

**Establishing Causality in Counter-Insurgency Doctrine: A
Theoretical and Empirical Analysis of Population-Centric War**

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In June 2018, journalist Lara Logan went to Kabul and found that US military officials could not drive the two-mile road from the airport to the block of the US embassy and NATO headquarters.¹ Rather, like journalists reporting on the conflict, they needed to travel by helicopter. Such was the situation in the heart of the capital city of a country that the US has occupied since 2001. The State Department similarly warns against all travel to Iraq, a state in which the United States has invested even more lives and treasure.² Figure 1, downloaded from Google maps, shows the path between the Kabul airport and the US embassy to be a straight line.

¹ Farmer 2018.

² U.S. Embassy Baghdad 2017.

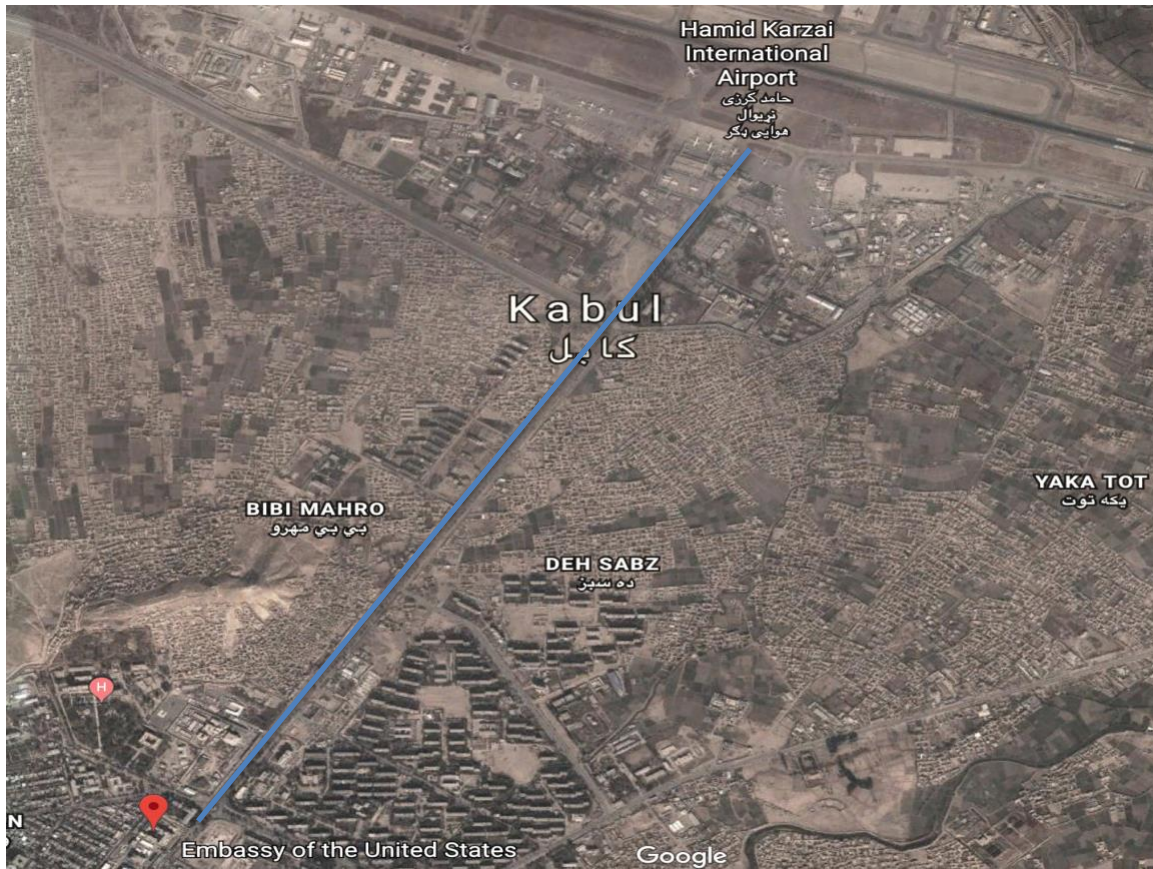


Figure 1. Map showing path from Hamid Karzai International Airport to the US Embassy in Kabul.

The extent to which the two major post-9/11 US state building projects have failed has been staggering. While Vietnam was for decades considered the prototype of a misguided occupation, throughout that war journalists and other western civilians were able to live in Saigon in relative safety.³ Given historical and contemporary examples of counter-insurgency campaigns that have been relatively successful, why have efforts by

³ Hallin 1989, 43-45.

the wealthiest and most technologically advanced society in history failed so miserably in recent decades?

This paper explores American counter-insurgency (COIN) doctrine through a social scientific lens and argues that flawed policy is ultimately rooted in false beliefs about the nature of civil wars. For decades, the major debate among scholars of counter-insurgency has been over whether to use a “hearts and minds,” or “population-centric,” approach or to focus more on prominent members of the occupied country and military factors in what can be called an “elite-centric” strategy. The American military officially came down strongly on the side of the former in 2006 with the release of Field Manual 3-24 (FM 3-24). As that document indicates, case studies and process tracing have been the main methods through which counter-insurgency theorists on both sides of the debate have learned the “lessons of history.” Yet the current American approach is contradicted by a wide variety of empirical findings.

Part I of this paper discusses the two major schools of thought in the COIN debate. While the population-centric approach is conventionally thought to have become official American policy with the publication of FM 3-24, elements of the empirical assumptions undergirding what has become explicit COIN doctrine have been present in US policy for decades. Part II goes on to discuss the epistemological foundations of the American approach. While prominent authors have used process tracing in order to draw lessons from past experiences, this method is problematic even if we set aside the small-n

problem.⁴ Establishing causation in the context of a counter-insurgency war presents inherent difficulties that are not found when exploring other question in IR.

Part III argues for relying on the civil war literature as an alternative to process tracing methods. David Galula, considered to be the father of modern hearts and minds doctrine, bemoaned the limited number of counter-insurgency wars from which to draw lessons.⁵ There is no reason, however, to restrict ourselves to situations where a major power is occupying a foreign land. The vast majority of civil wars in the postwar era have been insurgencies of one form or another, and there are few theoretical reasons to doubt that empirical work on what causes civil war, how they are fought, and how they end can shed light on the merits of COIN doctrine. Having established this point, Part IV evaluates the US approach through the lens of the literature on how and why intrastate conflicts more generally begin and end. Finally, Part V looks at statistical work that has sought to test particular tenets of counter-insurgency theory. Most claims of population-centric counter-insurgency are not supported by the evidence, and some of the few that supposedly are should be interpreted as being more consistent with an elite-centric view. A wide variety of literatures suggest that counter-insurgents would be better served by focusing more on accommodating or defeating elites and restricting opportunity for rebellion, on the one hand, and less on redressing popular grievances and winning over the general public, on the other.

⁴ Lijphart 1971.

⁵ Galula 2006, xiii-xiv.

I. The Triumph of Population-Centric War

Counter-insurgency campaigns are characterized by each side having a different advantage. The stronger party, almost always a government, has more material resources but less information, while the situation is reversed for the insurgent. To overcome its disadvantage, the stronger side must win the cooperation of the population, which can in turn help it effectively target the enemy.⁶ If the more powerful party knows who its enemies are and where they are located, it can easily eliminate them.

The questions of which segments of the population to focus on, and what kinds of methods to use, are fundamental to the study of counter-insurgency. Of the two methods that have been advocated for, one involves a light touch and providing economic and political reforms, while the other emphasizes the utility of force and tries to win over a minority of the population with a disproportionate amount of influence. Often, these two schools of thought are called “hearts and minds” and “coercion.”⁷ This terminology, however, can easily lead to confusion, as the “hearts and minds” method also sees utility in coercing people, while the other side also believes that it is necessary to win over some segment of the host population. To avoid these problems, this paper uses the terms “population-centric” and “elite-centric” methods of counter-insurgency.⁸

⁶ Wilson 2006.

⁷ Kahl 2007, 170.

⁸ Other conceptual schemas also exist. Leites and Wolf 1970, 28 frame the debate in economic terms as a matter of demand-pull and cost-push factors, categories that roughly correspond to hearts and minds and coercion. Others talk about “population-centric” and

The first approach calls on winning over the population through appealing to its hopes and interests.⁹ The military occupation works to provide a better life and political reform, thus making members of the general public more likely to help in defeating the insurgents through refusing to support the rebels and even actively taking up a role against them by joining and cooperating with counter-insurgent forces.¹⁰ Heavy-handed tactics alienate the population, which in the worst-case scenario causes individuals to fight for the insurgency.¹¹

Preventing collaborating with insurgents and inducing the same with the counter-insurgent is a matter of moral persuasion and appeals to interest, and in the hearts and minds approach the list of factors that might help determine success can begin to include nearly all functions of modern government. As Galula writes, in a passage that is singled out for praise in FM 3-24, a soldier has to take on the role of “a social worker, a civil engineer, a schoolteacher, a nurse, a boy scout.”¹² David Kilcullen likewise stresses the

“enemy-centric” war. Kilcullen 2010. The term “elite-centric” is preferable to “enemy-centric,” however, as the former includes both a focus on the enemy and potential allies that need to be won over, two views that are in practice usually found together and that can be contrasted with those who advocate for the need to directly win over the general population. Hazelton 2017; Lewis 2010.

⁹ Nagl 2007, 72-73.

¹⁰ Kilcullen 2010, 37; Robinson 2010, 4-5; Dixon 2009, 447-48.

¹¹ Kalyvas 2006, 59-60.

¹² Galula 2006, 8.

need for showing the population that it is in their “enlightened self-interest” to support counter-insurgent forces, downplaying the role of emotion.¹³

The alternative to a population-centric approach is what can be called elite-centric counter-insurgency.¹⁴ This view does not doubt that persuasion plays a role in winning wars, or neglect psychological factors. Rather, such a perspective differs from the population-centric approach with regards to the kind of action that is likely to gain the support, or at least the acquiescence, of the population.¹⁵ Often, this involves not necessarily the direct application of force, but natives acting as proxies, as they have better information about local conditions along with the linguistic and cultural knowledge to more effectively fight the enemy. By raising the costs of rebellion and through the demonstration of resolve, one can ensure that insurgency is no longer seen as a rational means to achieve political goals.¹⁶

Critics of population-centric war believe that elites, rather than the masses, are the important constituency to directly win over.¹⁷ This is why heavy-handed tactics are more

¹³ Kilcullen 2010, 40.

¹⁴ Handler 2010; Hazelton 2017.

¹⁵ Luttwak 2007; Kramer 2004.

¹⁶ Leites and Wolf, 14-15. The analysis of the influence of cost as a determinant of conflict onset and length is a standard part of the literature on inter-state war as a part of a bargaining process, or the result of a failure thereof. See, e.g., Smith and Stam 2004; Filson and Werner 2002.

¹⁷ Hazelton, 89-93.

likely to work according to the elite-centric view, in which there is less of a straightforward relationship between how the counter-insurgent behaves towards the public and the attitudes and behaviors of the masses. The elite-centric approach acknowledges that all societies, even when under seemingly anarchic conditions, are hierarchical in nature.¹⁸ Some individuals control a disproportionate share of resources, authority, and prestige, and societies that avoid violence are those in which these prominent individuals can agree to peacefully coexist in a stable power-sharing arrangement, whether formal or informal.¹⁹ This elite-centric approach thus focuses on winning over or neutralizing the most power members of the community such as business leaders, tribal elders, and top decision-makers among the enemy itself. In this view, providing aid and improving living standards is at best a diversion; at worst, it gives the enemy more resources to extract.²⁰

The population-centric approach is current American policy, being favored by most practitioners of counter-insurgency and authors known for writing on the subject. This can be seen in FM 3-24, which was written under the supervisions of Lieutenant Generals David Petraeus and James Mattis in 2006, and emerged as a collaborative project of some of the best minds across the military.²¹ The document is remarkable for

¹⁸ On hierarchy as a universal feature of practically all stages of human development, see Rubin 2000; Brown 1998, 330-334.

¹⁹ Lewis 2010, 666-667; Purcell and Purcell 1980.

²⁰ Leites and Wolf 1970, 76–78.

²¹ Kahl 2007, 170.

its self-awareness of its place in the historical debate discussed above, and its willingness to take sides on some of the most controversial issues involved.

For example, in an introduction to one version of the text, Sarah Sewall writes that the “field manual is radical in a contemporary American military context,” in that it “adopts a population-centered approach instead of one focused primarily, if not exclusively, on the insurgents.”²² It seeks to achieve results “beyond physical security toward economic, civil, and political rights.”²³ According to the foreword by John Nagl, “the key to success in counterinsurgency is protecting the population...”²⁴ Throughout the manual itself, it is acknowledged that sometimes killing leaders and irreconcilable elements is necessary, but usually this reminder is simply an add-on used to moderate the hearts and minds message or followed by a qualification that killing must not be seen as too important.²⁵ In contrast, where it ventures to compare the hearts and minds approach and the value of force, it is made clear at several points that the former should take priority.²⁶ In the “oil spot approach,” the counter-insurgent establishes complete control over certain areas of the map before taking over more territory and ultimately ending the war.²⁷

²² Sewall 2007, xxiv.

²³ Sewall 2007, xxx.

²⁴ Nagl 2007, xiv.

²⁵ FM 3-24: 1-14, 1-47, 1-68, 1-128, 1-141, 1-153, 5-38, 7-32.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1-40, 1-153, 2-2.

²⁷ Krepinevich 2005, 88-89.

In addition to its prominence in that manual, the idea that popular grievance is key to preventing and ending insurgency is found throughout works published by intellectual institutions and presses affiliated with the Pentagon.²⁸ Nonetheless, the population-centric approach is not endorsed by all former and current members of the US military, and some have written scathing critiques.²⁹ Porch notes that among his students at the Naval Postgraduate School have been members of the military who “have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan in recent years not only unsettled by their experiences in those countries, but also persuaded that the hearts and minds counterinsurgency doctrines they were dispatched to apply from 2007 were idealistic, when not naïve, impracticable, unworkable, and perhaps institutionally fraudulent.”³⁰

While FM 3-24 purports to be a revolutionary innovation in American strategy, it is important to note that the most controversial aspects of COIN were in practice even before the document was published. In that light, it is reasonable to ask whether that document was as radical as commonly thought, or whether it simply gave formal recognition to a consensus that had already emerged. The US has sought economic growth in Iraq and Afghanistan, with the belief that this would help it defeat insurgencies there, since those conflicts began, and had many of the same assumptions in El Salvador and Vietnam decades earlier.³¹ Even in the 1960s the hearts and minds approach had

²⁸ See e.g. Beckett 2005.

²⁹ Bacevich 2008; Gentile 2013.

³⁰ Porch 2013, xi.

³¹ D’Haeseller 2013.

wide appeal among scholars at RAND, despite some notable critics over the years.³² In the first two years after the overthrow of the Taliban, before the Petraeus strategy was adopted, Afghanistan received external aid that was equivalent to a third of its GDP, with much of that money being supplied by the US or due to American diplomatic pressure.³³ Paul Bremer likewise recounts how upon arriving in Iraq he stressed the need to solve problems that the Iraqi people were facing, “all the way from macro issues like what to do about the subsidies, the state-owned enterprises and the currency, down to the price and availability of rice and beans...”³⁴ When talking about Iraq and Afghanistan, American leaders from the very beginning pointed to improving living standards as indices of success. While such goals can be seen as inherent goods even if they do not have any strategic consequences, top decision makers have consistently made the connection between economic and humanitarian accomplishments and ultimate military victory, as have commanders on the ground.³⁵ Thus, while FM 3-24 may have changed the ways in which American wars are fought, some of the key assumptions of the population-centric approach are not new. Nonetheless, despite such continuities in US

³² Long 2002, 21-29. For recent works from RAND stressing the hearts and minds or population-centric approach, see Jones 2008, 12-20; Long 2008; Mackinlay and al-Baddawy 2008, 25–26.

³³ Dobbins 2003, 96-97.

³⁴ Bremer 2006, 55-56.

³⁵ See The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2002; Chiarelli and Michaelis 2005.

thinking, FM 3-24 can be credited with taking such beliefs and making them the explicit foundations of a uniform strategy in both Iraq and Afghanistan.³⁶

II. The Epistemological Foundations of Population-Centric COIN

Process tracing is “an analytic tool for drawing descriptive and causal inferences from diagnostic pieces of evidence—often understood as part of a temporal sequence of events or phenomena.”³⁷ In the international relations literature, this method often involves focusing on leaders and investigating the “the decision process by which various initial conditions are translated into outcomes.”³⁸ When establishing causation in historical research, one must always begin with a theory or risk being overwhelmed by the amount of data available, and the theory that one begins with guides the search.³⁹

American strategy in its post-9/11 wars has been justified through the use of historical examples.⁴⁰ The central role of process tracing is explicit in the literature produced by advocates for the hearts and minds approach. Galula’s work is filled with references to his experiences in Algeria and the Chinese Civil War, among other assignments.⁴¹ Two generations later, Nagl wrote an introduction to FM 3-24, and his

³⁶ Corum 2007; Kahl 2007. On the inconsistency of various approaches to fighting the war in Iraq before Petraeus’ tenure, see Ricks 2009, 3-23.

³⁷ Collier 2011.

³⁸ Checkel 2003, 213.

³⁹ Trachtenberg 2006, 169-82.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Hanson 2007, 63-64.

⁴¹ Galula 2006, 34-36, 43-54.

landmark book centered around a comparison between his characterization of the British success in Malaysia and the American failure in Vietnam.⁴² Nagl singles out Galula's *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* as the work that may have had the most influence on FM 3-24.⁴³

As a method, process tracing has unique benefits and shortcomings. The main drawback is that, even if a series of causal steps are demonstrated in any particular case, we do not know how generalizable the results in question are.⁴⁴ At the same time, deep historical case study can provide a richness of detail that is lacking in other research and can stimulate the development of more theory.⁴⁵ Ideally, process tracing and medium- and large-n studies complement one another, and when possible one usually relies on both to investigate a question of interest. When they are in agreement, one has a secure basis of knowledge, and when they conflict a researcher can be motivated to gain deeper understanding by finding out why.⁴⁶

Not every question in the social sciences, however, is ideally suited for process tracing. Scholars particularly look for cases where they can find “smoking gun” evidence for a theory.⁴⁷ When testing a hypothesis based on human decision-making, the smaller

⁴² Nagl 2007, xiii-xx; Nagl 2009.

⁴³ Nagl 2007, xix.

⁴⁴ Schimmelfennig 2014.

⁴⁵ Van Evera 1997, 64-70.

⁴⁶ Dey 2003, 3-4.

⁴⁷ Collier 2011, 827.

the decision-making circle, the easier it is to meet this standard. Process tracing has therefore provided great insights in the field of diplomatic history, putting forth explanations as to why, for example, leaders go to war or decide to form a political union.⁴⁸ Here, one can make a direct connection between the independent variable, or what specifically is going on in the heads of individuals in power, and the dependent variable, or the outcome we are interested in.⁴⁹ Process tracing is less useful when an outcome the researcher is interested in depends on decisions made by thousands or millions of people, such as the results of an election. The literature on the causes of civil war has similarly not made much use of process tracing, given the relative paucity of data and the multiplicity of actors.⁵⁰

Figure 2 shows, according to COIN theory, the process through which counter-insurgent behavior determines the ultimate outcome of a war, conceptualizing the case study method as showing a series of causal links.⁵¹

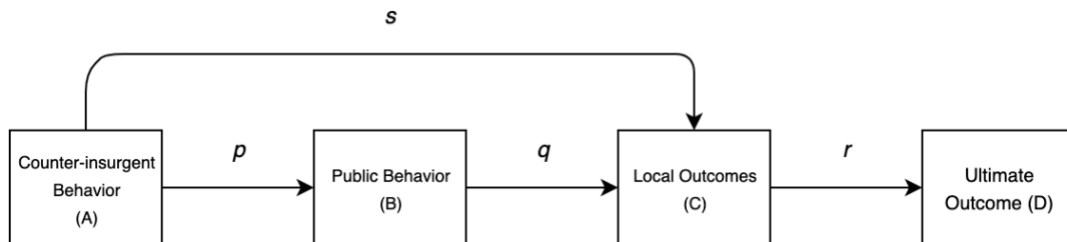


Figure 2: Necessary components of establishing causation in any particular counter-insurgency campaign. One must have evidence to complete one path from A to D. Possible routes are *pqr* and *sr*.

⁴⁸ Schimmelfennig 2014.

⁴⁹ Vennesson 2008, 232.

⁵⁰ Lyall 2014, 187-189.

⁵¹ Van Evera 1997, 66.

To convincingly show that a particular counter-insurgency strategy “worked” or “failed,” a researcher must find one of two possible paths from A to D, establishing either p , q , and r (pqr) in a given case, or alternatively, s and r (sr). Each of the individual steps provides unique difficulties, and it is very unlikely that any researcher will be able to connect A to D when studying any individual war. Below, I explain why we may have theoretical doubts about each of the steps needed, and also discuss the practical difficulties in showing the step occurred.

Counter-Insurgent Behavior to Public Behavior (p)

COIN theorists hold that counter-insurgents behavior can either bring the population closer to the occupying power or push it further away. The connection between self-interest and political attitudes, however, is far from straightforward. Indeed, even in established democracies objective measures of self-interest are usually poor predictors of political views, being trumped by issues related to identity and moral outlook.⁵² Evidence furthermore suggests that in the counter-insurgency context, foreign occupiers and domestic rebels are treated asymmetrically by the population.⁵³ There are therefore good reasons to doubt that economic growth and less coercive policy necessarily leads to public opinion becoming more supportive of a counter-insurgent.

Even if we assume that winning over the public is straightforward, it is by no means clear that attitudes necessarily lead to action that is consistent with those preferences. As Kalyvas points out, “in an irregular war the gap between attitudes and

⁵² Kinder and Sears 1981; Lucassen and Lubbers 2012.

⁵³ Lyall, Blair, and Imai 2013.

actions tends to swell; in many ways, this is the main consequence of the war,” particularly since insurgents and governments tend to induce compliance through force.⁵⁴ Even when the population clearly supports one side over another, civilians still face a collective action problem, which may prevent them from taking risks that make their preferred outcome more likely.⁵⁵ Rebel recruitment through violence is mentioned in FM 3-24, without any indication that the authors realize the theoretical problem this poses for the theory of hearts and minds.⁵⁶ All of this means that *p* must be proved rather than assumed. Unfortunately, acquiring survey data in a warzone tends to be expensive and difficult, putting those who set out to collect responses in danger.⁵⁷ Even when one can develop contact with a population, respondents might feel the desire to conceal their true opinions, a well-known effect that researchers have had to develop tools to counter.⁵⁸

Simply going from counter-insurgent behavior to action without studying attitudes is likely easier, although one must in that case make some additional assumptions. Even forgoing the need for public opinion data, difficulties abound in measuring B. How does one show that thousands or millions of people in any given war acted based on their political preferences rather than narrowly defined material interest? Often, post-war interviews are used to establish motives years after the fact, with reports

⁵⁴ Kalyvas 2006, 92; Stoll 1993, 20.

⁵⁵ Lyall 2009, 331-333.

⁵⁶ FM 3-24: 3-76.

⁵⁷ Axinn, Ghimire, and Williams 2012; Connable et al. 2012, 43.

⁵⁸ Blair, Imai, and Zhou 2015; Bullock, Imai, and Shapiro 2011.

that insurgents acted based on their political preferences.⁵⁹ However, it is natural to expect individuals, especially when recalling chaotic events that happened years before, to look back and ascribe to themselves noble and idealistic motives rather than admitting that they acted out of greed or fear.⁶⁰ In addition to measurement issues, there are problems of endogeneity. Whereas there may be less hostility to occupiers because counter-insurgents used less coercive methods, it could easily be the opposite, and governments may only have the luxury of taking a less aggressive approach when an area is already calm.⁶¹

Public Behavior towards Local Outcomes (q)

Once p is established, the researcher must show that public behavior was altered to such a degree that it had an effect on local outcomes. Why might we doubt this as a matter of theory? Imagine that a certain percentage of the population, x , can be induced to act contrary to self-interest based on political attitudes and can be won over to the counter-insurgent. If x is small enough, then even if a hearts and minds approach changes the behavior of 100% of x , it may not ultimately be enough to make any neighborhood more peaceful. Similarly, even large-scale changes in attitude might only change behavior under certain conditions, with concerns over interest and survival ensuring that under the vast majority of circumstances public opinion does not influence behavior, thus leading to small effects in p . To show q , one must not only prove that the actions of the mass public matters, but that enough people can be influenced to act in ways not

⁵⁹ Wood 2003, 267-274.

⁶⁰ Kalyvas 2006, 401-04.

⁶¹ Porch 2013, 2-20.

predicted by self-interest to the extent that it ultimately changes who holds territory at the local level.

The size of x and how much its behavior changes is not all that matters; as much depends on how influential x is within a given society and the smaller group that is actually won over. In all civil wars, the vast majority of participants are young men, which means that a policy that wins over women, children, and the elderly would not necessarily be expected to make a direct impact on recruiting, for example.⁶² Similarly, actions that win over the masses but alienate elites, as hearts and minds strategies often do, can have a counter-productive effect if the most powerful forces within a society turn on the counter-insurgent.⁶³ Moreover, a consistent finding across the social sciences is that across societies elites influence the attitudes and political behavior of the masses, often in substantial ways that trump other considerations.⁶⁴ Thus, a “good governance” strategy that seeks to win over the public may have little effect on stabilizing a region, if elites are opposed to the agenda of the counter-insurgent for ideological or self-interested reasons.

⁶² Humphreys and Weinstein 2008. Of course, if elders, wives, and mothers can influence the young men in their lives, or make rebellion more difficult by siding with counter-insurgent forces, changing the attitudes of citizens who will not fight under almost any circumstances might have an effect on recruitment.

⁶³ Hazelton 2017, 89.

⁶⁴ Zaller 1992.

While it is often assumed that all guerilla forces must have a great deal of support in the local population, this is not universally the case.⁶⁵ If lack of public support precludes insurgents employing certain methods, such as placing IEDs in populated areas, they may switch to others like hit and run attacks.⁶⁶ In economic terms, guerilla war fought with the support of the public and guerilla war fought without it might be substitutable goods.⁶⁷ Thus, we cannot assume that inducing more public cooperation will pacify an area. To show that this did indeed have an impact, one needs measures of public behavior, B, such as a willingness to provide information to or fight on the side of counter-insurgent forces. The connection must then be made between those factors and pacification at the local level, C.

As in establishing p , scholars must also account for potential endogeneity problems. While it may seem natural to suspect that attitudes cause behavior, psychologists and political scientists have also found the opposite: inducing people to take action affects their later preferences.⁶⁸ State and rebels alike can both coerce and socialize those under their control, thus making it a mistake to simply assume that public behavior is the cause of which side holds a given region, rather than its effect.⁶⁹ The arrow of causality might well point in both directions, yet one needs some idea about the

⁶⁵ Valentino, Benjamin and Balch-Lindsay 2004; Felter and Laitin 2003, 88.

⁶⁶ Berman, Shapiro, and Felter 2018, 91.

⁶⁷ Samuelson 1986, 6.

⁶⁸ Acharya, Blackwell and Sen 2018; Little and Zeitoff 2017, 523-557.

⁶⁹ Posen 1993; Kalyvas 2006, 118-32.

likelihood and degree of the effect in each direction in order to form a counter-insurgent strategy. One therefore needs a random, or quasi-random, distribution of behavior of a counter-insurgent that is then measured against some empirical indicator of population behavior, such as the providing of information or levels of civic engagement.⁷⁰

Counter-insurgent Behavior to Local Outcomes (s)

An analyst may attempt to show s when one does not have the data to establish pq . Here, one only needs measures of counter-insurgent behavior and local outcomes. No or unmeasurable variation in counter-insurgent strategy or effect on the population across different regions rules out using process tracing even in theory. Not having measures of public behavior, B , necessitates skipping steps and deprives the process tracing method of what is perhaps its greatest advantage, which is the ability to provide rich detail demonstrating the mechanisms in question. Here, endogeneity problems similar to those discussed above remain.

Local Outcomes to Ultimate Outcome (r)

Whatever path one uses to arrive at C , one more step must be taken. Just because a counter-insurgent has pacified a number of areas, it does not mean that it is necessarily any closer to winning a war. One may be able to assume that to bring down the national crime rate it is sufficient to focus on reducing the crime rate in the various cities and towns of the country. Ending a war, however, which is a strategic interaction between two or more sides, is not simply a process of reducing the number of battles. The calming of one front might indicate that a war is coming to an end. It might also mean that one of

⁷⁰ Berman, Felter, and Shapiro 2018, 82-108; Dell and Querubin 2017.

the belligerents is preparing for an attack somewhere else or waiting for a better opportunity to resume operations. Insurgents may also decide to pull back and let an investment go forward, either because they can cause more damage by destroying it or they expect to benefit from any economic development when they seize the area or extract its resources later.⁷¹

It might likewise be found that areas in which the counter-insurgent kills more civilians there is more rebel activity. Imagine that in Area A (a_a) where more civilians die as a result of counter-insurgent attacks there is a level of violence at v_a , which is higher than the level of violence v_b in an otherwise similar Area B (a_b) where fewer civilians were killed. It may be that the effect of killing civilians on local violence is $v_a - v_b$.⁷² Yet it is plausible that insurgents put more resources into a_a because more civilian casualties made recruiting easier. This would mean that while it may be correct to infer that civilian casualties cause more violence; a naïve analysis nonetheless greatly overestimates the effect size. Similarly, a drone strike that kills a rebel leader may in the short run motivate more locals to join the insurgency. In the long run, however, it can increase the probability that the rebel movement collapses as more leaders are killed and it is unable to replace lost talent and experience.⁷³

The main reason to doubt r is that local outcomes might be trumped by political factors. Civil wars end through negotiated agreements or victory. While leaders with

⁷¹ Leites and Wolf 1970, 19-20.

⁷² Dell and Querubin 2017.

⁷³ Abrahms and Mierau 2017.

decision-making power are certainly influenced by success and failure on the ground, it is an open question how much such local outcomes ultimately matter for guerilla war. In a conventional war, what happens on the battlefield can bring the conclusion closer by demonstrating relative strength or depriving the losing side of more manpower and materiel, thus making continuing the war too difficult.⁷⁴ Insurgencies, however, do not rely on superior resource capabilities and can often wait out their opponents. It is possible for rebels to lose territory and nonetheless remain in a strong position. To observe *r*, a researcher might observe that in the long run, less violence in some areas that were pacified was not followed by more violence in others or the restarting of hostilities soon afterwards.

III. Alternative Sources of Evidence

It is theoretically very difficult to establish causation in any particular counter-insurgency campaign. This section suggests a less stringent standard. Rather than asking whether hearts and minds theory is consistent with the results of individual campaigns, we can ask what else about the world we would expect to be true if the recommendations of population-centric war were correct. There are three potential methods that can be used, and each is reviewed in turn.

A. Controlled Comparisons and Extreme Cases

The controlled comparison method attempts to establish causation through insights from a study of two or more cases with different outcomes.⁷⁵ A researcher may

⁷⁴ Powell 2004; Filson and Werner 2004.

⁷⁵ George 2019.

find multiple cases that are similar on several variables but differ on the key variable of interest.⁷⁶ Alternatively, one can find cases that are similar on the key variable of interest but otherwise different.⁷⁷ In the context of establishing that the current American theory of counter-insurgency is correct, this would mean, in the first instance, showing that a population-centric approach worked better relative to an otherwise similar situation in which elite-centric methods were used, and, in the second, establishing that a population-centered approach worked, or that an elite-centric approach failed, in two or more separate cases that were otherwise very different.

Unfortunately, FM 3-24 bases its counter-insurgency campaigns theory on only a few cases stretched over a century, and temporal distance between them alone makes comparison difficult. For example, if one wants to compare the US experience in the Philippines to the war in Vietnam, plausible differences between the two conflicts that are functions of time alone include the existence of the Cold War, anti-colonialism and Marxism as influential ideologies, tanks, military bombers, landmines, radio, and television. Thus, even if the Philippines and Vietnam were completely similar with regards to culture and terrain, which they are not, variation based on time alone presents an endless array of factors that might plausibly explain the greater American success in

⁷⁶ Lijphart 1975, 163; Seawright and Gerring 2008, 304-07.

⁷⁷ Lieberon 2000, 208-209.

the first campaign. Failing to take into account changes in technology and societal organizations can have disastrous consequences, as it did before the First World War.⁷⁸

Another method, one can be applied to one or more cases, is to look for “cases with extreme and opposite values” on the independent and dependent variables.⁷⁹ Thus, if one can find cases of overwhelming coercion being used in a counter-insurgency campaign followed by complete victory, we would have evidence against the hearts and minds approach.⁸⁰ Among the cases traditionally studied in the COIN literature, however, we rarely find extreme coercion used, due to the focus on western democracies. Perhaps the most notable exception to this was the US occupation of the Philippines, during which American forces rounded up military aged males into camps, burned villages suspected of harboring insurgents, and caused famines that devastated the local population.⁸¹ This ended in US victory, thus arguing against the hearts and minds approach.

⁷⁸ General Sukhomlinov, the Russian Minister of War at the time, spoke for many in Europe when he stated that “as war was, so it has remained.” Tuchman 1989, 80.

⁷⁹ Van Evera 1997, 81.

⁸⁰ The opposite is not necessarily true, however; a situation where a counter-insurgent did the most possible to win hearts and minds and lost would not be strong evidence against that approach, since it is argued that population-centric tactics are necessary, but not necessarily sufficient, for reaching a political settlement. FM 3-24: 1-40; Nagl 2009, 18-23.

⁸¹ Silbey 2008, 123-69.

B. Expanding the Size of N

The field of counter-insurgency studies suffers from the “small-n problem.”⁸² In the last hundred years, there have been only a handful of cases of counter-insurgency war that theorists have relied on. The annotated bibliography of FM 3-24 lists studies of 11 cases: the Arab revolt against the Turks; the British in Afghanistan, Greece, Oman, Malaysia, and South Africa; the French in Algeria and Vietnam; the United States in the Philippines and Vietnam; and the Chinese Civil War. Galula acknowledged this problem, writing,

The enterprise is risky... whereas conventional wars of any size and shape can be counted in the hundreds, no more than a score of revolutionary wars have occurred, most of them since 1945. Is it enough to detect laws? Generalization and extrapolation from such a limited basis must rely to some extent on intuition, which may or may not be correct.⁸³

In the COIN literature, scholars tend to stick to situations in which a large power is occupying a foreign country, thus limiting the size of n. But when COIN theorists set out to define insurgency and counter-insurgency, they do not require that a foreign power be involved.⁸⁴

Traditionally, insurgency has been seen as a subset of civil war, with the difference being that in non-insurgency campaigns the two sides split into factions such

⁸² Goldthorpe 1997.

⁸³ Galula 2006, xiii-xiv.

⁸⁴ FM 3-24: 1-2.

that the “war between these groups soon resembles an ordinary international war except that the opponents are fellow citizens.”⁸⁵ However, over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, the gap in military capabilities between incumbents and rebels has become such that nearly all civil wars are to some extent insurgencies. The overlap between civil wars and counter-insurgency in the post-1945 period is so complete that scholars often treat them as conceptually the same thing. In their landmark study on the causes of intrastate conflict, Fearon and Laitin argue that conditions that favor insurgency are the main determinants.⁸⁶ When we ask what causes civil war, we are asking what the causes of insurgency are, and vice versa. According to one estimate, 84% of civil wars between 1960 and 2008 have been guerilla wars, and practically all the rest include some kinds of asymmetric violence.⁸⁷ Merging the study of counter-insurgency and the study of civil war solves the small-n problem of the former. Counter-insurgency doctrine is concerned both with preventing and defeating insurgency, and there have been enough intrastate conflicts in the postwar era for the research to provide guidance in investigating both issues.⁸⁸

COIN strategists have generally overlooked the civil war literature, without attempting to justify focusing their study on the handful of conflicts that most resemble American interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam. It is plausible that general

⁸⁵ Galula 2006, 3.

⁸⁶ Fearon and Laitin 2003, 75.

⁸⁷ Krcmaric 2018.

⁸⁸ Uzonyi and Hanania 2017, 677; Hartzell 1999.

lessons drawn from empirical research on civil war cannot transfer over to the types of conflicts that the US faces today, although why this is and what the key differences are need to be spelled out. American counter-insurgency campaigns in many ways resemble standard civil wars in the postwar era: an incumbent government with international recognition and superior conventional military capabilities seeks to put down an enemy waging an asymmetric campaign for the overthrow of the state or some other political goals. Not even active outside support for the incumbent makes American counter-insurgency unique, as most intrastate conflicts tend to see some form of foreign interference.⁸⁹ Without any strong reason to suspect otherwise, it is possible to look to the empirical literature on civil war in order to help evaluate counter-insurgency doctrine.

C. The Piecemeal Approach

Finally, although it may be extremely difficult to prove causation in any particular counter-insurgency campaign, one may be able to justify a hearts and minds approach by showing pqr or sr to be general effects. This can be called the piecemeal approach to judging counter-insurgency doctrine. It is important to note that, because there are three steps required for a population-centric strategy to work, we should have less confidence of the expected effect of COIN as a whole than we do of any individual step. For example, imagine that we expect that p , q , and r is each true 70% of the time. Confidence in each individual step should not imply confidence for the theory as a whole, as the probability of a population-centric strategy succeeding, or going from A to D, is $.7^3 =$

⁸⁹ Regan 2002.

.343. Figure 3 below demonstrates this point, assuming that the outcomes of p , q , and r are independent.⁹⁰

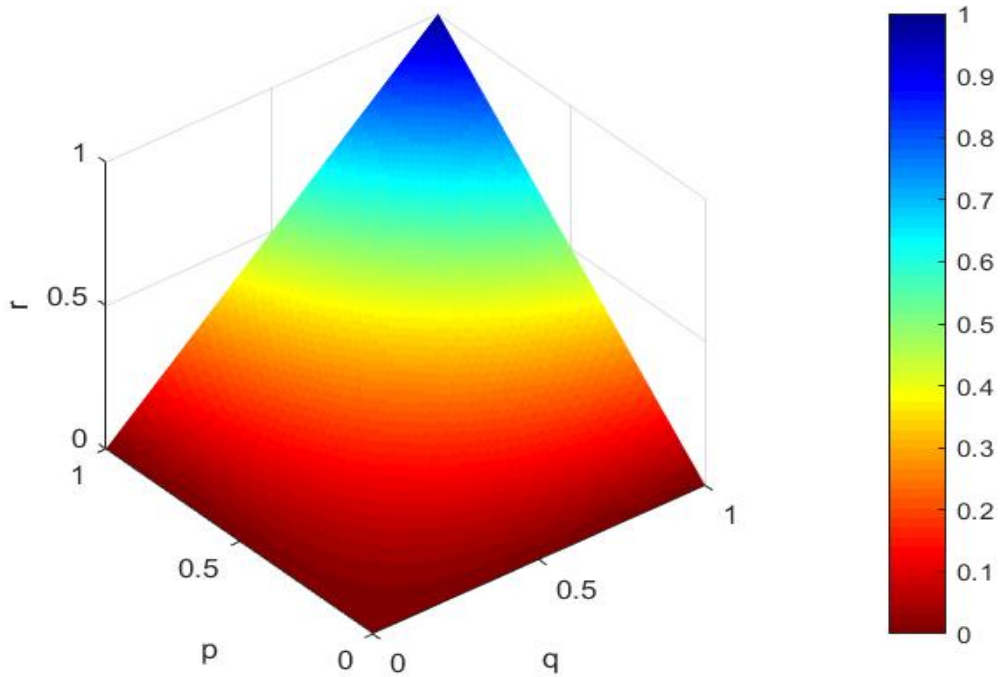


Figure 3. Each of the individual axes represent a theorized step in Figure 2, while color represents the degree to which we can have confidence that the population-centric approach will succeed.

In a sense, the opponent of the population-centric approach has an easier job than its proponent. The elite-centric approach, in contrast, only requires two steps that might

⁹⁰ Of course, success could build on itself, or, alternatively, insurgents can adjust their strategy based on the previous government success.

be theoretically in question: that counter-insurgents can influence elites, and that elites can induce behavior among the masses.⁹¹

IV. Counter-Insurgency and Civil War

If the assumptions of population-centric counter-insurgency were correct, we would expect certain themes to emerge from the civil war literature. Grievance should be more important than opportunity in causing civil war, states should rarely use brutal methods and fail when they do so, and economic and political reforms should be necessary for civil wars to end and the ensuing peace to last. The empirical evidence indicates the opposite in each case, casting serious doubt on the main claims of the population-centric approach.

The literature on the causes of civil war has found it useful to conceptualize fundamental causes as either stemming from grievance, on the one hand, or opportunity and greed on the other.⁹² The population-centric approach to counter-insurgency is based on the belief that grievance is the driving force behind civil war occurrence. According to FM 3-24, “any successful COIN operation must address the legitimate grievances

⁹¹ Such a formulation may yet be too kind to the population-centric approach, since, as alluded to above, *p* can actually be thought of as two steps: counter-insurgent behavior affects public opinion, and public opinion affects behavior. One could therefore plausibly argue that population-centric approach requires four steps, although that formulation introduces unnecessary complications in exposition, and conceiving of the population-centric approach as requiring only three steps is sufficient to make the point.

⁹² Fearon and Laitin 2003; Collier and Hoeffler 2004.

insurgents use to generate popular support.”⁹³ Kilcullen argues that “insurgents are regarded as representative of deeper issues or grievances within society.”⁹⁴ According to Galula, while “there are always problems in any country... [w]hat makes one country more vulnerable than another to insurgency is the depth and acuity of its existing problems.”⁹⁵ FM 3-24 cites only two works that seek to explain social violence as a general matter—Ted Robert Gurr’s *Why Men Rebel* (originally published, 1971) and Eric Hoeffler’s *The True Believer* (1951)—both of which emphasize the psychology of individuals rather than situational factors.

Thus, in the population-centric approach individuals rebel because they are angry, and how angry they are is determined by what the government does, or fails to do, for them. A competing point of view is put forth by Fearon and Laitin, who argue that grievance is everywhere, and if “just 500 to 2,000 active guerrillas can make for a long-running, destructive internal war, then the average level of grievance in a group may not matter that much.”⁹⁶ In this view, grievance is everywhere, and states that have civil wars are distinguished by how much opportunity there is to rebel.⁹⁷ Opportunity for rebellion is determined to a great extent by state capacity, which might be hindered by factors such as the inability to command and utilize sufficient resources or rough terrain. Deriving

⁹³ FM 3-24: 1-51.

⁹⁴ Kilcullen 2010, 187.

⁹⁵ Galula 2006, 14. See also Ucko and Egnell 2003, 59.

⁹⁶ Fearon and Laitin 2003, 88.

⁹⁷ Thompson 1966, 21.

causes of rebellion from the statements of insurgents themselves is problematic, as they can be expected to emphasize more idealistic motives for what may in fact be self-interested or even criminal behavior.⁹⁸

One might object to the grievance/opportunity dichotomy as an oversimplification, but each of the two main schools of counter-insurgent thought carries with it an implicit theory about the causes of intrastate war. Table 1 below shows why any counter-insurgency theory needs to take a stand on the grievance or opportunity question.

Table 1. Typology of Choices Faced by Counter-Insurgent

	Decrease Grievance	Increase Grievance
Increase Opportunity	Theory needed (II)	Easy decision, no theory needed (I)
Decrease Opportunity	Easy decision, no theory needed (III)	Theory needed (IV)

When a policy, whether tactical or from the perspective of grand strategy, falls into Quadrants I or III, no theory is needed. For example, a mass killing campaign that is completely indiscriminate (Quadrant I decision) causes the population to turn against the counter-insurgent, and does little to decrease opportunity since one kills supporters and opponents alike, which is why governments that have resorted to such atrocities have done so in a way that targets the base of their enemies, even when casting a wide net.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Collier 2003, 62.

⁹⁹ See Valentino, Huth, and Bach-Lindsay 2004; Kalyvas 2006, ch. 6. For the sake of simplicity, Table 1 does not create a 3 x 3 matrix by including the possibility of decisions

Similarly, all counter-insurgents have a stake in preventing crime (Quadrant III), or at least in suppressing rival criminal networks, as a higher crime rate can turn the population against the government and cause individuals to go over to the insurgents for protection.¹⁰⁰

When counter-insurgents face decisions that fall into Quadrant II and Quadrant IV, they require a theory. At the strategic level, we can say that a state is pursuing a population-centric approach when it makes strategic decisions that fall into Quadrant II, and that it is following an elite-centric approach when it finds itself in Quadrant IV. Policies designed to decrease grievance often also shift power relations with society, thus increasing opportunity for rebellion as factions begin to compete for status and control.¹⁰¹ In contrast, if counter-insurgents accommodate local elites without pressuring them to make reforms, as in the case of the Russian wars in Chechnya and Syria, they may be acting against the objective interests of the local population.¹⁰²

The empirical evidence clearly suggests that opportunity is more important than grievance, implying that the empirical foundations of the population-centric approach are false. Fearon and Laitin showed that factors associated with grievance—including rough terrain, being a new state, and facing instability—predict civil war onset, while

that are neutral with regards to grievance or opportunity. For our purposes, it is Quadrant II and Quadrant IV that are important.

¹⁰⁰ Williams 2009, 5–11, 45–48; Kalyvas 2006, 155–56.

¹⁰¹ Gleditsch and Ruggeri 2010, 300; Hazelton 2017, 107-108.

¹⁰² Hughes and Tripodi 2009, 14; Taylor 2007; Sakwa 2010.

ethnoreligious fractionalization and democracy do not.¹⁰³ Collier emphasizes the importance of a dependence on commodity exports, which provide an incentive for groups to seize them.¹⁰⁴ Hegre and Sambanis note that many of the empirical results derived from the literature are not robust or replicable, and so use a global sensitivity analysis that tests the effect of 88 variables on the outbreak of civil war.¹⁰⁵ They generally confirm that opportunity is more important than grievance, with ethnic fractionalization only being important for predicting the lowest level of conflict.

The results from this research indicate that not only should some aspects of the population-centric approach not be expected to work, but that some of its recommended policies may make rebellion more likely. Among the most robust variables for predicting civil war is anocracy, or being partly democratic.¹⁰⁶ Other strong predictors of civil war are periods during which elites see an opportunity to seize power, such as the formation of a new state or an irregular transition from one leader to another.¹⁰⁷ Thus, economic and political reforms that overturn old hierarchies create opportunity for groups to use violence in order to secure their place in the new order.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Fearon and Laitin 2008, 83-85.

¹⁰⁴ Collier 2003, 61-63; Collier and Hoeffler 2004.

¹⁰⁵ Hegre and Sambanis 2006.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 526-527.

¹⁰⁷ Gleditsch and Ruggeri 2010, 304-305.

¹⁰⁸ Hazelton 2017, 107-08.

We may doubt these findings, as they may be plagued with endogeneity problems, since whatever issues are causing such opportunities for rebellion might also be associated with civil war without the causal relationship that the literature argues for.¹⁰⁹ Nonetheless, one might also expect to find similar results with regards to measures of grievance such as ethnic tension, and we generally we do not see that in the data. While this does not necessarily rule out the idea that some measures of opportunity are associated with civil war due to one or more endogenous factors, it does at least show that endogeneity problems are not inevitable when one accounts for potentially confounding variables. The findings on opportunity also end to be consistent with the US experience with regime change over the last two decades, as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya have all seen civil wars after a previous oppressive government was removed.

Furthermore, even among the measures of grievance that may be important, it is far from clear how much US policy can help. If ethnic fractionalization causes civil war, there is generally little that a counter-insurgent can humanely do to make a population more homogenous. There is also some questionable evidence to suggest economic inequality between ethnic groups might fuel civil war, yet a counter-insurgent is usually not in a position to decrease economic inequality between ethnic groups; indeed, racial differences in wealth are massive within the United States, despite decades of policy aimed at reducing those gaps.¹¹⁰ Counter-insurgents can only remedy a few grievances

¹⁰⁹ Hegre and Sambanis 2006, 527–529.

¹¹⁰ Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch 2011.

even in theory, and for a population-centric strategy to work, those on the ground need to believe that those factors in particular influence the likelihood of civil war.

The two schools of counter-insurgent thought make different predictions regarding what causes civil war. They also imply different predictions about how civil wars are likely to be fought and how they are likely to end. The two ways that intrastate fighting can stop are through military victory and a peace settlement.¹¹¹ There is no finding in the literature suggesting that wide scale economic or political reforms are necessary for a state to win a civil war. In fact, according to a list from Licklider, of the 43 civil wars studied that ended in victory, the median length of time during which the war was fought was one year.¹¹² The hearts and minds approach stresses patience since its methods cannot be expected to produce results in a short period of time.¹¹³ Clearly, however, long-term projects and reforms that provide services and change minds are not necessary in order to win civil wars. Furthermore, despite the emphasis COIN places on political rather than military solutions, civil wars that end in decisive military victory are most likely to lead to prolonged peace.¹¹⁴

A look at strategies that states pursue when fighting civil wars can also be illuminating. Assuming that states are rational and self-interested, we can expect them to more often than not pursue strategies that make sense. In practice, it is often difficult to

¹¹¹ Hartzell 1999; Saleyhan 2007.

¹¹² Licklider 1995, 687-689.

¹¹³ FM 3-24: 1-10; Ucko and Egnell 2003, 14-15.

¹¹⁴ Licklider 1995.

say whether a particular state is pursuing a hearts and minds or more coercive approach, as the vast majority of campaigns will have components of both. Regardless of this fact, there is at least one strategy about which the two schools of counter-insurgent thought make clear and opposing predictions.

If a population-centric approach is correct, we should expect mass killing, or the deliberate murder of a large number of civilians, to be a rare occurrence. Nothing is so sure to increase grievance among the target population, while also reducing opportunity.¹¹⁵ When mass killing is used, it should usually backfire. In contrast, the elite-centric approach to counter-insurgency would expect rational states fighting civil wars to engage in mass killing often, and for them to be somewhat successful in doing so, as harsher tactics can destroy the support base of the rebels and help defeat them militarily. In fact, an ongoing civil war is the best predictor of mass killing, regardless of the database used or model specifications.¹¹⁶ Within that category, guerilla wars in which the state lacks popular support are most likely to see mass killing.¹¹⁷ This is the opposite of what a population-centric approach would predict. Furthermore, although there are no large empirical studies on whether mass killing leads to victory, it at the very least makes civil war less likely to reoccur, indicating that it is far from an obviously irrational strategy.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Uzonyi and Hanania 2017, 678-679.

¹¹⁶ Wayman and Tago 2010.

¹¹⁷ Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay 2004.

¹¹⁸ Uzonyi and Hanania 2017.

V. Directly Testing Population-Centric Counter-Insurgency

Returning to Figure 2, this part investigates the direct evidence that speaks to each one of the processes described.

From Counter-insurgent Behavior to Public Behavior to Local Outcomes (pq) or From Counter-insurgent Behavior to Local Outcomes (s)

There are three important counter-insurgent behaviors that the population-centric approach makes predictions about. First of all, we should expect that fewer civilian casualties leads to better outcomes for counter-insurgents. Scholars have shown that fewer tips to counter-insurgent forces come in after civilians are victimized.¹¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, when a party in a war victimizes civilians, public support for that side tends to go down, although the effect seems to be smaller or even non-existent when the perpetrators are insurgents and the civilians forming their opinions share ethnic or cultural ties with the rebels.¹²⁰

Marginal changes in behavior among the public do not necessarily lead to better outcomes, if either tips or other forms of voluntary cooperation are not that important or the effect size of casualties on civilian action is small. Nonetheless, studies from the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan show an association between civilian casualties caused by the Americans and more insurgent activities.¹²¹ Two caveats are in order about this data, however. First, the results are not uniform across studies. Lyall finds that civilian

¹¹⁹ Shaver and Shapiro 2015; Schutte 2017; Wright 2017.

¹²⁰ Blair 2013; Lyall, Blair and Imai 2013.

¹²¹ Wright et al. 2017; Dell and Querubin 2017; Kocher, Pepinsky, and Kalyvas 2011.

victimization distributed across space through a quasi-randomization process in the Chechen conflict actually lowers insurgent activity.¹²² Furthermore, under different specifications the results from Iraq show the effects to be small and only detectable over the short term.¹²³ Second, one would expect that attacks by insurgents that harm civilians would also depress rebel activity, yet this is not always the case, with a study in Afghanistan actually showing that the Taliban engaged in more attacks after such episodes, and another article showing a non-existent effect of insurgent sponsored casualties in the Sunni areas of Iraq.¹²⁴ This research suggests an asymmetry that must be taken seriously.¹²⁵

It should also be noted that studies showing that more civilian casualties increase insurgent activity all come from American wars fought over the last few decades. American law and norms provide some limit to the degree of coercion that can be used, and one may imagine a U-shaped relationship between civilian victimization and counter-insurgent success. This would explain why although more civilian casualties lead to more attacks against the US and its allies, there is nonetheless widespread use of mass killing within civil wars more generally and a study from the Chechen conflict shows the opposite results. Furthermore, this is consistent with the data showing that insurgents that

¹²² Lyall 2009; Condra et al. 2010, 28-31.

¹²³ Condra and Shapiro 2012.

¹²⁴ Ibid.; Condra et al. 2010.

¹²⁵ Condra and Shapiro 2012, 173.

use higher levels of targeted force against civilians do not suffer a cost due to their brutality.

In order to actually build support for the government, rather than simply avoid losing it, recommendations of the population-centric approach can be grouped into two categories: general economic conditions and direct aid. First of all, there is no evidence that general economic conditions are correlated with lower levels of violence. In particular, while it has been suggested that more jobs raise the opportunity cost of rebellion and build support for counter-insurgent forces, Berman, Callen, and Felter find that lower unemployment rates are correlated with *more* violence at the local level across three conflicts.¹²⁶ In Afghanistan, better economic conditions as measured by nighttime lamination are likewise not correlated with less insurgent activity.¹²⁷

Similar findings result from research on the provision of aid. In a regression discontinuity design looking at community aid in the Philippines, government help is actually correlated with more violence in the short run, presumably because combatants on the ground compete for the new resources.¹²⁸ In the case of Afghanistan, a series of studies show aid to improve perceptions of the government while at the same time either

¹²⁶ Berman et al. 2011.

¹²⁷ Iyengar et al. 2017, 82-83.

¹²⁸ Crost, Felter and Johnston 2014. This is in contrast to a study showing that conditional cash transfers reduce violence in the Philippines, although the effects found in this study leveled out after one year and the study was based on areas with already low levels of violence. Chaudhury, Friedman and Onishi 2013.

not significantly reducing or actually increasing violence at the local level.¹²⁹ A general spike in support for the government of that country after 2012 is not accompanied by any reduction in violence.¹³⁰ While this might be because insurgents are being strategic in attacking areas where the government is providing aid, so that the positive effects of hearts and minds is counter-acted by greater rebel motivation to attack, it is also possible that the hearts and minds strategy is wrong and aggregate public opinion does not matter for our outcomes of interest. When aid is found to be effective in Afghanistan, it tends to be in areas in which the government is already in control, making it unlikely that it can be useful precisely in the areas where it is needed most.¹³¹

Berman, Felter, and Shapiro make the most comprehensive effort to reconcile the findings regarding aid with traditional counter-insurgency thought. They find that small aid spending in Iraq had no effect on violence between 2004 and 2006, but reduced violence between 2007 and 2008.¹³² The authors argue that this is because the surge in American troops brought greater awareness of local conditions, which made aid spending more effective at winning over the population, which in turn was then willing to share information. Based on their own research and that of others, they argue that projects aimed at improving living standard can be expected to reduce violence only when they

¹²⁹ Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2012; Böhnke and Zürcher 2013; Iyengar et al. 2017, 51-52.

¹³⁰ Iyengar et al. 2017, 34.

¹³¹ Sexton 2016.

¹³² Berman, Shapiro and Felter 2011, 801-02.

are “modest, secure, informed, and conditional.”¹³³ In this view, self-interested civilians make calculations based on what they can expect from the government and its opponents in case either side has control.¹³⁴ Large projects did not have a similar effect in part because they were presumably less likely to be conditional and more difficult to defend.

While this theory seems consistent with the population-centric approach, it remains difficult to reconcile with the findings showing general economic conditions not leading to a reduction in violence. Aid spending that is well-informed is supposed to be a proxy for increasing the well being of the population, while economic indicators such as GDP and employment rates are more direct measures of the same. According to Berman and his co-authors, conditional aid works because citizens know that it can be withdrawn, so the population shifts its behavior. Yet if this logic is sound, it is unclear why more general favorable economic conditions should not be expected to have the same effect. Any economic success may easily disappear if an area becomes contested or the government loses control over it; growth or low unemployment is in that sense “conditional” in the same way that aid spending is.¹³⁵

The data on economic aid is there more consistent with an elite-centric model of counter-insurgency, in which peace, when it exists, is due to the consent of the most powerful actors in society rather than the general public.¹³⁶ Conditional and small aid lets

¹³³ Berman, Shapiro, and Felter 2018, 260.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 109-151; Berman, Shapiro, and Felter 2011.

¹³⁵ Nore and Ghani 2009, 108-09.

¹³⁶ Handler 2010.

the leaders of a community extract resources and satisfy patronage networks.¹³⁷ While general economic improvements might also plausibly allow these elites to extract more resources, the ways in which they can do this is less straightforward and can be difficult when counter-insurgent forces insist on good government practices.¹³⁸ Under the elite-centric approach, projects that would be most desirable from the perspective of traditional hearts and minds theory, in that they improve living standards more globally, are the least likely to reduce violence. This is broadly consistent with the data.

From Local Outcomes to Ultimate Outcomes (r)

While pq and s are best investigated through statistical methods, r can only be shown through case studies. Unfortunately, this step as a necessary component of a successful counter-insurgency campaign has been largely overlooked.¹³⁹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to give this aggregation problem a full treatment, as few literatures have directly addressed the issue. It will be noted, however, that the trajectories of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are consistent with a story in which localized successes are overwhelmed by political factors.

In Afghanistan, levels of violence were low before beginning to rise in 2006.¹⁴⁰ To what can we attribute the resurgence of the Taliban? Given the predominance of the hearts and minds view, it is unsurprising that scholars have pointed to the successful

¹³⁷ Arriola 2009, 1339-1362; Guriev and Treisman 2015.

¹³⁸ Olson 1993.

¹³⁹ Berman, Felter, and Shapiro 2018, 308.

¹⁴⁰ Iyengar et al. 2017, 33.

exploitation of the population's grievances.¹⁴¹ This interpretation of events has serious flaws, particularly in terms of the remarkable economic growth in Afghanistan in the years prior to the Taliban resurgence, the transition to democracy, the great care NATO forces have taken to avoid large scale casualties, and the aid they provided that ensured that the invasion of Afghanistan was a rare example of a war that improved the well-being of the host population in the short term.¹⁴² For their part, Afghan leaders observing the deepening descent into civil war such as President Hamid Karzai tended to view the Taliban as a proxy of Pakistani intelligence, and saw the failures to quell the insurgency as an issue of foreign meddling, a perspective that was in line with that of many officials in the US government.¹⁴³ Battlefield strategy may not be meaningless for pacification at the local level, but the US failure in Afghanistan highlights the fundamental importance of elite actors and diplomacy.

In Iraq, violence began to rise a few months after invasion in the summer of 2003. Analysts have looked back and argued that shortly after Saddam was toppled there was an opportunity to reach out to elites of the old regime who were alienated by de-Baathification and the disbanding of the Iraqi army.¹⁴⁴ Thus began an insurgency led by ex-Baathists and Sunni Islamists, as the US also fought elements loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr. Trends got worse, until the Sunni Awakening, in which the United States worked

¹⁴¹ Dorronsoro 2009, 12-17; Chayes 2015, 6.

¹⁴² See Hansen et al. 2008.

¹⁴³ Coll 2019, ch. 11.

¹⁴⁴ Ricks 2006, 153-166; Packer 2005, 190-196.

with the tribes in Anbar province against al-Qaida and in turn created conditions that led to a US withdrawal in 2011. At the local level violence began to decline in areas where Sunni leaders turned against al-Qaida, but that they arguably would not have succeeded had the US not increased its troop presence in their areas to support them against Islamist forces.¹⁴⁵ The Anbar Awakening was the result of decisions taken by local leaders seeking to protect their prestige and power; there is little to suggest that it had anything to do with improving living standards or changing public opinion, broadly conceived. While the US likely benefited by being seen as less vicious and better for the local population than either al-Qaida or Iranian-linked militias, this is a standard the US military would have met under just about any strategy it could reasonably be expected to have adopted.

The stories of Afghanistan and Iraq are therefore consistent with a theory in which inter-elite competition, broadly defined to include foreign as well as domestic actors, is the main determinant of violent trends and the prospects for settlement. We do not know that local stabilization makes peace more likely. One could imagine a scenario where it is actually increased violence that leads to a political settlement, as the worse it is the more desperate political leaders become to end the bloodshed lest they see their interests suffer and ultimately fall victim to it. Alternatively, COIN tactics designed to reduce violence can, if successful, reduce the urgency to arrive at a settlement and cause underlying political issues to fester. Indeed, lasting peace settlements are often credited to both sides being exhausted by war.¹⁴⁶ Current research is a long way away from

¹⁴⁵ Biddle, Friedman and Shapiro 2012.

¹⁴⁶ Walter 2004, 373; Luttwak 1999.

establishing that the main recommendations of population-centric doctrine, even if correct locally, can be expected to determine the ultimate outcome of a counter-insurgency campaign.

Conclusion

In the post-9/11 era, the military has sought guidance in previous instances of counter-insurgency that have most resembled its current conflicts. Unfortunately, due to their inherent nature such wars are very unlikely to be understood using process tracing or individual case study methods. Thus, current American doctrine must be judged in light of empirical research on specific mechanisms thought to be important by advocates of the population-centric approach, along with findings on the causes and consequences of civil war.

The population-centric approach requires a series of questionable steps. This makes it unlikely to be expected to work *prima facie*. Empirical research tends to provide some support for the goal of minimizing casualties, yet most of the evidence argues against nearly all other aspects of the population-centric approach. Civil wars are predicted by grievance rather than opportunity, mass killing is a widely used tactic in civil wars once they begin, the broad trajectories of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars contradict the hearts and minds approach, economic development does not reduce violence, and economic aid does so only under certain conditions that appear to be more consistent with the elite-centric view of counter-insurgency.

This paper suggests several avenues for future research. First, while the data revolution has led to some studies that test certain components of various counter-insurgency theories, this science is in its infancy, with most of this work having been

done in the last decade.¹⁴⁷ Second, there needs to be more of a realization that COIN scholars and those who study civil wars are asking many of the same questions. Analysts working in either tradition should be aware of the work in the other, and formulate research agendas and interpret their findings in ways that keep in mind the contributions of both literatures.¹⁴⁸ If counter-insurgency campaigns carried out by outside powers differ from regular civil wars in ways that should be taken account, scholars should more explicitly spell out these differences and their relevance for research. Finally, more work needs to be done on the question of whether local victories and pacification actually lead to peace. This problem has been “little understood and scarcely acknowledged in policy debates.”¹⁴⁹ How exactly does winning the village lead to winning the war?

Improving living standards and reducing violence at the local level are important goals in and of themselves; they need not be justified as “strategies” in order to be worthwhile. Yet leaders may be misled if they come to see providing such goods as key to victory. If nothing else, the opportunity costs of implementing strategies that should not be expected to work are the forgoing of those that might and wasting money that could be better used elsewhere. If aid projects in conflict zones have no effect on violence or actually increase it, then leaders may want to redirect resources towards poor regions of the world that are not currently experiencing violence, where such projects have fewer

¹⁴⁷ e.g., Berman, Shapiro, and Felter 2011; Sexton 2016.

¹⁴⁸ For an example of this see Kalyvas 2006, 104–29, which treats the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq similarly to the way it treats other civil wars.

¹⁴⁹ Berman, Felter, and Shapiro 2018, 308.

potential downsides and do not have to be defended against insurgents, thereby making it possible to implement them in a more certain and cost-effective manner.

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