

Book Reviews

Counterinsurgency

By David Kilcullen

Reviewed by Group Captain John Alexander

Counter-insurgency is fashionable again: more has been written on it in the last four years than in the last four decades'.¹ So wrote David Kilcullen in 2006, at the low point of the US-led coalition's counter-insurgency in Iraq. He has since become one of the foremost counter-insurgency 'soldier-scholars'. A former Australian infantry officer with a PhD in Anthropology, he has played a leading role in making population-centric counter-insurgency orthodox, advising both the US State Department and General Petraeus. Furthermore, Kilcullen has published widely on the subject: his *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* is on the CAS's 2010 Top 10 Reading List. His latest book, *Counterinsurgency*, is intended both for counter-insurgents – civilian and military students and practitioners – and also for the general reader interested in 'today's conflict environment'. Like all his work, *Counterinsurgency* is very well written but, in his own words, it is 'far from a definitive study' and is instead 'an incomplete collection of tentative, still developing thoughts'.

This collection is in two parts. Part One, entitled 'A Ground-level View', emphasises the local and temporal character of effective counter-insurgency. It starts with

a reprint of Kilcullen's *Twenty-eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-level Counterinsurgency*, written in 2005 for US Army company officers struggling to adapt to the Iraq insurgency.² The second chapter, written in late 2009 and aimed at ISAF, lists suggested measures of effectiveness for counter-insurgency, concerning the population, the host-nation government, the security forces, and the enemy. Next there are two case studies. First, a previously published summary of his doctoral thesis which traces the development of Indonesian counter-insurgency techniques, from success in the 1960s, using population-control against communist insurgents, to failure in East Timor in 1999.³ This is followed with an account of an engagement between Kilcullen's infantry company and Indonesian forces in East Timor. Chapter Five is a broad ranging study of Al Qaeda, Somalia and Afghanistan emphasising counter-insurgency as a competition for governance and legitimacy. In the shorter Part Two, Kilcullen posits the so-called Global War on Terror as a defensive global campaign against a *Takfiri* insurgency which seeks to recreate the Caliphate. He argues the solution is the employment of counter-insurgency principles on a global scale.

The book's main strength is the clarity

and accessibility of Kilcullen's writing. For example, the introduction summarises in thirteen-pages why population-centric counter-insurgency is more effective than an aggressive enemy-centric approach. Kilcullen stresses two fundamentals - local solutions and respect for non-combatants. He neatly explains the challenge of expeditionary counter-insurgency in a third-country and therefore the need to understand the country, secure it, and build viable local allies. Successful counter-insurgency, he concludes, demands knowing what kind of state we are trying to build or assist, what has proved viable previously, and the compatibility of its government with our own. In other words, for counter-insurgency tactics to work the strategy has to be right. *Counterinsurgency* also provides an interesting perspective on the US Army's struggle to adapt in contact and Kilcullen's part in it.⁴ Kilcullen's *Twenty-eight Articles*, probably his most widely-read work, was written one night in Baghdad, and then published almost immediately by the influential online *Small Wars Journal*. The *Twenty-eight Articles*' title and format were a crib from T E Lawrence and it has since been published as an annex to General Petraeus' Field Manual 3-24 *Counterinsurgency*, which Kilcullen helped write.⁵

One obvious weakness is the book mentions air power only once when it states that, according to Kilcullen, over reliance on air (or artillery) support is an indicator of a unit's failure to engage with the local population – caused by under confidence or because it is overmatched. As in the Petraeus Field Manual, the counter-insurgent's

reliance on air power to make the adversary fight as a guerrilla, for the fire support to enable dispersed operations, for ISR, and for mobility to avoid IEDs is at best taken for granted. Also Kilcullen does not really challenge the population-centric doctrine. He compares it only with the extreme 'kill them all' approach of the Romans and Nazis, when critical analysis of more recent alternative approaches, such as the 2009 Sri Lankan defeat of the Tamil Tigers, may have proved more insightful.

Overall *Counterinsurgency* is a curate's egg. The book is published in map-pocket size and is ring-bound to make it look like a Field Manual, which it is not, and the chapters on Indonesia add marginal value only. Nevertheless, most of the book is well worth reading for its valuable insight on countering insurgency.

Notes

¹ David Kilcullen, 'Counterinsurgency Redux', *Survival*, 48. 4 (2006), 111-130 (p. 111).

² David Kilcullen, 'Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-level Insurgency' (<<http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/28articles.pdf>>: *Small Wars Journal*, March 2006, accessed 29 June 2010).

³ David Kilcullen, 'Globalisation and the Development of Indonesian Counterinsurgency Tactics', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 17. 1 (2006), 44-64.

⁴ See for example Brigadier Nigel Alwin-Foster, 'Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations', *Military Review* (2005), pp. 2-15.

⁵ T. E. Lawrence, 'Twenty-seven Articles', *Arab Bulletin*, 20 August 1917.

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