affairs*, no. 16 (Spring 2009), 41–48, available at <www.ciaonet.org/journals/jisa/v0i16/f_0016438_14210.pdf>.

[11] On the latter point, if some readers hear echoes of Carl von Clausewitz, that is no accident. While it has become passé, if not clichéd, to stress today that a counterinsurgency campaign (run by a democracy) cannot be won by use of force alone, the subtler point is that we must first define the political goal of the COIN campaign. Clausewitz would agree.

[12] While one could here mention the case of post–World War II Japan as an example of the occupier and the population not sharing the same ethnicity, culture, or language, the use and monopoly of atomic weapons by the United States clearly makes that case strategically sui generis.

[13] See <www.correlatesofwar.org/>.

[14] Put mathematically, the data show that if the counterinsurgent government is fighting on its own territory and also willing to negotiate, it has an 80 percent chance of success. If neither condition holds, then it is down to 20 percent

[15] With regard to the significance of the primary condition, and in an attempt to grasp the level of the challenge that we face in combat theaters today, think of the analogy of Iraqi police officers suddenly being deployed to New York City to do the job of the New York Police Department. (Or even worse, the Iraqi army being asked to do so—let alone the Afghan National Army.) That is the nature of the current counterinsurgency challenge we face on foreign soil.

[16] We are grateful to Professor Thomas A. Marks, Head of the War and Conflict Studies Department at the College of International Security Affairs at National Defense University, for illuminating this point.

[17] Carlos Ospina Ovalle, "Insights from Colombia's 'Long War': Counterinsurgency Lessons Learned," *Counterterrorism* 12, no. 3 (Fall 2006), 29.